

THE HUMANITARIANS

by

Edwin Thompson

The Humanitarians
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Dedication

*Thank you to the three students in my first English class in Jackson, Alabama in 2010
for the inspiration for this story.*

CHAPTER ONE

Serengeti Plains, Africa

The Serengeti Plains were bathed in darkness, but in the green haze of her night vision, the landscape glowed an eerie, electric green. A thicket cast deep shadows across the open plains. The midnight air was alive with the calls of nocturnal wildlife. She moved with quiet intent, her footsteps nearly silent against the dry earth.

Checking her wrist altimeter, she flipped the master toggle and pressed the start button. The engine sparked to life, its low idle whining into a high-pitched rev.

She sprinted toward the open plains, her breathing muffled by the roar of the motor. Her feet left the dirt. She was airborne.

Skimming above the savanna, she became a solitary silhouette against the star-dotted sky. Below, herds of animals drifted across the landscape like ghosts.

She dipped the controls, swooping to treetop level to buzz a watering hole as panicked wildlife scattered into the dark. Ahead, her target materialized: a ranch compound fortified by a towering wall.

Reaching up, her gloved finger flipped the switch. The engine died, leaving only the hiss of the wind through the lines as she glided silently over the wall. On the ground, guard dogs scrambled in circles and stared upward, baffled by the ghostly whistling sound. Before they could bark, steaks rained down on the yard. The hounds abandoned their confusion and sprinted for the meat.

Circling the compound, she lined up her approach behind a dense hedgerow. The ground rushed up. Twenty feet. Ten feet. Five. At the final second, she flared the sail. The canopy caught the air, braking her momentum. Her boots hit the dirt.

She unbuckled her gear, the sharp snap of her harness releasing into the quiet night.

Near the gatehouse, two security guards smoked cigarettes, their backs turned to the lawn as they laughed over a shared phone screen, oblivious to the danger behind them. Crouching low, she moved

toward the villa. The guard dogs lay motionless, pacified by the treated meat.

Springing from the shadows, she darted across the lawn and vanished into the bushes flanking the structure. Pressing her back against the wall, she looked through the glass.

Inside, General Nkwatcha lay fast asleep.

Recognizing the window was sealed, she slipped around the corner to a set of French doors. She slid a tension wrench and a lock pick into the keyway, applying practiced pressure. With a faint metallic click, the lock gave way. She parted the doors just enough to slip inside, closing them silently behind her.

The bedroom was crowded with an eclectic mix of West Indies furniture and traditional African decor. Through the green glow of her night vision, the walls seemed to watch her, lined with tribal masks and the mounted heads of exotic animals.

Nearby, a row of framed photographs caught her eye. They featured a round-faced man in a decorated military uniform, smiling alongside various world leaders. Even through the green tint of her optics, the block letters on his chest patch were unmistakable: *NKWATCHA*.

She stepped toward the bed. General Nkwatcha lay fast asleep, a serene smile on his face. He tossed under the sheets, his expression softening as if lost in a pleasant dream.

Slowly, she raised a pistol, the long cylinder of a silencer extending toward his head.

"Sweet dreams, you bastard," Madelyn whispered, her voice carrying a faint, icy Afrikaans accent.

She slowly squeezed the trigger—the pistol made a muffled *pop*.

CHAPTER TWO

*Washington, D.C.
One Month Later*

Pop.

Only this time, it wasn't a gunshot. It was a champagne cork.

High above the grand ballroom of a luxury hotel, the formal gala looked like a swirling tapestry of wealth. A big band filled the air with lively swing music while hundreds of guests danced beneath chandeliers. Down on the floor, a waiter carrying a silver tray wove through the crowd, offering filled crystal flutes. Manicured hands reached out, snatching up the sparkling drinks.

As the waiter turned to leave, a noticeably less-manicured hand claimed the last glass.

The hand belonged to Mike Anderson. Handsome and built like an athlete, Mike carried a rough-edged demeanor that his polite manners couldn't quite mask. A constant look of suspicion burned in his eyes as he joined a small circle of guests.

At the center stood Dr. Madelyn Pugh, the woman of the hour. Petite and demure, she was the recent recipient of the prestigious Humanitarian Award. Every few moments, the bangs of her bobbed hair would fall across her face, requiring a quick brush of her fingers.

Standing beside her was Bill Roth, a weathered Texas cattle and oilman in his sixties, and a longtime friend of Madelyn's family. His wife, Barbara—a slender, bejeweled Southern lady—stood gracefully at his flank. The rest of the tight circle included Mrs. Zumbado, a pudgy South African woman dressed in richly colored tribal attire, and a short, heavy-set male guest who was already half-drunk.

Bill raised his flute, catching the light. "To the Humanitarian."

The group clinked their glasses together, the crystal ringing out in a collective toast before they drank.

"Madelyn, your daddy would be so proud," Bill added warmly.

Barbara cut her eyes at her husband with a tight-lipped look, then smoothed her expression into a warm smile for Madelyn. "Congratulations, honey. We are all just so proud of you."

The drunk guest raised his glass again, sloshing champagne over the rim. "And you, more than anyone, deserve the award... and my money!"

The group offered polite, easy laughter.

Mrs. Zumbado turned to Madelyn, her soft Afrikaans accent carrying over the ballroom din. "So many of our children will live because of your work. You truly make the world a better place, Dr. Pugh. To your foundation—life for many—and to you."

Madelyn looked around at the supportive faces. "Thank you. If I died in my sleep, they would find me with a smile on my face."

The group laughed, but Mike Anderson merely raised an eyebrow, watching her with amused suspicion.

"I'm an admirer of your work, Dr. Pugh," Mike said, his voice cutting through the chatter.

Madelyn stepped away from the others, moving toward him. "I don't believe we've met."

"Mike. Mike Anderson." He extended a hand.

Madelyn took it. Their fingers locked, neither breaking the grip as they held the handshake, eyes locked in mutual calculation.

"And you?" Madelyn prompted.

"Don't practice medicine or open hospitals," Mike replied smoothly, "but I make the world better, too. We help a lot of the same people."

"I'm surprised we haven't met before, Michael."

"Excuse me," Mike said, interrupting himself.

He downed his champagne, placed the empty glass onto a passing tray without breaking eye contact, and cleared his throat as the bubbles caught.

"Mike," he repeated, his voice smoothing out. "It's just Mike. And I'll be looking for you, Dr. Pugh."

Madelyn smiled, brushing her dark bangs from her eyes. "Madelyn. It's just Madelyn."

"Madelyn..." Mike said, his voice dropping. "It seems I always miss you by a day or so... but I'm sure I'll see you again."

He gave a polite nod to the surrounding guests, his gaze lingering on her with a knowing smile. Madelyn watched him, suspicion and interest flashing through her eyes.

"Congratulations, Dr.—" Mike caught himself, holding up a hand. "Madelyn."

With a final nod, he ran a hand through his hair and vanished into the crowded ballroom.

The remaining guests exchanged bewildered glances, thrown off by his intense departure. Madelyn didn't join in their hushed whispers; her eyes stayed locked on his retreating figure.

Mrs. Zumbado stepped closer, placing a gentle hand on Madelyn's arm. "I don't know how you do it, the suffering you deal with. Where does your courage come from?"

Madelyn looked down, her expression tightening as she forced a polite smile. The rest of the group grew quiet, realizing Mrs. Zumbado had touched a raw nerve.

"I grew up on a ranch in South Africa, not far from our new hospital," Madelyn said softly. "My *vader* was active in the anti-apartheid movement. I saw the cruelty and suffering firsthand. I learned very young to handle challenges with courage."

The grand ballroom faded. Memories from twenty-five years earlier rushed to the surface.



The African sun beat down harshly on the Pugh family ranch. A young Madelyn, her hair tied back in a ponytail, sprinted wildly across the dusty terrain. Clad in jeans, boots, and a duster beneath her wide-brimmed hat, she screamed for help, her voice hysterical with terror.

Behind her, a lion charged at full speed, its guttural snarls echoing across the plains.

Terrified, she launched herself into the arms of her father. Mr. Pugh, a rugged man in his late thirties dressed almost identically to his daughter, shielded her with his body. His right hand gripped a large pistol, his knuckles white against the frame, but he held his fire as the predator closed the distance.

Just past them, the lion pounced, taking down a young calf and dragging it into the dirt.

Clinging to her father, her feet dangling off the ground, Madelyn wept, staring at the empty space where the predator had struck.

"Why? Why didn't you do something, vader? Why didn't you stop him! Why did he kill Lucy? She was mine! Why, vader?"

Mr. Pugh squinted into the harsh sunlight, his eyebrows furrowing. He silently watched the thick brush close behind the predator. A look of cold revenge washed over his hardened features.

"Don't worry," her father said, his thick Afrikaans accent steady. He slowly holstered his weapon. "Vader will teach you what equal and exact justice means."

He let her slide back to the dirt, catching her hand in his. As they began the long walk toward the house, Madelyn's frantic sobbing quieted into shuddering breaths. Mr. Pugh wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her against his side. "It'll be okay," he murmured.

Later that day, the lion lay stretched out in the tall grass, fast asleep.

The carcass of the calf rested nearby under the persistent hum of flies, while vultures waited in the branches of a skeletal tree. Nearby, a lioness watched over her cubs as they playfully tugged at a piece of meat.

A short distance away, she watched with her mouth agape, her lower lip quivering and her face still damp from crying. As a fresh tear streaked down her cheek, she wiped it away with the back of her hand.

Beside her, her father crouched on one knee, locking into a steady sniper position. He pulled back the bolt of his rifle, chambered a round, and slowly pushed the mechanism forward until it clicked into place.

She looked at her father. "Do you have to kill him, vader? Maybe it's not right..."

Mr. Pugh raised the rifle to his shoulder, leaning down to peer through the scope. "It's the right thing to do."

Madelyn clutched his right shoulder, pulling slightly. The motion nudged the rifle off-target.

"But he was just feeding his family," she whispered. "Maybe it wasn't bad... maybe we... I don't know, vader."

Her chest heaved as she blinked against the dust, her wide brown eyes desperate for the truth.

Mr. Pugh sighed, lowering the rifle across his knee. He gently placed a hand on her cheek, looking at her before reaching up to brush her bangs away from her face.

"Evil grows," her father said, his voice heavy with conviction. "It becomes empowered if allowed to exist. Sometimes one must die so many can live. That is a truth to live by. Remember this... always."

Without another word, he raised the rifle and peered into the crosshairs. Through the scope, the sleeping lion's head filled the view, its lips curled into a smile.

"Sweet dreams, you bastard," Mr. Pugh muttered.

He squeezed the trigger. The sharp crack of the rifle shot echoed across the plains, and the lion's head dropped into the dirt.

"If you must be humane," Mr. Pugh added quietly, "kill them in their sleep."



The memory shattered. The sights and sounds of the Washington gala rushed in to replace the African plains.

"—didn't know that you were from South Africa," Mrs. Zumbado was saying, her voice grounding Madelyn. "I wish my husband were here to meet you, but the unfortunate incident with General Nkwatcha has our country in much turmoil."

Smiling widely, Mrs. Zumbado stepped forward and wrapped Madelyn in a warm hug. "But how wonderful to have you on our side."

The drunk guest reached into his jacket, pulling out a thick envelope. "Well, I know why we're here—to raise some money! I'll get the ball rolling." He handed it to Madelyn with a grin.

Bill Roth reached into his own pocket and drew a folded check. He handed it over, the face of the paper showing a donation of five hundred thousand dollars made payable to *A Smile to a Child Foundation*.

Madelyn blotted a sudden tear from her eye with the back of her gloved hand. "Thank you all for your support. I—I..." She paused, searching for words before looking up. "You're helping a little girl's dream come true."

Bill leaned close, slipping a handkerchief into her palm. "My friends hope that money goes straight to your project in Central America," he murmured, his tone turning serious. "And if you have any more delays from that arrogant little dictator Ruiz, you call me. His pride won't stop our progress."

Madelyn offered a wry smile, lifting a hand to shade her mouth. "I can handle any trouble. If I need help, you'll be the only person I call."

"You know, your daddy and I could control the climate of an entire country if we wanted to," Bill said with a chuckle. He swept an arm through the air, fluttering his fingers to simulate falling rain. "And if I have to, I can still brew up a storm."

He raised his glass to Madelyn and finished his champagne, though a sudden wince crossed his face as he massaged his temples.

Madelyn noticed and touched his arm. "I know you can. But what about those headaches? You really need to see a doctor."

Bill let out a loud laugh. "I'm seeing a doctor right now."

"Really, Bill," Madelyn pressed, her voice dropping. "How do you feel?"

"They hurt. I hurt," Bill admitted, his smile fading. "But hell, everybody hurts. Never mind me, I'm just so proud of you!"

He took Madelyn's hand, patting her arm affectionately. "Congratulations, darl'n." He stepped forward and pulled her into a tight, fatherly embrace. "That's my girl."

Before Madelyn could reply, the windows flared with a flash of white. A crack of thunder boomed, shaking the glass, and the chandeliers failed—plunging the entire room into darkness.

CHAPTER THREE

Maggie Valley, North Carolina
One Month Later

Morning light flooded the mountainside, miles away from the chaos of that night.

Nestled high atop a secluded ridge, Madelyn's home was a masterpiece of glass and natural rock. The structure framed a panoramic view of the Blue Ridge Mountains, awash with the fiery reds and deep golds of peak autumn. Above the peaks, the sky stretched in a crystal blue.

Inside, Madelyn padded into the great room in her nightclothes, cradling a mug of coffee. She walked to the grand piano beside a wall of windows, setting her mug on the polished wood to pick up a framed photograph.

The image showed a younger version of herself standing proudly beside her father and her pet calf, Lucy. A bittersweet smile touched her lips as she traced the frame.

"I miss you, *vader*," she whispered, replacing the picture.

Moving to a nearby chair, she pulled an acoustic guitar into her lap and pressed record on a desktop audio unit. The pre-recorded track of a mandolin wove through the quiet room, and she strummed along, matching the melody perfectly.

The sharp ring of her cell phone broke the music. Setting the guitar aside, she answered and toggled the speakerphone.

"Hello, Bill," she said, picking up her coffee.

"Turn on the news," Bill's voice boomed over the speaker, crisp and urgent. "You need to see this."

Madelyn grabbed the remote and clicked on the television. On the screen, a polished anchorwoman was in the middle of a live broadcast, reporting that the government blamed rebel forces for General Nkwacha's assassination one month ago.

"The Peoples Council of Kwatza has unanimously appointed Mr. Zumbado as Council General," the anchorwoman announced. "Zumbado's plans to unite Kwatza are currently unknown, though he will allow foreign humanitarian interests to return. Controversially, he also plans to expand oil and mining rights."

Madelyn's eyes widened. "This is incredible."

She leaned closer to the phone, a sense of relief washing over her. "I'll be damned."

She clicked the television off, walked to the windows, and stared out at the rolling mountains.

"Congratulations, little girl," Bill said through the line. "We're in. But I do have one concern."

Madelyn raised an eyebrow. "Concerned? You? About what?"

"Remember that man at the fundraiser last month? Mike Anderson? You seemed attracted."

"I wasn't attracted," Madelyn corrected quickly, her tone defensive. "Is he a friend of yours?"

"No! No," Bill said firmly. "He headed up the U.S. investigation on Nkwatcha. Now he's nosing into Zumbado's connections to U.S. businesses being allowed in. Like my friends... and your hospital."

Madelyn frowned. "They blamed Nkwatcha on the rebels."

"We'll be okay in Africa, but honey... Mike's CIA."

The revelation hung heavy in the air.

"CIA?" Madelyn repeated, her heart sinking. "That's not good."

"Yeah, no kidding," Bill agreed. "And we don't want any more roadblocks. My friends want to help with your hospital in Central America, but Ruiz is trouble. And Anderson is nosey, hot on what little trail we have."

Madelyn ran a hand through her hair, her face hardening. "Bill, I have a bad feeling about this. If this Mike is—"

"A bump in the road," Bill interrupted smoothly. "Listen, darl'n. We need this to happen down there."

"Bill, I just want to save the children," Madelyn said, her voice carrying a note of exhaustion. "That's been my only dream since childhood. All of this is starting to feel wrong."

"I've known you since you first had that dream, Madelyn," Bill reminded her, his voice softening into a paternal tone. "We put this entire thing together to fulfill your dream, and a lot of others as well."

Madelyn picked up the photograph of her father, holding it against her chest as if for protection. "I don't know, Bill. I just feel like this—"

"This needs to happen," Bill said, cutting through her hesitation. "Ruiz is a hold-up to the good of his country, to the children. He needs to go. What if my friends put together nine million? Do you think—"

Madelyn closed her eyes, drawing a deep breath. "We could call it done."

"Great! That's my girl!" Bill said over the speaker. "The Independence Carnival is next month. Hell of a lot of fun—noisy, lots of fireworks, and there's some great parasailing down there."

Madelyn sat back. "A vacation?"

"My friends will sponsor your flying troupe," Bill explained. "They keep the penthouse suites at the Miraflores Palacio for business. It'll all be for you and your team."

"What's the plan?"

"Ruiz will be staying one floor below you," Bill said, his voice turning clinical. "He goes to bed every night at eleven, like clockwork. I'm taking a boat down the Pacific coast. You're going to get sick the day before your group leaves."

Madelyn nodded, calculating the timeline. "While you get things prepared, I'm going to Slovanka next week. The hospital is running and overflowing. They asked me to come—said I need to see it for myself."

"Good deal, darl'n. Be sure to tell Vidmar hello for me."

"Will do. I'll be in touch."

Madelyn ended the call and set her phone down. Picking up her coffee, she turned to the window and stared at the mountains, a slow smile creeping across her face. She walked toward the kitchen, unaware that as she passed the desk, the audio recorder's red light was still blinking.



Later that afternoon, the crisp autumn air had warmed enough for Madelyn to relax on the patio. She lay stretched on a chaise lounge, typing an email on her laptop:

Hi everyone, our sponsors are treating us to a parasailing trip in Porte Valerdera for the Independencia Carnival. Private jet, penthouse suites, we just have to fly over the festival with their logos on our sails. I assume you're all in?
—Madelyn

With a quick tap, she sent the message and closed the lid. She picked up her drink and let out a satisfied sigh.

"It's just too easy," she muttered to the empty air.

Lifting her glass toward the peaks, she offered a solitary toast. "*Vir die kinders.*"

CHAPTER FOUR

Siran, Slovanka
One Week Later

The cramped small car winding along the Eastern European highway felt a world away from the peaks of North Carolina. From the passenger seat, Madelyn watched the picturesque countryside of Slovanka roll past.

Navigating the vehicle down the tight roads was Dr. Matija Potonik, the hospital administrator. He was a soft-spoken man in his sixties—short and stout, with a thick head of hair, even thicker eyebrows, and a constant, nervous eye twitch.

“I forget how beautiful this area is,” Madelyn said.

As they crested a hill, the road snaked down the mountain toward Siran. Built entirely on a jagged peninsula, the ancient city jutted into the Gulf of Siran, the water sparkling in the sunlight like aquamarine.

“God, that’s gorgeous,” Madelyn breathed, captivated by the view. “It’s just idyllic.”

“Ah yes, beautiful Siran,” Dr. Potonik agreed, his thick accent heavy. “A jewel on the seashore. One could not believe it has suffered rebellions, revolutions, and war since before the Romans were even here.”

Madelyn watched the water below. “It sure looks peaceful from up here.”

“That, Dr. Pugh, is merely an illusion,” Dr. Potonik said softly. He glanced over with a gentle smile. “But the children are very excited to meet you. Many call you Saint Madelyn... which is terribly upsetting to the local priest.”

Madelyn looked at him, waiting for a punchline, but his expression remained earnest as he turned back to the road.

“No, I am not kidding,” Dr. Potonik continued. “We truly don’t know what we would do without your hospital. Since the assassination of President Horvat last year, the fighting in this region has become worse than ever.”

The peacefulness of the view vanished. Madelyn's smile froze, then faded entirely. She shifted in her seat, her pulse hammering against her ribs.

"The new administration cares nothing for our people," Dr. Potonik said, his voice dropping. "They have let in foreign companies to exploit our resources and steal our jobs. But the children... the children always suffer most. Last week, the hospital was spilling over with injured little ones."

"What?" Madelyn's breath caught, the word sticking in her throat.

"Yes. This is why I asked you to come here, to see it for yourself," Dr. Potonik said. "Perhaps because of your Humanitarian Award, you can talk politics. You can talk sense to these politicians... perhaps you can even stop the violence."

Madelyn's face paled, the weight of his words pressing into her chest.

"Last week, a bus full of children was caught in the crossfire," the administrator continued. "The bus was hit by a small rocket. But because of you, because we have your hospital, we were able to save many lives."

Dr. Potonik looked over, the exhaustion and hurt clear on his face. "Thank you, Dr. Pugh."

Madelyn rubbed her face, a wave of cold nausea rising in her throat. She gripped the edge of her seat, forcing her breathing to steady.

"Uh-huh," she whispered, her voice quivering. "It's what I do... or, what I've done."

They drove the rest of the way in silence, navigating the cobblestone streets of Siran. The city's medieval architecture loomed over them, looking as though time had stood still.

When they arrived at the hospital, a crowd of children waited outside. As Madelyn and Dr. Potonik stepped from the car, a cheer erupted. Some of the children made the sign of the cross; others called out in a chorus of hope.

"Saint Madelyn! Saint Madelyn!"

As Madelyn drew closer, the injuries hit her. Children sat in wheelchairs; others were bandaged or propped on crutches. She walked through them, tiny hands reaching out to touch her coat.

The weight of it broke her defenses. Tears slipped down her face.

Dr. Potonik watched with a somber smile. "It's touching, yes? They love you. But cheer up, Dr. Pugh. Tonight we must attend a party in your honor."

Madelyn wiped her eyes as he continued.

"The Minister of Health is throwing you a celebration aboard his new yacht," Potonik said. "We must go and pay homage."

Madelyn looked back at the sea of injured children, then turned to the administrator. "Homage?"

"Oh yes," Dr. Potonik said, his voice dropping into cynicism. "Since Minister Vidmar was appointed by the new president, he feels he deserves our respect—and a hefty monthly stipend for allowing our hospital to operate. He has worked himself right into our annual budget."

Madelyn grimaced and followed him through the heavy entrance doors.

The main lobby was a sharp contradiction. A modern children's medical facility had been built directly within the hollowed shell of a Roman building.

Dr. Potonik led her over to a woman in her late thirties. She had long black hair, chiseled features, and a completely cold expression.

"Dr. Pugh, this is our head nurse, Leja Nikola," Dr. Potonik said. "She will show you around, give you the tour of our structure."

Madelyn extended her hand, offering a smile. "Nurse Nikola, it's a pleasure to meet you."

"It is a pleasure to finally meet you, Dr. Pugh," Leja replied, her formal tone heavy. "If you don't mind, my daughter would like to join us for the tour. She is a fan of yours. She says she wants to become a doctor, just like you."

"That would be wonderful," Madelyn said, her chest tightening. "I can't wait to meet her."

"Here she comes now," Leja said, her expression softening. "My baby girl."

Madelyn turned to greet the child. The smile died on her lips. She went entirely pale, her legs trembling so violently she nearly collapsed.

Another nurse rolled a wheelchair toward them. Inside sat Leja's ten-year-old daughter, Larisa.

The little girl was missing her left hand and her left leg below the knee. Her face was disfigured, still oozing from recent burns, and her right eye was gone entirely. Yet, despite the trauma written across her body, Larisa grinned.

“Dr. Pugh! Dr. Pugh!”

Larisa leaned forward, reaching out with her remaining hand to hug Madelyn. Her energy defied the blood-stained bandages wrapping her frame.

Madelyn forced herself down to the child’s level. She wrapped Larisa in an embrace, but the weight of her secret crushed her. Sobs wracked Madelyn’s body. Unable to compose herself, she pulled away, breathlessly excused herself, and bolted for the restroom.

Her footsteps echoed against the marble as she ran into the restroom. Bracing her hands against the porcelain sink, she leaned over, fighting a wave of sickness.

Slowly, she looked up. She stared at her reflection.

“Who are you?” she whispered to the glass.

The restroom door swung open. Leja walked in, her silent approach catching in the mirror behind Madelyn. She watched the doctor with a cold gaze.

“Are you alright, Dr. Pugh?” Leja asked.

“Yes... yes, I’m...” Madelyn stammered, shaking her head. “I’m sorry. I don’t—”

“Don’t worry, Dr. Pugh, I understand,” Leja interrupted quietly, her voice flat with underlying grief. “She is my daughter. My pain for her stolen innocence is...”

Before Leja could finish, Madelyn turned and threw her arms around the nurse, weeping openly against her shoulder.

Leja stared straight ahead, her eyes blank. With a stiff resistance, she gently patted Madelyn’s back, then eased the doctor away to break the embrace.

They looked at each other for a long moment. Madelyn took a shuddering breath and wiped her face.

“I’m okay,” Madelyn said, pulling herself together. “I’m sorry.”

When they returned to the lobby, the tension had settled. Madelyn knelt by the wheelchair and looked at the little girl.

“Oh sweetie, you don’t want to be like me.”

Larisa beamed, her single eye wide. “I do. I’m alive because of you. I’m so happy to be alive... my name even means joyful!”

Leja stood behind the chair, her face completely flat as she listened to her daughter.

“And mine means weary, sorrowful,” Leja said quietly. “How strange names are. Come, Dr. Pugh, let’s show you around. Please, follow us.”

Leja turned the wheelchair and pushed Larisa into an arched hallway. Gathering her composure, Madelyn stepped into stride behind them.

The ceilings were lined with faded frescoes where cherubs peeked through cracked plaster. As they paused beneath the artwork, Madelyn looked up. Several of the painted angels bore an uncanny resemblance to her own face.

Madelyn looked down at Larisa, then back to Leja.

Larisa offered a wide smile. Leja merely stared, her eyes cold.

“This building has been a hospital several times throughout the millennia,” Leja said. “The angels were painted by the Catholic Church during the thirteenth century, as a symbol of God’s protection over the children. It was a children’s hospital then as well.”

Larisa looked up at Madelyn. “The nun that ran the hospital back then was sainted. You should be sainted too, Dr. Pugh.”

Leja raised a finger, pointing up at two angels.

“The angels are said to be a portrait of that sainted woman,” Leja said, her voice dropping. “But legend says her heart was not true. It says she was not a saint at all... but a devil.”

The words left Madelyn numb. She forced her gaze to the ceiling, unable to look away from the painted faces. Leja watched her before turning back to the hallway.

“I’m so glad you made this a children’s hospital again,” Larisa bubbled, breaking the silence. “If not, I would have died.”

“If we still had President Horvat, perhaps the children would not need this hospital at all,” Leja added quietly. She dropped her head, the hardness leaving her expression as she looked at Madelyn. “I’m sorry, Dr. Pugh. I did not mean disrespect. We are grateful for your work.”

She leaned down, kissing the top of Larisa’s head.

“I especially am,” Leja said. “I just meant—”

"I know what you mean," Madelyn interrupted softly. "I feel the same way."

As they walked down the corridor, they passed room after room of bandaged children. The further they went, the more Madelyn's posture changed. Her sorrow hardened, her spine straightening.

Dr. Potonik hurried down the hall to meet them. "There you are. I trust you ladies got to see enough. I hope, Dr. Pugh, you can see what we are up against here—what we are truly facing."

"Yes, Dr. Potonik," Madelyn said flatly. "I saw the problem very clearly... as if I were looking in a mirror."

From high above the city, the tolling of church bells echoed through the valley.

"My goodness, the bells of St. George tell me it's getting late," Dr. Potonik said, checking his watch. "I'll see you tonight then, Dr. Pugh."

With a quick nod, the administrator hurried away.

Madelyn stooped to the child's level. Larisa smiled, her eye wide as she looked at her hero.

"Goodbye, sunshine," Madelyn murmured. "I'll come see you before I leave."

Larisa beamed. "Promise?"

Madelyn raised a finger and crossed her heart. "Hope to die..."

Without another word, Madelyn turned and walked away down the corridor. Behind her, Larisa waved her remaining hand, her single leg bouncing with excitement as she watched her go.

Later that evening, the waters of the Gulf of Siran lapped against the hull of the luxury yacht. Madelyn stood alone on the deck, leaning against the railing as she stared at the city lights. Behind her, music and laughing voices drifted from the main cabin.

Footsteps approached, and Minister Vidmar stepped into the moonlight. In his late fifties and robustly built, he looked uncomfortable in an ill-fitting designer suit. An expensive toupee sat poorly on his head, and his voice carried a raspy gurgle.

"Dr. Pugh, you miss your own party," Vidmar said, his tone dripping with mock warmth. "Come, be happy, for the people here adore you."

Madelyn didn't look at him. "I don't feel well."

“What? Is this not the reality you expected?” Vidmar asked, letting out a low chuckle. “Do you not like what you see? Are you not happy with what you have created?”

Madelyn turned to face him, her hands gripping the railing behind her. The sea breeze whipped her dark bangs across her face, her eyes burning between the shifting strands.

“No,” she said, her voice flat. “To all of your questions.”

“Humph. Mr. Roth told me to expect as much,” Vidmar muttered. He took a sip of his drink, staring her down over the rim of his glass. “You and I share one thing, Dr. Pugh.”

Madelyn tilted her head. “And what would that be?”

“We both find fortune in others’ misfortune.”

Vidmar took another sip, offering her a look of pity. He turned his back on her and strolled away, tilting his head to guzzle the rest of his drink before tossing the glass over the side of the yacht.

“Well, Saint Madelyn, perhaps you need to count your blessings,” Vidmar called back, his laugh echoing as he moved into the shadows of the upper deck. “How many businesses let you create your own customers... like yours.”

The darkness swallowed him, leaving only the muffled music from the cabin.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Pacific Coast Three Weeks Later

The yacht sat like a shadow on the water, its deck lights casting an isolated glow against the surrounding blackness. The ocean wind blew steadily, shifting into violent gusts that rattled the rigging.

Madelyn stood near the stern, pulling the heavy straps of the powersail engine over her shoulders and cinching them tight. Bill stood behind her, holding the folded canopy.

Sliding her night-vision goggles over her eyes, the pitch-black ocean vanished, replaced by an iridescent green. In the distance, the jagged silhouette of the shoreline materialized through the haze.

"I feel like I'm standing in the Emerald City," Madelyn said. "It's so green."

Bill looked at the churning sky, his expression strained. "I feel like we're in Kansas. Are you sure these winds aren't too strong for a launch?"

"I'll be fine," Madelyn countered, tightening the straps across her chest. "I'm just worried about—"

"I'm not," she interrupted, cutting him off. "I told you, I'll be okay. I'll just have to fly at a higher altitude to clear the crosswinds." She adjusted the settings on her wrist altimeter.

Bill's eyebrows shot up. "Won't that just make you more—"

"Bill, shut up!" Madelyn snapped. "You worry a lot."

Without waiting for a response, she reached down and pressed the starter. The engine sparked to life, its mechanical whine dropping into a steady, vibrating idle. She twisted the throttle, increasing the revs until the motor roared against the wind.

She gave Bill a sharp nod. He released his grip, and the sail flared open, catching a violent gust. The force dragged Madelyn backward across the slick deck. Digging her boots in, she threw her weight forward and broke into a dead sprint.

She cleared the edge of the yacht, dropping out of sight for a second toward the black water. Bill rushed to the railing, peering over the side.

A moment later, Madelyn shot past him, tossing against the buffeting wind. She twisted the engine to full throttle, gaining altitude. Within seconds, her silhouette vanished from the ship's lights, swallowed by the darkness.

As Bill stared into the black void, the faint, distorted sound of her voice drifted back to the deck, singing over the roar of the engine.

"I'll fly away, oh glory, I'll fly away..."

High above the Pacific, the coastline approached. Glowing green beaches gave way to jungle-covered mountains. Winds slammed into her canopy, buffeting the sail and forcing her to fight the controls to hold her glide path.

Cresting the peaks, the glittering lights of Porte Valerdera unfolded like scattered diamonds. Below, the muffled music and cheering of a street festival drifted into the night.

Spotting her target, she watched the Miraflores Palacio Hotel loom ahead. Madelyn pulled the control lines, beginning her steep descent.

Without warning, an erratic gust slammed into the sail, pushing her off course. Muttering a curse, she veered away and swung into a wide circle to line up the approach again.

"Damn it!" she hissed aloud. "I'll have to come in under full power."

She angled for the flat roof of the hotel, coming in fast and unsteady, unnoticed by the crowds below. The surface was a chaotic maze, cluttered with the powersail frames, lines, and aviation gear left behind by her team.

Madelyn narrowed her eyes, aiming for a tight clearance amidst the gear.

"Damn it, damn it—damn it!"

She came in too high, waiting until the last second to flare the sail. The canopy caught the air, halting her momentum six feet above the deck. She killed the engine.

The fabric collapsed, dropping her like a stone onto the concrete. Wincing, she rolled onto her side and grabbed her ankle. She struggled

to stand, but the wind seized the canopy, dragging it toward the ledge. The sound of tearing nylon cut through her pain.

Releasing her harness, she limped to the edge and hauled the fabric back in, only to find a jagged tear running down the center.

"Kak!" she hissed.

With a quick slice of her knife, Madelyn freed the damaged sail. She surveyed the remaining equipment. "Great, nothing but small sails. It's going to be a rough ride home."

She rigged a fresh, compact sail to her harness, stuffed the torn nylon into her empty pack, and pitched it off the roof. The bag thudded softly onto the adjacent building below.

Locating a climbing rope hidden near the service door, she clipped it to a roof stay and swung over the ledge. Madelyn lowered herself down the sheer face of the building, her boots bracing against the wall. Every impact jolted her injured leg.

Reaching her floor, she pushed against her suite's window. Stuck fast. Steeling herself, she kicked the frame open and slipped silently into the dark room.

Through the green haze of her night-vision goggles, Madelyn scanned the penthouse parlor. She checked her watch: 10:45 p.m. Unclipping her harness, she opened her pack and laid out her equipment: a .25-caliber pistol, extension barrel and silencer, fiber-optic camera, viewing screen, magnetic socket, curved tubing, and a spent casing.

She paused to inspect her swelling ankle. Using her knife, she sliced a pillowcase into thick strips, wrapped the joint tightly to stabilize it, and stuffed the scraps into her bag.

Limping silently across the floor, she shifted a heavy round table and pulled back the corner of the rug. She angled the magnetic socket through a knot hole in the floorboards. Once it connected with the ceiling plug of the chandelier below, she unscrewed it, hauled the assembly back up, and set it aside. Finally, she threaded the fiber-optic camera down the open shaft and switched it on.

The monitor flicked to life, revealing the lower suite's parlor. A heavy-set guard leaned against the wall while two younger men stood watch. Satisfied, she reeled the camera up, slipped into the adjacent bedroom, and dropped the lens through a second floor opening. This

time, the screen showed Ruiz preparing for bed. It was 11:00 p.m. She panned the lens, scouting the rest of the room until she found his personal guard—a sharp-suited man in his forties stationed in a plush corner armchair.

Madelyn waited in the dark, methodically massaging her ankle. By 11:50 p.m., Ruiz was fast asleep, and his personal guard stepped out to the parlor to speak with the others. Moving quickly, Madelyn fed the curved tube through the floorboards and dropped the spent cartridge. The brass cylinder landed silently on the rug beside the bed. She pulled the tube back up just as the guard returned. He bypassed the bed, opened the window, and leaned out to watch the carnival below. Madelyn slid the silenced pistol into the open slot and activated the scope feed. Ruiz's sleeping form filled her crosshairs

Midnight. The thunderous boom of fireworks shook the glass. Madelyn aligned her sights on Ruiz's head and squeezed the trigger. A dark pool of blood bled out across the pillow.

She gathered her equipment, replaced the floorboard plugs, and rearranged the rug. After returning the table to its exact spot, she limped to the window and slipped into the night. She scaled the rope back toward the roof. Behind her, bursts of red and gold fireworks shattered the dark, throwing shifting shadows across the building's face.



One floor below, the guard pulled himself back inside the window frame. He looked toward the bed and went pale. Spotting the shell casing on the rug, he grabbed it and rushed to Ruiz's side—unresponsive.

"Mierda! No," he muttered.

He threw open the heavy parlor door, catching the attention of the three lookouts.

"Señor Ruiz is dead!"



Madelyn dragged herself over the roof ledge and crawled to her sail. Struggling onto her wrapped ankle, she hoisted herself into the flight harness. Below, the carnival music still pulsed through the dark. She reached down and started the engine.



Down in the bedroom, the guards frantically searched the room. Their suspicious eyes turned toward the personal guard, who was backing away.

"I was looking out the window..." the man pleaded, raising his hands. "I turned around and he was dead. I found the shell."

He held out the cartridge. The heavy guard snatched it from his palm, inspecting it closely.

"Point two-five caliber," the heavy guard noted, his voice low.

He gave a sharp nod. The two younger guards lunged, grabbing the personal guard by his arms and pinning him against the wall. The heavy guard ripped the man's pistol from his holster, checking the chamber before his face tightened.

"You idiot," he growled. "Did you think you could get away with this? You killed Señor Ruiz!"

"No! I did not kill him! I swear to you!" the man cried, twisting desperately against their grip.

The heavy guard growled, pulling a pair of handcuffs from his belt and locking the man's wrists together. "You will pay for this. Call the *policía*."



On the roof, Madelyn pushed the throttle forward. The engine roared. She tried to run, but her injured ankle buckled. Gritting her teeth against the pain, she hobbled faster, letting the engine's momentum drag her toward the ledge.

Perched on the edge, she revved the engine to full power, flared the small sail, and stepped into the open air. She dropped like a stone, vanishing from the roofline just as a massive volley of fireworks exploded overhead.

Climbing rapidly, the powersail swept past the lower suite. Through the glass, she caught the chaos inside. A victorious smile spread across her face.

As she climbed higher, the revelers in the streets shrank to tiny specks. Fireworks erupted in the distance, and the glittering city lights faded behind her. Ahead, the dark peaks of the coastal mountains came into view

Winds rushing off the ridges slammed her small sail, tearing at the controls. She throttled up, fighting the crosswinds to clear the final peak, then plunged into a wall of dense fog.

Visibility dropped to zero. Her wrist unit beeped frantically, the GPS signal breaking up at thirty-five hundred feet. She initiated a blind descent into the gray void, but the fog only thickened. A violent pocket of air snapped a sail line. The right corner of the canopy collapsed, sending the glider into a steep, listing drop.

Madelyn checked her display screen, but the screen flashed: *Searching for satellites.*

Flicking her thumb over the controls, she pressed the emergency button on her radio. "Bill," she called into the static. "Bill! Bill! I'm in trouble!"

The radio cut out, filling her ears with a wall of harsh static.

"Bill! Can you hear me? I'm in trouble!"

"Madelyn! What's wro—" Bill's voice bled through the interference, then snapped shut.

On her wrist display, the GPS text flashed: *No signal.* Her eyes darted to the altimeter—fifteen hundred feet and dropping fast.

"I'm past the range, over open water," she called out to the void. "I can't see anything out here. I'm losing altitude. I can't find you, Bill."

"...your... ove... wa..." The radio dissolved into a steady, rushing hiss of dead air.

"If you can hear me, shoot a flare!" Madelyn screamed, fighting the collapsing canopy.

There was no response. She checked her wrist. Six hundred feet.

"Shoot a flare! Bill!"

Four hundred and fifty feet. Three hundred feet. One hundred and fifty.

"Damn it, Bill, can you hear me? Shoot the flare!"

A trail of white-hot light rushed upward, tearing through the dark from the surface of the sea. The dense fog illuminated, glowing a brilliant, burning green. Madelyn yanked her lines, turning the sail hard toward the light.

One hundred feet. Sixty feet. Forty feet.

"I'm in the zone!" she screamed, her heart hammering. "Jettisoning the sail—I'm hurt—"

On the deck of the yacht, Bill frantically panned a searchlight across the sky, but the powerful beam bounced blindly off the thick fog.

A moment later, the distant hum of the engine died.

A heavy splash echoed over the water nearby. Bill strained to hear, cupping his hands.

"Madelyn! Madelyn!"

A second splash cut the silence, followed by silence.

"Madelyn! Madelyn!"

Shouting orders to the crew, Bill helped launch the small rescue inflatable. They tore away from the yacht's hull, the searchlight beam bouncing wildly across the misty water as they raced toward the splash.

Madelyn fought to stay afloat, treading the cold ocean water as heavy waves rolled over her head. Through the lenses of her night-vision goggles, the underwater world was a ghostly, translucent green. Strength rapidly drained from her limbs.

"Help me, *vader*..." she whispered.

Her boots felt like anchors, pulling her down. She sank beneath the surface. Reaching up with a final burst of energy, she ripped the heavy goggles off her face.

As she drifted deeper into the dark, the ocean above flared with a brilliant white light.

Go to the light, a voice echoed in her mind.

Summoning the last of her willpower, she clawed her way toward the brightness. A pair of hands broke through the surface, grabbing her jacket. Bill hauled her upward, pulling her clear of the water as Madelyn opened her mouth, gasping for air.

The brass doors of the Miraflores Palacio Hotel spun smoothly, opening into a grand lobby worlds away from the ocean storm. Inside, polished marble floors stretched beneath old-world arches, the space bustling with affluent guests and carnival revelers still dressed in elaborate costumes.

The rhythmic click of leather shoes echoed against the marble, drawing a straight line toward the reception desk. Behind the counter stood a young receptionist. As the visitor approached, she adjusted her posture and offered a polished, welcoming smile.

Standing a few feet away were two other staff members: the general manager—a distinguished man with gray wings in his hair and an impeccable suit—and a muscular, bald security officer with a hand hovering near his earpiece.

"*Buenas tardes, señor,*" the receptionist said warmly. "How may I help you?"

Without a word, the visitor placed a leather wallet onto the polished counter, flipping it open to reveal a gold-trimmed credential badge. It read: *Mike Anderson, Special Agent, CIA.*

The receptionist's smile faltered. She looked over her shoulder at the manager, her voice dropping. "Sí, señor. Un momento, please."

Seeing the badge, the manager and the security officer walked over, giving the receptionist a nod to dismiss her. The two men stared at the credentials, then exchanged a puzzled look before facing Mike.

"We weren't expecting you," the manager said, his thick accent strained. "Why is the American CIA here before our own local policía? Are you here for Señor Ruiz?"

Mike kept his expression blank. "I'm here to—"

The high-pitched wail of police sirens cut him off. Everyone in the lobby turned toward the entrance as flashing red and blue lights reflected wildly against the glass.

Outside, a convoy of police cruisers screeched to a halt at the curb. Officers scrambled out, led by a sharp, well-dressed detective in his forties. He had a lean build and carried the unmistakable scent of a heavy smoker. Barking rapid orders at his men, the detective flicked his cigarette to the pavement, crushed it with his heel, and marched through the entrance.

The detective stormed into the lobby, his eyes locking on the manager and the stranger at the desk. Adjusting his tie with an agitated jerk, he glared at the staff.

"Who is this man?" the detective demanded in sharp Spanish. "Why are you talking to anyone? What the hell is going on here?"

The manager raised his hands. "He is American... CIA."

The detective stopped in his tracks, pinching his upper lip. He turned slowly toward Mike, looking him up and down with a gruff grunt. After a tense beat, he extended his hand. The two men exchanged a brief, firm handshake.

The detective reached into his coat, pulled out a silver case, and tapped a cigarette against the metal before placing it between his lips. He vibrated with nervous energy.

"Well, I am not surprised to see you here," the detective said, his Spanish shifting into accented English. "Lately, your government seems to be everywhere... right before we are. What is your business?"

Mike hesitated for a fraction of a second, his eyes scanning the commotion in the lobby. "I'm here to see Dr. Pugh," Mike said evenly. "I understand she and her group are staying in the building."

The detective clicked open his lighter. Spark met tobacco. He took a long drag and checked his watch with open suspicion.

"You work strange hours," the detective remarked, his tone sharp. "Or is your visit to this Dr. Pugh more... social?"

The manager glanced at the detective, then faced Mike. "Dr. Pugh is not here. She canceled her personal reservation the day before the others arrived. Her suite is empty, though the rest of her group is upstairs, scheduled to leave tomorrow."

The detective threw his arms up in mock surprise, gesturing to the commotion. "Oh! So surprising, yes? But nonetheless, such perfect timing."

He rolled his arm toward the elevator bank, bowing with false accommodation. "Come, Mr. Anderson, let us go up to Señor Ruiz's suite. His guards are holding the man they believe shot him."

The detective marched toward the elevators, flanked by his officers. Mike drew a breath, scanning the room one last time, and shook his head before falling into stride behind them.

Reaching the elevator, the detective hammered his thumb against the call button, tapping the toe of his loafer against the marble. He hit the button in rapid succession until the brass doors finally slid open. The men crowded into the small cab. The detective crushed his cigarette against the doorframe, dropping the butt just as the doors sealed shut.

Inside the elevator, the polished brass panels reflected the tense expressions of the men. The detective muttered a few rapid words to his officers in Spanish.

The only term that bled through the quiet was "CIA," followed by a chorus of disapproving grunts from the uniforms.

The detective pinched his upper lip. Mike ran a hand through his hair, and they rode the rest of the way up in silence.

Out on the dark waters of the Pacific, the crew hoisted Madelyn over the railing of the lower deck. She was drenched, shivering, and slipping into shock.

Working quickly, they wrapped her in dry blankets and hurried her into the warmth of the cabin, laying her onto the plush sofa in the main salon. Bill knelt beside her, rubbing her forehead to bring warmth back to her skin.

"It's okay, Madelyn," Bill said. "It—"

Madelyn weakly lifted a hand, placing her fingers over Bill's mouth to silence him. She shook her head against the cushions, her expression hollow.

"It's not okay," she whispered. "I've had enough. I can't do this anymore. Just get me home."

"But your father—" Bill started.

"Is dead," Madelyn interrupted, her eyes sliding shut. "He's gone. It's over."

Within moments, exhaustion claimed her, and she drifted into a heavy sleep.

The glare of the South African sun replaced the darkness, transporting her back to the ranch in 1996.

An angry mob had gathered outside the estate, their shouts echoing across the dirt yard. They waved weapons, screaming threats to burn the house. A short distance away, several Black families who worked the land were held at gunpoint, huddled together in terror.

Inside the dining room, the atmosphere was frantic. Mr. Pugh methodically loaded a collection of firearms, laying them across the wood table. He handed a weapon to Madelyn, then passed another to her mother—a reserved woman in a colorful sundress.

A sudden crash shattered the tension as a rock tore through the windowpane, showering the room in glass. Madelyn and her mother dropped to the floor, covering their heads.

"I'm going out there," Mr. Pugh growled, checking his rifle. "If anyone tries to force their way into this house, you shoot them."

They scrambled to their feet, fingers tightening around the grips of their weapons. Mr. Pugh leaned in, kissing his wife and daughter. Madelyn clung to him in a fierce hug.

"If they try to come in, you shoot them," he repeated, looking his daughter dead in the eyes. "Do you understand me? Remember the lion, Madelyn. Shoot them!"

Staring back at him, she felt the fear evaporate, replaced by a cold resolve. Beside her, her mother stood motionless, her expression hollow.

"Yes, vader," Madelyn whispered.

Mr. Pugh turned and walked out the front door, leaving them by the window.

Outside, a heavily built man named John stepped forward from the mob. Seething with rage, he brandished a weapon as the crowd fell silent. Mr. Pugh marched out to meet him, a rifle in one hand while his other rested on the pistol holstered at his hip.

The two men stood face-to-face.

"I've had enough, Pugh!" John bellowed, his thick Afrikaans accent cutting through the heat. "You sit high and mighty on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. You deny me amnesty, and now you break the very laws you're supposed to uphold!"

He whipped his weapon toward the huddled Black families. "These people were ordered to relocate, yet they still work right here on your land!"

The mob erupted into angry shouts. The families looked around, terrified. From inside the house, Madelyn watched through the broken window, her rifle braced against the sill.

"All of you, get off my land... now!" Mr. Pugh ordered.

The crowd mumbled restlessly as John shook his weapon in Mr. Pugh's face. In the distance behind the mob, a cloud of dust rose over the horizon, accompanied by the wail of sirens. The protesters grew anxious.

"I'm not going to jail!" John screamed, his eyes wild. "Not while they are free. That is not justice! I'll kill you all first!"

The mob fell silent. The sound of the approaching authorities grew louder as the dust cloud billowed higher. John whirled toward the helpless families, aiming directly at them.

"John, don't do it!" Mr. Pugh shouted, taking a step forward. "Put your weapon down!"

The police cruisers tore into the yard, forcing the mob to split as officers scrambled out with weapons drawn. John spun back toward Mr. Pugh, glancing frantically between the police and the man before him.

"What happened to my country?" John cried, his voice cracking. "What happened to my freedom?"

As the officers closed the distance, John raised the barrel, pressing it against his own temple. The yard went quiet, save for the low whistling of the wind. The mob stared, frozen.

Suddenly, John turned his gun on Mr. Pugh.

A sharp gunshot rang out, tearing through the quiet. The crowd's faces filled with shock.

From the window, she screamed, her finger instinctively pulling her own trigger. Her rifle kicked hard, her bullet striking John in the head as the courtyard erupted into chaos.

John dropped to the ground.

Screaming, Madelyn sprinted out the front door, flinging her rifle into the dirt. In the doorway behind her, her mother stood paralyzed, hands clamped over her mouth. Madelyn threw her body over her father, sobbing as the authorities rushed in.

When the police finally pulled her away, her face and white blouse were smeared with crimson. She stared blankly ahead, her eyes boiling with a simmering rage.

"Vader! Vader! No! No!" she screamed as the officers dragged her back toward the house.

She twisted violently in their grip, screaming at John's lifeless body, "Lion! Lion!"



The horrific memory dissolved, returning Madelyn's mind to her sleeping body. She tossed restlessly against the cushions of the plush sofa in the main salon.

Across the room, Bill poured a splash of amber whiskey into a crystal tumbler. He walked closer, leaning down against the quiet hum of the yacht's motor to catch her troubled mumbles.

"Lion... lion," Madelyn whispered.

Bill straightened and flagged down the captain. "Get the poor girl a sedative and get her to her cabin," he ordered. "And captain, get us into U.S. waters immediately."

The captain gave a nod and exited.

Bill walked to the glass doors, stepping onto the open deck with his drink. Leaning against the railing, he took a slow sip of his whiskey, staring down into the dark water. He watched the iridescent trail of bioluminescence churning in the boat's wake, mesmerized by the glowing green foam.



The elevator doors slid open. The men stepped out onto the plush carpeted hallway, the detective sparking a fresh cigarette as they walked toward Ruiz's suite.

Two young guards stationed in the corridor stepped aside, greeting the detective with rigid nods before everyone entered the room. Inside, the fat guard stood over the handcuffed prisoner, glaring with absolute fury.

"Don't touch anything!" the detective barked to his officers, tossing his cigarette into a nearby tray.

Mike leaned forward, looking into the adjoining bedroom. The body of Ruiz lay on the bed, the pristine sheets stained a deep crimson.

"What the..." Mike muttered.

The detective marched over to the personal guard, squatting to stare him dead in the eyes. His gaze darted across the man's terrified face, searching for guilt. The guard stared back, his eyes desperate as he pleaded for his life.

After a long moment, the detective stood up and turned a suspicious glance toward the fat guard. Caught off guard by the scrutiny, the guard shifted his weight and looked away.

The surrounding officers exchanged uncertain glances. Standing near the back, Mike watched, amused by the unfolding drama. The only sound in the room was the chopping of the ceiling fan cutting through the heavy air.

"This man did not kill Ruiz," the detective announced flatly.

A murmur of surprise rippled through the room. The personal guard let out a shuddering breath of relief, dropping his head.

The fat guard took an aggressive step toward the detective, pointing at the prisoner. "But detective, we found the empty casing

right there," he argued, his voice rising. "He was the only one in the room with him. I think—"

"You think wrong!" the detective cut him off.

""Gracias, Jesús, Madre Mary," the personal guard whispered, blinking back tears. "Gracias, detective."

The detective turned to him, giving a brief nod. He shook his head, turning on his heel as he muttered under his breath in Spanish. "But no one else will believe you. You will pay for this crime."

The personal guard shrugged helplessly at the fat guard. The fat guard responded by dragging a single finger across his own throat. "He said you're a dead man," the fat guard hissed.

Ignoring them, the detective lit a cigarette and paced the perimeter of the room. He stopped in front of a large police sergeant with a thick handlebar mustache and an ill-fitting uniform.

"Take him to the station," the detective ordered the sergeant. "Charge him for the murder of Ruiz. And I want everyone else out of here—except Mr. Anderson... from the CIA."

He took a drag, exhaling the smoke toward the ceiling as his eyes scanned the plaster. Mike followed his gaze.

The detective looked back down, extending an arm toward the open bedroom doorway. "Well, Mr. Anderson, from the CIA, shall we?"

Mike began to walk past him, but paused after a single step. He turned to face the detective fully. "Mike. It's just Mike."

The detective raised an eyebrow, taking a slow drag from his cigarette. He exhaled, nodding in a patronizing rhythm. "Ah yes, the informality of the Americanos. *Por favor*, after you, Mr. Mike."

Shaking his head at the man's theatrics, Mike entered the bedroom. The detective followed close behind his shoulder.

"Mike..." Mike muttered under his breath. "Damn, it's just Mike."

The two men stepped into the quiet bedroom, walking toward the edge of the mattress. Mike split off to investigate the right side of the bed, while the detective moved around to the left. Both stood in silence, staring down at Ruiz.

The detective looked across the bed at Mike, took a drag from his cigarette, and pointed toward the ceiling. A flake of ash fell onto

Ruiz's chest. Mike looked up, then down at the ash, his brow furrowing.

The detective's attitude remained entirely nonchalant. "He's going to be cremated anyway. What's a few more ashes, *s?*?"

Mike shook his head, ignoring the comment as he leaned closer to study the clean, precise entry wound.

The detective gestured up toward the ceiling again. "And so, Mike, you say you came to see a Mrs. Pugh... who was supposed to be staying in the suite directly above us?"

"Dr. Pugh," Mike corrected, his voice distracted as he continued to examine the sheets.

"Who is mysteriously not here?" the detective asked, letting out a low hum. He waved his hand dismissively over the bed, causing another small dusting of ash to fall.

Mike looked up from the wound, staring directly at the detective, then down at the new debris. He shook his head in quiet disapproval.

The detective looked back at the late politician. "At least it's not a wasted trip," he added with a shrug.

Mike didn't answer. His eyes scanned the ceiling panels, his gaze shifting methodically from side to side. Suddenly, his movements stopped. His eyes fixed on a point above, and a slow smile spread across his face.

"He was killed in his sleep," Mike announced. He looked at Ruiz's body, nodding to himself as he ran a hand through his hair. "Just like Nkwatcha."

Turning on his heel, Mike headed toward the bedroom door. He paused at the threshold, looking back over his shoulder. "Detective, I need to see the suite upstairs."

The detective pinched his upper lip, watching Mike with a mixture of puzzlement and suspicion.

"Please," Mike pressed, his voice taut. "Let's go upstairs."

The detective shrugged dismissively. He dropped his cigarette into an ashtray and gestured toward the door. "Yes, of course, Mr. Mike... from the CIA."

Mike followed him out, shaking his head in disgust. "Mike. Just Mike."

He missed the mocking smirk that spread across the detective's face.

"Sí," the detective murmured.

A few minutes later, the two men stepped into the spacious parlor of the penthouse. Mike looked around, taking in the pristine layout. Everything was in perfect, undisturbed order.

He walked to the windows, checking the hardware; the heavy snap locks were secured. Without a word, he marched into the bedroom and dropped to his knees, beginning an inch-by-inch inspection of the flooring.

The detective remained unconcerned. He pulled another cigarette from his case, lit it, and leaned against the window frame, watching Mike work with an amused expression.

"I am unsure what it is you look for," the detective said, exhaling a thin stream of smoke. "Ms. Pugh did not stay here. Besides, we already have our killer in custody. This case is solved. It is closed."

"Your mind is closed," Mike countered, not looking up from the floor. "Ballistics will tell a different story."

The detective bristled at the insult. Turning, he unlatched the heavy frame and flung his cigarette out into the night before facing Mike fully.

"Oh, *sí*, ballistics tests! No, señor, we don't have those here. We wanted to get that fancy equipment, but there was none left... Hollywood had bought it all."

Mike cut his eyes toward the man, a dry smile escaping his lips before he returned to the pine planks. "With all due respect, detective, you don't seem interested in finding out who really killed Ruiz."

The detective scoffed, extracting another cigarette from his case. He lit it, took a deep drag, and strolled over to where Mike was kneeling.

"I wish I could say I am sorry that Ruiz is dead, but in truth, Mike... I am not," the detective admitted, his voice dropping. "Ruiz was an evil man. He will not be missed."

"But that doesn't change the fact that the truth needs to be investigated," Mike said, his voice level.

"Investigate the truth?" The detective let out a bitter laugh. "The truth is that ninety percent of my country's people wanted to see Ruiz dead. Most of them would have killed him themselves." He took another drag, shrugging as he exhaled a swirling cloud of smoke. "His own army was talking of a coup. I simply do not have the time to investigate. Nearly every person in this country has a motive."

Mike stood up, studying the man's face.

The detective took a final drag, looked back at Mike, and raised an eyebrow. He walked to the window, staring into the darkness.

"Who rented this suite?" Mike asked.

"An oil company from Texas," the detective replied. "They reserve this entire floor for the year." He let out a short, cynical laugh. "They come here for our oil. This hotel is a political hot spot, Mike. There are perhaps... even more suspects in this case, no?"

The detective turned toward the door. Stopping at the threshold, he pulled another cigarette from his case, packed it against his palm, and placed it between his lips.

"If you will excuse me, Mike, I must go get ready for a press *conferencia*," he said with a smirk. "I must let the people know I have solved this murder. You look around all you want, but please... don't touch."

Mike extended a hand. "Gracias, detective. Buenas noches."

The detective lit his cigarette, gave a sharp nod, and walked into the corridor, disappearing behind his own smoke screen.

Left alone, Mike walked to the window, leaning against the heavy wooden sill to look out. Below, the sprawling street carnival was finally beginning to wind down, the crowds thinning. He ran a hand through his hair, his eyes scanning the framing.

"Well, hello..." he whispered.

Mike dragged a chair to the window and stepped onto the seat. Leaning in close, he inspected the top of the frame. Etched into the finished wood was a fresh rub mark, and caught in the splintered groove was a synthetic rope fiber. He leaned out, peering up toward the heavy concrete stays on the roofline.

Pulling himself back inside, he stepped down and began pacing, his eyes locked onto the knotted pine floorboards.

"I know she was here," he muttered to himself. "I know it!"

He walked to the door and pulled it open, his expression hardening. "It's time to wake up her friends."

Out in the hallway, Mike pounded on the doors, the thuds echoing down the corridor.

One by one, the doors swung open. The women of the flying troupe stepped into the hall, looking sleepy, disheveled, and confused by the disruption.

Before they could speak, Mike flashed his government credentials in front of their faces.

"Good morning, ladies," Mike said, his voice cutting through their grogginess. "We need to talk."



Miles away on the open Pacific, the smooth surface of the sea mirrored the blooming colors of the dawn sky as a cool breeze began to blow across the water.

Bill sat at the table, sipping his morning coffee while a steward quietly laid out a platter of fresh fruit. The peaceful dawn was broken as a disheveled Madelyn limped onto the sun-drenched deck, propping herself up on a pair of crutches.

Bill glanced over the rim of his glasses, keeping his tone light. "Good morning. Sit down, sit down. Have some coffee and fruit."

Setting his mug aside, Bill stood up to guide her into a chair. Madelyn let out a sharp grunt as she settled onto the cushion. Bill took the crutches and passed them to the waiting steward, gesturing toward his own empty cup to signal for a refill for Madelyn. The steward gave a nod and slipped into the cabin.

As soon as the crewman was out of earshot, Bill's demeanor shifted. "Listen, hon. We need to talk."

Madelyn rolled her eyes, letting out another defensive grunt.

Bill sighed, sinking into his seat. "After breakfast."



The first rays of dawn struck the hotel roof, illuminating the chaotic mess of parasail equipment scattered across the concrete. The heavy service door swung open with a dull metallic groan.

Mike stepped onto the deck, escorting Susan—a fiery redhead—along with two other women from the flying troupe. All of them were athletic, slim, and striking, though still groggy from being woken up.

Susan scanned the clutter, her eyes widening as she marched forward. "Hey! My sail is gone! And my lines are cut!"

Mike walked over, kneeling to inspect the severed cords. Standing, he paced to the ledge and stooped, examining the fresh scuff marks etched into the roof's edge. He leaned over the edge, tracking the line of sight down the building facade, it was a direct line to Madelyn's suite. His eyes caught a dark shape resting on the roof of an adjacent, lower structure—an abandoned backpack.

Turning to the group, Mike walked to Susan and extended his hand. Susan offered a lingering smile as their fingers met. Mike placed a hand on her shoulder, guiding her and the other women back toward the exit, though Susan kept a firm grip on his hand until the last second.

"Thank you, ladies, for your help," Mike said smoothly. "Sorry to wake you so early."

Susan tilted her head, her eyes locking onto his. "It would be a pleasure to wake up with you any morning..."

"I hope Dr. Pugh is feeling better," Mike replied, deftly deflecting the advance. "I'll personally ensure your equipment is shipped back to you. You all have a safe trip home."

He ushered the women through the frame, closing the heavy door behind them. Susan offered one final, silent glance before disappearing into the stairwell.

Left alone in the quiet dawn, Mike walked back to the ledge, staring down at the backpack below.



Mike stepped out onto the gravel-strewn roof of the adjacent building. He bent down and hoisted the heavy canvas backpack, glancing up at the towering facade of the Miraflores Palacio to calculate the drop.

Unzipping the main compartment, he tipped the bag, dumping the contents onto the gravel. Out fell Madelyn's torn black sail, several cut pieces of a flight harness, and a coiled length of rope. A knowing smile spread across Mike's face as he stuffed the incriminating gear back inside the pack.

The sharp crack of a gunshot shattered the morning quiet.

A bullet slammed into the gravel next to his shoe, kicking up a spray of stone and dust as it ricocheted into the air. Mike didn't hesitate; he bolted across the roof, diving for cover as a second shot rang out.

Pressing his back against a concrete vent stack, Mike risked a glance toward the hotel roofline. Far in the distance, a solitary figure dressed entirely in black was fleeing across the deck.

"What the hell?" Mike muttered, his heart hammering.

He stood up, brushing the dust off his clothes, and checked his perimeter before darting toward the exit stairs.

"I'm going to find me that shooter."



Back on the open Pacific, the luxury yacht cut through the water. Bill and Madelyn rested side by side on chaise lounges, soaking in the midday sun.

A steward approached, setting down a tray with a chilled pitcher of iced tea, but Bill gave a sharp wave, dismissing the man. Bill sat up, bracing his elbows on his knees as he leaned close to Madelyn.

"Close call last night," Bill said. "Listen, I know you're in shock and a lot of pain, but I need to bring you up to speed on some things you don't know."

Madelyn watched him, her brow furrowing. "I sense bad news."

"What do you actually know about the relationship between me and your father?" Bill asked.

Madelyn shifted against the lounge. "You were close friends."

"Hon, it was a business relationship," Bill said, his voice flat. "He worked for me. If not always with me."

A confused expression crossed Madelyn's face as she parsed his words. "What are you talking about?"

"Me, you, your dad, Mike Anderson," Bill listed.

"Anderson?" Madelyn repeated, her voice tightening. "You said Anderson is CIA. I'm not making the connection, Bill."

Bill drew a breath, looking her dead in the eyes. "Madelyn... I'm CIA. Have been for years. Your dad was an operative. After your mother's suicide, everything you've learned, everything you've ever done, has been orchestrated by the agency—through me."

The words hit her like a physical blow. "Orchestrated? My life is not your symphony!"

Bill pursed his lips, raising his eyebrows in a clinical display of authority. "Well... it really is... kind of. But listen to me—"

"No! Fuck you, Bill!" Madelyn snapped.

She lunged forward, swinging her aluminum crutch and striking Bill across the chest. The outburst triggered the ship's security; the cabin door burst open, and a burly crewmember rushed onto the deck, a weapon brandished.

Bill scrambled backward, clearing her reach as Madelyn forced herself upright, trembling with rage.

"Madelyn, sit down," Bill said, his hands raised. "Listen to me. Nothing is different."

"Nothing's different? Everything's different!" Madelyn screamed, her voice cracking under the weight of the betrayal. "I told you last night—I've been telling you—I'm through! I've had enough. I knew something was—"

She cut herself off, her gaze snapping to the armed crewmember. She stared at the barrel, her expression shifting into defiant disgust.

"And what?" she challenged, glaring back at Bill. "Are you going to shoot me?"

Bill's eyes hardened, the paternal warmth vanishing from his face. "Yes. If he has to. Now sit down and shut up! We need to figure some things out, right now!"

The fight drained out of her all at once. Madelyn sank into her chaise lounge, casting the crutch onto the deck to stare blankly at the rolling horizon. After a moment, she turned her cold gaze back toward the armed guard.

"Put your weapon away," she muttered. "The only shot I need right now is whiskey."

Bill looked toward the cabin door. "Bring the bottle."

Attempting to ease the tension, Bill adjusted his glasses and offered a dry smile. "Hon, could you watch your language? You sound like a sailor."

Madelyn didn't answer, her eyes scanning the perimeter. "We are on a fucking boat, Bill," she snapped, her voice dripping with bitter irony.

They dropped into a thick silence. Madelyn stared out at the churning wake while Bill watched her every move, his expression guarded. The yacht swayed against the tide, the low rumble of the diesel engines vibrating through the deck.

The steward returned, breaking the tension just long enough to place a crystal decanter of whiskey and two matching tumblers on the table before slipping back inside.

Madelyn turned, resting her elbows on the wood and spreading her hands in a rare display of vulnerability. "I just... I need to understand," she stammered, her voice cracking. "My father? Anderson? None of this connects."

Bill reached across the table, his hand moving to touch her shoulder. She flinched, pulling away instantly.

"Let me make this simple for you," Bill said, his tone clinical.

Madelyn gave a tight nod. She grabbed her glass, knocked back the burning whiskey in a single swallow, and poured a second.

"Your father worked with the agency during the apartheid era," Bill explained. "But he got too involved, Madelyn. He cared too much, and he went too far."

Madelyn looked at him, craning her neck forward as she squinted against the glare of the sun. Her lips moved, mouthing a single word: *What?*

"When he became a member of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission—which I begged him not to do—he pissed off a lot of powerful people," Bill continued, unbothered. "We couldn't protect him any longer."

"So you threw him to the wolves?" Madelyn asked, her voice dropping to a whisper.

"He chose to—"

"To die?" she interrupted. "To die, Bill? You let him die. The CIA did that? You did that!"

Bill shifted his gaze, staring down at his glass as a heavy wave of guilt washed across his face.

"What about Anderson?" Madelyn pressed, refusing to let him off the hook.

A faint smile returned to Bill's lips. "Mike's a little green. He doesn't even know I'm with the agency. But the boy's got talent. Honestly, you two would make a hell of a team."

"What?"

"I'm just saying," Bill chuckled. "You'll see. Y'all would be good together."

"And you knew he was actively investigating me?"

"I'm trying to see how good he really is," Bill admitted, shrugging. "Hell, I'm trying to see how good you really are, too. I've been grooming you for this—"

"Grooming me!" Madelyn barked, a bitter laugh escaping her throat. "What, now I'm a circus poodle? You've been playing me this entire time, Bill... say it."

Bill pursed his lips, his expression freezing in a calculated nod. "Well, darl'n... as they say back home in the Carolinas, I've been playing you like a fiddle."

Madelyn sat back, crossing her arms. Her face was a mask of unadulterated disgust. "That sucks, Bill. That really sucks."

"Listen to me, Madelyn. Listen carefully." Bill took a sip of his whiskey, then set the tumbler down with a soft click. "The agency wants to bring you into the fold. They want you to work for us on a much larger scale."

"Now?" Madelyn interrupted, incredulous. "You're telling me this now? I already told you I'm through, and after this, I mean it. I don't want any part of this anymore. I want to be a doctor. The kind that saves lives."

"Cut the philosophical crap!" Bill snapped, his patience wearing thin. "We've been guiding you since you were a child. It makes perfect sense. In the end, you got your dream."

"Sense?" Madelyn repeated, her voice rising. "I'm a doctor who kills people, Bill! I kill people. You made me a killer. I'm a killer!"

"And thousands of children live because you are," Bill countered, his voice booming over the wind.

"That's not what's happening in Slovanka," she whispered.

"You're losing your focus."

"You took my pain, my anger, and you mixed it with your own sick ambition," Madelyn said, her eyes boring into his. "You took the perfect ingredients and manufactured a monster."

"Be sensible, Madelyn."

"How can I when none of this makes sense?" she challenged, shaking her head. "I feel like a cog in a machine. For good reasons or bad, people die, revolutions begin, and the cycle repeats."

She stared at him, a wave of clarity washing over her as the reality clicked into place. "Revolution. In every country your friends wanted something from. My hospitals, the children, me... we were just pawns in your political theater. You bastards."

"That theater paid for your Ivy League education," Bill said, his voice cold. "Those exact friends finance your hospitals. Face it, honey—the CIA gave you your dream."

Without another word, Madelyn grabbed her crutches. Bill flinched, pulling back.

Forcing herself upright, she balanced against the handles and hobbled toward the cabin doors. Halfway there, she stopped, swinging around to face him fully.

"And you..." she spit, her voice trembling with a quiet intensity. "You killed my father. I will never forgive you for that."

She turned, throwing her weight into the crutches.

Bill stood up, looking past her toward the bridge. He gave a sharp nod to the captain. The captain returned the gesture, signaling the surrounding crewmen, and the deck erupted into motion.

"It's all in how you look at it," Bill muttered to himself, taking a final sip of his whiskey.

Madelyn yanked open the heavy cabin door.

"Madelyn, get your things ready," Bill shouted. "A chopper is coming to transport us back to Texas. Be ready to move in ten minutes."

"No thanks, Bill," she called over her shoulder. "I'll take the boat back."

"Honey, this boat was never here," Bill barked, the paternal veneer vanishing. "I am not asking you. I am telling you: get moving."

Bill knocked back the last of his drink, rubbing his temples as he stepped out to search the sky. In the distance, the rhythmic thumping of a helicopter echoed across the flat water.

The crew moved with practiced efficiency. Stewards hurried up the narrow stairs, lugging heavy suitcases toward the upper helipad. Another crewman stepped forward to assist Madelyn, guiding her weight up the steps as she struggled against her wrapped ankle.

Bill remained at the railing, his eyes locked on the horizon as the heavy chopping of the approaching rotors drowned out the ocean. A massive Chinook transport helicopter hovered overhead, the downwash from its tandem rotors blasting a ring of white water outward and flattening the swells beneath the hull.

Steel life lifts lowered from the open cargo bay. One by one, the crew and passengers were strapped in and hoisted through the mist into the belly of the transport.

Inside the rattling fuselage, Bill caught the pilot's eye and gave the signal to clear the area. The heavy transport tilted forward, roaring away. Bill turned in his seat, looking through the small porthole window back at the vessel left drifting in the open water.

With a cold, unblinking expression, he reached down and pressed a single red button on a small remote control.

Through the porthole, the lonely yacht rocked against the swells. In a sudden flash, the entire vessel vanished inside a fireball—the explosion tearing the structure into a million burning fragments that rained into the sea.

CHAPTER SIX

Houston, Texas
Same Day

On the Houston tarmac, orange batons guided the heavy Chinook to its pad. The wheels met concrete. The rear cargo ramp lowered, releasing Bill and Madelyn into the humid Texas air.

A sleek Town Car pulled to the edge of the landing zone. Barbara Roth stepped from the driver's side with a warm wave. Bill and Madelyn approached in silence. Madelyn's face was hollow, her movements mechanical. Bill hugged his wife briefly, then climbed into the front seat. Madelyn bypassed them, threw herself into the rear, and slumped into the leather.

Nearby, uniformed military personnel loaded bags into the trunk. Barbara climbed behind the wheel and steered away from the flight line, pulling onto the Houston highway.

To break the silence in the cabin, she glanced at the rearview mirror. "How was y'all's trip?"

In the glass, Madelyn sat rigid, staring at the back of Bill's head.

Bill didn't turn around.

"What's for dinner?"

Barbara adjusted her grip on the steering wheel, looking to the road. "Okay then..."

Later that evening, Bill, Barbara, and Madelyn sat around a massive Queen Anne table in the grand dining room of the Roth estate. The table was set with fine china, crystal stemware, and polished sterling silver. Overhead, a tiered crystal chandelier illuminated the paneled wainscoting, a heavy mahogany sideboard, and a sprawling Aubusson rug. Soft candlelight flickered between a massive feast spread across the table.

"Mmmm, mmmm," Bill chewed, cutting into his dinner with aggressive strokes. "Honey, this is delicious. Now this is a great steak! What do you think, Madelyn? Nothing quite like feedin' on the fatted

calf. You grew up on a cattle ranch, you know choice meat. What d'ya think?"

Bill took another bite.

At his flank, an old Golden Retriever sat, resting a heavy paw against Bill's thigh. Bill sliced a piece of steak and held it. The dog took the meat from his fingers.

"Now see, even old King knows a good thing," Bill chuckled, his voice dropping. "Did you see how he took that steak? Gently, appreciatively... he knows better than to bite the hand that feeds him."

He snapped his gaze across the table, locking onto Madelyn. She didn't flinch, returning his stare with a sharp smirk.

Bill slammed his fork against the fine china. He shook his steak knife at her, talking past the food still in his mouth. "We can dance around this issue all night, Madelyn, but I am not in the mood to attend a masked ball. So let's cut the crap—you need to make a decision here."

"I already told you, Bill," Madelyn said, her voice flat. "I'm through. That's it. I've had enough. I am finished, and I want a change."

Bill swallowed, letting out a sarcastic laugh. He set his knife on the table, wiped his mouth with a linen napkin, and slapped the table.

"Change? You want change?" Bill barked, leaning forward. "Well, before you make that your final answer, darl'n, let me spell out two or three things for you. You just sit there and listen, and then you sleep on it. Because you are underestimating the consequences of your decision."

"Bill, really, you need to listen to—"

Before Madelyn could finish, Barbara reached across the table, her fingers touching Madelyn's forearm with a firm tug.

Madelyn turned her head. Barbara's face was lined with a profound worry, her eyes fixed on the younger woman.

"Madelyn, honey," Barbara whispered. "Just listen to Bill."

Madelyn searched her face, tracking the tension in the older woman's features. Barbara patted her hand and nodded.

"Honey... just listen," Barbara repeated.

Madelyn glanced across at Bill. With a tight nod, she rolled her hand forward, gesturing for him to continue.

“Madelyn, we go back a long time,” Bill said, his voice dropping into a measured tone. “But in reality, there’s only the present. And right now, you are standing at the crossroads of your future... we all are.”

Bill picked up his wine glass, took a calculated sip, and set it on the table. He looked directly at her.

“The agency wants you to take on a specific assignment,” Bill revealed. “One that I believe only you have the exact skill set to handle. Prince Nasir, who is currently second to the throne behind Sarraf, needs to move up a notch. The king doesn’t have much time left... hell, none of us do.”

Madelyn recoiled, startled by the target, her eyes darting to Barbara. Barbara merely forced a cracked smile, her expression conveying a tragic sense of confirmation.

“Sarraf needs to go,” Bill stated coldly. “This operation is going to require deep preparation and logistics. If you pull this off, my friends are prepared to fund your foundation to the tune of fifty million dollars upon completion. It’s all or nothing.”

Bill leaned closer across the table, his face inches from hers. “I don’t have to tell you that if you botch this, you won’t have any need for the money anyway. But if you complete it... you will never have to worry about funding again.”

“That entire region is unstable, Bill,” Madelyn argued, her chest heaving. “An action like this would light the fuse on a global powder keg. Why would the agency risk that?”

“Let me spare you the questions,” Bill interrupted smoothly. “The preparation and the logistics ahead of you will be top-tier. We already have a rogue agent pre-staged in the area to act as the fall guy. Every angle of this is covered. This is—”

“Insane,” Madelyn spit out, shaking her head. “This entire plan is so dangerous, so destabilizing, it’s—”

“Your only choice,” Bill cut her off, his voice hardening. “If you refuse to do it, the agency will systematically ruin you. Your funding, your hospitals, your reputation... gone in the blink of an eye.”

Madelyn gripped the edge of the table. “I’m not—”

“That stupid,” Bill spat, his voice dropping into a harsh register. “Madelyn, honey, these people aren’t playing around. You’ll go down

for Nkwatcha and Ruiz. They'll extradite you, and you know as well as I do that you won't survive long enough to make it through the trials."

Madelyn's fingers tightened around her napkin. "I don't see where I have a choice."

"You really don't," Bill said bluntly. "You're going to have to trust me on this. And I know you don't want to. This operation is going to be full of illusions, Madelyn. You won't be able to trust your own heart, or even what you see. You're just going to have to trust me."

"That's asking a lot," she whispered.

Bill stared at her, a distinct sadness lingering in his weathered eyes. "Hon, the world's an ugly place, and the agency is the ugliest part of it all. I'm just the messenger, darl'n. And the code of war has always been... don't shoot the messenger."

Madelyn sank into her chair, frozen. Bill wiped his mouth with his napkin, set it by his plate, and pushed his chair from the table. A physical groan escaped him as he labored to his feet. Walking around the table, he stopped behind Barbara, wrapping his arms around her shoulders to press a kiss to her head.

"Honey, that dinner was delicious," Bill murmured. "I love your cooking. I'd miss that second only to your smile." He looked toward them, adjusting his glasses. "You ladies excuse me, I'm going to bed. I have a hell of a headache."

He turned and walked toward the dining room doors. As he walked, he massaged his forehead, his face twisting into a grimace of pain.

"Madelyn, sleep on it," he called back, his voice echoing in the space. "It's either-or. You only have one real decision to make here. Make the right one."

He stepped out, his footsteps trailing as he disappeared up the staircase. A moment later, his muffled voice drifted down. "By tomorrow morning!"

Madelyn pushed her chair, preparing to stand, but Barbara reached out, her fingers catching her arm. "Let's talk for a while," Barbara pleaded.

Madelyn sank into her seat. Barbara reached for the decanter, pouring a splash of red wine into their glasses. She lifted her glass into the candlelight.

“To the good times past,” Barbara said, her voice trembling. “To the future... for better, and for the worst to come.” She shifted her gaze, blinking to hold back a rush of tears.

Madelyn set her wine glass on the table untouched, sliding her chair closer to Barbara. “Barbara, what’s wrong? What is really going on here?”

“Oh, honey, it’s Bill,” Barbara sobbed, burying her face. “He’s not well. He has to get... he...”

Madelyn leaned in, wrapping her arms around the older woman, holding her as Barbara wept against her shoulder. “Slow down, Barbara,” Madelyn whispered, rubbing her back. “Just tell me what’s going on.”

“Bill’s just not well,” Barbara choked through her tears. “He has a tumor—an inoperable brain tumor. It’s starting to make him like Jekyll and Hyde. And this mission in the Middle East... why he is even telling me about it tonight... he has never talked about—”

Barbara cut herself off, forcing a breath to compose herself. She pushed from the table and paced, her fist bumping against her mouth to stop the shaking. Finally, she stopped in front of Madelyn, placing her hands on the younger woman’s shoulders.

“Madelyn, Bill is right about one thing. There is no time,” Barbara said, her eyes boring with urgency. “Those friends of his are dangerous—the agency, whoever they are. Honey, if you fight them, they will take everything you have. If I were in your shoes, I...”

Barbara stopped, looking at the chandelier. She exhaled and wiped the moisture from her eyes.

“I would take the offer,” Barbara admitted. “Bill will be dead within months anyway. Get out then. You cannot say no to them right now, Madelyn. Take the money, get through this, and then you can save the children. But right now... you have to save yourself.”

Barbara left, leaving Madelyn alone in the quiet room. Madelyn stared into the empty space.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Maggie Valley, North Carolina *The Next Day*

“Turn right in one hundred feet,” a GPS voice chimed.

Mike Anderson glared at the dashboard display. A thousand miles from Houston, the morning sun cut through the heavy trees of Maggie Valley, but Mike was too lost to appreciate the view. He glanced right, staring at a vertical, rocky mountainside that offered no path forward. Muttering, he drove past it.

“Recalculating,” the digital voice droned. “Continue 0.2 miles, then make a U-turn.”

“You sound like a wife!” Mike grumbled. “How the hell can anyone get lost in a town this small? How did Pugh ever end up out here in this mountain country anyway?”

Spotting a restaurant lot ahead, Mike yanked the wheel, bringing the vehicle to a sharp stop across the gravel. He pulled his phone, dialed a sequence, and held it to his ear.

“Hey, Mike, what’s up?” Gloria answered.

“I need a favor, Gloria,” Mike said. “I need a link to our satellites. I’m driving in circles out here. Did your system say Pugh is definitely home? Wherever that is.”

“Hang tight a second,” Gloria replied. The rhythmic clacking of a keyboard bled through the receiver. “Alright, it should be linking to your dashboard unit now. I’m showing Dr. Pugh’s phone and computer are both registered at her address, and actively in use.”

The navigation screen refreshed, a set of coordinates overlaying the map. “Yeah, I see it,” Mike said. “It’s coming up clearly now. I’m heading to see her. Thanks, Gloria. Oh, and one more thing—remember to unlink her tracking signals in a few minutes and block any local alarms. I’ll be in touch.”

Mike ended the call, shifted into drive, and accelerated onto the main roadway.

The rental car climbed the mountain passes, the engine roaring against the incline.

“Recalculating,” the GPS voice stated. “Drive 3.6 miles.”

Mike drove past the outskirts of the town center, navigating the narrow blacktop as it cut into the Appalachian Mountains. He swung into a steep driveway draped with pine trees. Reaching the crest of the hill, the trees cleared, and Mike stopped in front of Pugh’s home—a modern design perched on the mountain peak.

“Nice place,” Mike muttered, scanning the glass panels. “I could live here.”

He turned off the ignition. Reaching inside his jacket, he checked his shoulder holster. He glanced at the rearview mirror, ran a hand through his hair, and gave the weapon a final pat through the fabric. Satisfied, he stepped from the car into the quiet mountain air.

Mike walked toward the rear of the structure, his shoes crunching against the gravel. The silhouette of the surrounding mountains and his reflection captured sharply in the glass walls of the modern home.

“Hello!” Mike called, adjusting his jacket. “Dr. Pugh? Hello, is anyone home?”

He tapped firmly on the glass of the rear door and waited. There was no answer. Cupping his hands against his brow, he looked through the pane. A phone and a laptop rested on a table. A jumble of wires snaked from the devices into a matte-black enclosure where a series of LEDs blinked.

Mike walked the perimeter of the house, calling for Dr. Pugh at every corner while scanning through the windows. Finding no one, he returned to the rear entrance. He pulled a lock-picking tool from his pocket, worked the mechanism until it clicked, and slipped inside.

In the great room, Mike scanned the area, keeping his voice level. “Hello! Dr. Pugh? Mike Anderson, CIA. Are you home?”

Receiving only silence, he nodded at the vaulted ceilings. “Nice house...”

He began a sweep of the interior, moving through the kitchen and down the central hallway to memorize the layout. Stepping into Pugh’s bedroom, he checked the bathroom and walk-in closets before sliding open the dresser drawers. He sifted through her personal items, nodding as he pushed the drawer shut—accidentally leaving it ajar.

Mike returned to the great room and noticed a collection of photographs on the piano. He picked up a frame containing a picture of a younger Madelyn, her father, and their pet calf, studying their faces before setting it down. He pressed a few keys, then strummed the strings of an acoustic guitar.

Spotting the audio recorder, Mike pressed play. The track of a mandolin filled the room, followed by the acoustic guitar. Mike walked to the fireplace, running his hand across the cold stones.

Suddenly, the recording was interrupted by a telephone ring. The guitar tracking stopped entirely, though the mandolin continued to play.

“Hello, Bill,” Madelyn’s recorded voice echoed through the speaker.

Mike swung his head toward the device. “Hello indeed!” he muttered, a smile spreading across his face.

He hurried to the table, pulled out his phone, and began recording the playback.

“Bill, I don’t know,” Madelyn’s voice pleaded. “I just don’t feel like this—”

“This needs to happen,” Bill’s voice boomed. “Ruiz is a hold-up to the good of his country, and to the children. He needs to go. What if they could put together nine million? Do you think—”

“We could call it done,” Madelyn answered flatly.

Mike grinned. “Oh yeah, so done! You are so done.”

“Great! That’s my girl!” Bill’s recording continued. “The Independence Carnival is next month. Hell of a lot of fun—noisy, lots of fireworks, and there’s some great parasailing...”

The rest of the conversation played out. As soon as the recording cut to static, Mike stopped the playback and dialed Gloria.

“Gloria, it’s Mike,” he said. “I’m staying in North Carolina for a bit, so book me a room nearby. I’m sending an audio file right now. As soon as you get it, run a sweep and locate the coordinates for Dr. Pugh and Bill Roth.”

“Will do, Mike,” Gloria replied.

Mike ended the call and slipped his phone into his pocket. He yanked the rear glass door open and paused to scan the room.

“Oh yeah, Dr. Pugh,” he whispered. “You could call it done, alright.”

He stepped out, pulling the door shut.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Houston, Texas

The Next Day

The next afternoon, under a hot Houston sun, Madelyn, Barbara, and Bill sat at an iron table on the patio, finishing brunch. Behind them stretched a manicured garden and a green lawn. A steward stepped forward, clearing the plates.

"Thanks," Bill said, shifting in his chair. "Could we get another round of coffee?" He looked at Barbara, who offered a brief nod.

Madelyn placed her hand over her cup, shaking her head. The steward gathered the remaining items and slipped into the house.

Suddenly, Bill slammed his palm against the table. The crack startled both women, their shoulders tensing.

"Well, Madelyn," Bill demanded, his eyes piercing. "Just say yes or no right now, and then we will discuss any details or questions."

Madelyn looked at him, exasperated. A silence fell over the patio. Bill began to drum his fingers against the iron table, the tapping counting down the seconds. Madelyn shifted her gaze to Barbara, whose eyes were still filled with a quiet pleading, before facing Bill.

"Yes," Madelyn said.

Bill's tense face broke into a victorious grin. "Well, that's my girl. You go first—what are your questions?"

"How soon?" Madelyn asked flatly.

"A month—tops," Bill replied. "There is a huge amount of preparation work to handle, and that foot of yours needs time to heal. What else?"

"How fast can you get me home?"

"Today."

"I'll be packing," she muttered, disappearing indoors.

Bill turned to Barbara, patting her hand as a smile settled on his face.

CHAPTER NINE

*Maggie Valley, North Carolina
Later That Day*

Later that evening, a taxicab pulled up the tree-lined driveway, stopping at the crest of the mountain. Madelyn stepped out, using her crutches to navigate the dark walkway. She unlocked the entrance door and limped into the house.

In the black foyer, she checked the security keypad. The screen glowed in the dark, reading: UNARMED.

The cab driver carried her suitcases inside, setting them on the hardwood. Madelyn passed him cash. He offered a nod, exited, and closed the door.

Left alone, Madelyn leaned on a crutch, her head tilting as she scanned the dark space. Reaching into her handbag, she extracted a pistol and checked the chamber. Moving in silence, she cleared the kitchen, then made her way down the hallway with her weapon drawn.

She stepped into her bedroom. Her drawer was ajar. She pulled it open, her brow furrowing as she saw her items had been disturbed. She scanned the bedroom, then closed the drawer with a click.

She limped into the great room and went to the stone fireplace, pressing her fingers against a hidden seam in the masonry.

With a mechanical whirr, a stone panel slid away, exposing a console with six video screens. She pressed a master button.

The monitors refreshed, displaying security footage from earlier that day. Madelyn stood in the glow of the screens, watching video of every movement Mike Anderson had made around her home.

Her jaw tightening, Madelyn reached for her phone and dialed Bill.

"I didn't expect to hear from you so soon," Bill's voice said.

"Anderson was here," Madelyn hissed. Her eyes locked on the footage of Mike sifting through her drawers. "He was inside my house, Bill! Did you know about this? He broke into my home! Did you authorize that?"

“Didn’t know a thing about it,” Bill said, his voice flat. “I’m going to Langley tomorrow morning, and I’ll arrange things. Chances are, he’ll come back to your place soon anyway. Looks like you two get to meet again after all.”

Madelyn’s grip tightened on the phone. “What exactly are you going to arrange, Bill? What are you talking about?”

“I already told you that you two would be good together,” Bill replied. “Mike’s going to be your partner on this assignment.”

“What?”

“Yep. When he shows up at your door, just let him in and tell him whatever you want. Now, take down this number.”

“Bill—”

“Just take down this number, Madelyn, and don’t worry about a thing.”

Madelyn sighed, opening a drawer in the console to retrieve a pen and a pad.

“Ready?” Bill asked. “757-555-0007.”

Madelyn let out a cynical laugh. “Really? 007?”

“Gotta have a little bit of fun with this job, hon. Look, when Mike shows up, mess with him a little bit. Have some fun, and then dial that number and hand the phone over to him. Tell him Gloria will explain everything.”

“What if—”

“Just let him in,” Bill interrupted, his tone final. “Mess with him. Tell him whatever you want to tell him. Give him the phone. That’s it, that’s all you need to do. I gotta run, Barbara needs me for something.”

The line went dead. Madelyn stared at the blank screen in disbelief. She shrugged and hung up.

“That’s it?” she muttered. “Mess with him. Oh, I will. Tell him anything I want to... How about the truth? That’s certainly been stranger than fiction lately.”

Madelyn went to the bar, pouring a measure of whiskey. She walked to the sofa and sat, taking a sip from her glass as a grin settled on her face. Her hand flicked up, pushing her bangs back.

"Come on down, Mike Anderson!" she whispered to the dark windows. "You're our next contestant..."

She took another sip of the whiskey, a drop spilling on her chin. She blotted it with her sleeve, her eyes locked on the front door. "Mess with him any way I want..."



The next afternoon, the quiet of the mountain house was broken only by piano keys. Madelyn sat at the instrument, her fingers tracing a melody across the ivory.

Suddenly, the chime of the doorbell echoed through the room.

Madelyn stopped playing. Reaching for her crutches, she limped toward the foyer. Through the patterned glass, Mike Anderson's silhouette was visible. Madelyn stopped, taking a steadying breath.

"It's showtime!" she whispered in a Bob Fosse cadence.

She flung the door open.

"Hi, Mike! How are you?" she cheered. "So glad to see you! Sorry you wasted an entire trip all the way to Porte Valerdera just to see me, but here I am!"

She threw her arms up, lowering them in a sweeping motion like a game-show model. The theatrical burst of energy caught Mike off guard. He stood on the threshold, mouth open, speechless.

"What's wrong, Mike?" Madelyn teased, tilting her head. "Cat got your tongue?"

Before he could answer, she hooked her hand around his forearm, pulling him into the foyer. "Come on in, Mike... again."

Madelyn turned, limping past him toward the great room. Instead of stopping, she moved down the hallway, disappearing into the bedroom.

"I just need to grab a jacket!" she called, her voice echoing. "Go on in, make yourself at home—you already know where everything is anyway. I'll be right out!"

Mike stood alone, staring at the empty hallway as her words registered. He stepped into the room, bewildered. His hand twitched toward his coat, his fingers patting the weapon.

Inside her bedroom, Madelyn opened the dresser drawer. She reached past the clothing, retrieving the black silk panties Mike had

disturbed days before. Sliding the fabric into her jacket pocket, her expression hardened.

Back in the great room, Mike paced the hardwood, scanning for threats.

"I'll be right there, Mike," Madelyn's voice called from the hall. "Get yourself something to drink. There's tea in the fridge."

Madelyn limped into the room and sat in an armchair, gesturing for Mike to occupy the seat opposite her. She propped her injured leg on the arm of the chair, her skirt shifting with the movement.

Mike crossed the room and sat, trying to keep his voice steady under her scrutiny.

"Well, Mike, what's up?" Madelyn asked. "What is so important that you would search the world just to come see me?"

"Yeah, uh, it's beautiful up here..." Mike stammered, clearing his throat. "Look, I need to ask you... ah—"

He cut himself off, losing his train of thought as Madelyn reached into her pocket. With a deliberate motion, she pulled out the panties and dropped them onto the table, sliding them next to his hands.

Mike froze, his eyes locking onto the fabric. Across the table, Madelyn offered a triumphant smile.

"You have expensive taste, Agent Anderson," she said, her voice dripping with mockery. "But if you're going to break into a house just to touch her things... you should really learn how to fold them back correctly. You left the drawer open—ever so slightly. Sloppy."

Mike bolted from his chair, running an agitated hand through his hair as his investigator shield shattered. "Okay. I can tell—"

"Tell what, Mike?" Madelyn interrupted.

She stood, abandoning her crutch to close the distance between them. She stepped into his personal space, looking up into his face. The theatrical facade vanished.

"Can you tell I'm aware that you broke into my house?" Madelyn asked, her voice dropping to an icy register. "I know you went through my things."

Mike stood in silence as he waited her out. His jaw remained tight, his expression locked like a vault. Madelyn's hand flicked up, brushing her bangs back.

“Let’s cut the crap,” she said. “What do you want? What do you actually have to say to me? Because if you need to see the security footage of you trespassing and rifling through my drawers, I have it ready to go. Federal Agent Anderson, breaking the law... caught on a home surveillance camera.”

The blow landed. Mike sank into his armchair, his face locking into an unreadable poker face. He remained silent, refusing to give her an inch. Madelyn turned and limped toward the bar; Mike missed the triumphant grin that flashed across her face the moment her back was turned.

“You want a drink?” she called, her tone lighter. “I’ve had a rough week.”

Mike exhaled, the tension in his shoulders easing a fraction. “Yeah... gin, please.”

Madelyn poured the spirits, balancing a glass in each hand. She walked toward the patio door, looking from Mike to the handle.

“Can you get the door?” she asked. “You know exactly how the lock works. Come on, let’s sit outside and talk. So far, you haven’t shown any conversational skills.”

Mike stood, walking past her with his eyes on her face. He shook his head, a grunt of an amused grin breaking through his investigator defenses. He unlocked the door and swung it open, letting them step onto the deck.

“Hit play on the audio recorder on your way, Mike,” Madelyn added, not looking back. “You know exactly where that is, too. And leave the door open.”

Mike went to the desk and pressed play on the machine. A jazz track filled the great room. Turning, he exited onto the deck.

They sat opposite each other at a wrought-iron table. Beyond the railing, mountain peaks rolled into the distance.

“It really is beautiful here,” Mike admitted. He turned his eyes to Madelyn, a faint smile breaking through his guarded posture. “Everything is.”

Madelyn didn’t miss a beat, playing along with a theatrical flair. She fanned her face with her hand, fluttered her eyes, and lowered her chin as she peered at him. “Aw, shucks. I bet you tell all the girls that.”

They each took a sip of their drinks. A silence fell between them as they hunted for their next words. Madelyn cut through the quiet, resting her elbows on the table.

"Tell me what you think you know," she commanded. "I have some things to say to you, too, so get to the point."

Mike cleared his throat, his posture straightening. "I think you're a killer that works for Bill Roth. I think you killed both Nkwatcha and Ruiz."

Madelyn nodded slowly, unbothered as she sipped her whiskey. "Is that it? Any other suspicions?"

"Not that concern me," Mike said.

"Do you have evidence that could convict me in a court of law?" she asked. "Honestly—yes or no?"

"No."

"Then let me give you some," Madelyn said. "I killed both Nkwatcha and Ruiz. Others as well. And I don't work for Roth."

She took another sip of her drink, pausing to let the confession hang between them.

"But you do," she added.

Mike's stoic expression remained fixed, showing zero emotion at the revelation. Without a word, he knocked back his gin. The spirit caught in his throat; he choked, setting the glass on the table.

"Got any proof?" Mike asked as soon as he could speak, his voice tight. "Yes or no?" He shook his head, coughing as he recovered his composure from the bite of the alcohol.

Madelyn laughed at his expense. "Proof that you can't handle your liquor? Yes—first at the fundraiser, and now right here. You choke every time, Michael. Didn't you ever go to college?"

"Yeah, I went to college," Mike replied, chagrined. He leaned forward, deflecting the embarrassment. "Bill Roth... tell me about Roth."

"Bill told me he works for the agency," Madelyn explained, swirling the ice in her glass. "He's been using you this time to see how good your tracking skills are—to see if you could get this close to his assassin." She took a sip, then reached across the table, placing her hand over Mike's fingers. "Oh, and he thinks we'd make a great team."

Mike stared at her, his mouth parting in disbelief as the pieces of the puzzle rearranged themselves in his mind. He looked down, his fingers reaching for his empty glass.

Madelyn stood. "Need another drink?"

"How do I know you're not—"

"You don't," Madelyn interrupted. "But Gloria does."

Reaching into her pocket, Madelyn pulled out her phone and dialed the number Bill had given her. She tossed the phone across the table, and it landed in Mike's lap as she turned toward the house.

Mike caught the device, holding it to his ear. The connection chimed, followed by a voice.

"Hey, Mike, surprise!" Gloria's voice cheered. "Everything she's told you is true. Senior Agent Roth is sitting right beside me. He said to listen to Dr. Pugh, follow her lead, and be back at the office in Virginia tomorrow morning. Bye, Mike!"

The line went dead.

Mike lowered the phone, setting the device on the iron table. He picked up his glass, staring into the crystal before looking toward the kitchen doors.

"Yes," he called. "I do need another drink."

A moment later, Madelyn returned, a smile on her face. She carried two bottles, refilling both of their glasses to the brim before taking her seat.

They lifted their glasses into the sunlight. Madelyn raised her drink toward him, her eyes flashing.

"Well, Mike... who knew," she murmured. "To new adventures."

They clinked their glasses together in a solemn toast.

Mike leaned forward, his elbows on the table as his expression turned serious. "I was told to listen to you. What the hell is going on here, Madelyn?"

"I'm sure you already know my history," Madelyn said, her voice dropping to a flat cadence. "You've probably read every file on me. My father was an operative for the agency. I believe they executed him. Bill and Barbara... they're the only family I've had since I was a teenager." She paused, looking out at the mountain peaks. "And killing... well, killing is all I've ever known to get things done."

Madelyn looked down at the table, her chin quivering. Steeling herself, she looked up and locked her gaze on Mike.

"I don't want to do this anymore," she whispered. "I've told Bill several times. But he told me the agency would systematically ruin me if I tried to walk away. Mike... I have to do this mission."

Mike drew back. Madelyn took a sip of her whiskey, tilting the glass toward him like a weapon.

"Oh, and by the way," she added with a smirk. "You're my new partner."

"In what?" Mike asked, his brow furrowing.

"To eliminate Prince Sarraf," Madelyn said. "We need to clear the way so Nasir can take the throne."

"Nasir take the throne?" Mike repeated, his voice rising. "That is starting World War III. Kill Sarraf? No way! I refuse to be held responsible for the deaths of millions."

"Bill said—"

"I don't give a damn what Bill said!" Mike snapped. "You told me a minute ago that you don't work for Roth. Who do you really work for?"

"I don't know anymore," Madelyn admitted, her shoulders dropping. "It was always Bill's friends with the oil and cattle interests. The funding came from them... or, at least, that's what I was led to believe."

"I thought so," Mike muttered. He tilted his head, staring at the sky for a moment. Leaning across the table, he pushed into Madelyn's space, his eyes boring. "Madelyn, my assignment is as an expert on Middle Eastern affairs. Namely... keeping the peace. I've been investigating the deaths of Ruiz and Nkwatcha because they were flagged in intelligence chatter about a possible coup."

Mike lifted his glass and shot his gin. This time, he didn't choke. He slammed the glass on the table. "A coup that would stir up trouble on a global scale—exactly the kind of trouble you're talking about right now."

Madelyn sat back. "Are you saying—"

"I'm saying your financial backers are the warmongers I've been tracking for months," Mike explained, his voice tight. "They make

billions perpetuating wars and funding rebellions. They've been using you for years to serve their own interests."

Madelyn looked down at her hands, hurt by the truth. "I've started to realize that, but I still have to—"

"Do the right thing," Mike interrupted. "Let one man live so that millions of innocent people won't die. Sarraf is actively pulling for peace in that region. If Nasir takes the throne, he'll nuke the U.S. the next day. Nasir is hard-core crazy, Madelyn. Bill's plan is not going to happen."

Madelyn looked at the mountains, taking a sip of her drink. A bitter titter escaped her, and she shook her head.

"One lives so millions won't die..." she murmured. "It's the inverted creed to the one I've lived by—that one must die so many may live."

Mike looked puzzled. Madelyn held up her hand, a silent gesture that meant *don't ask*. She looked across the table, reaching to hold Mike's hand.

"So, what do we do?" she asked.

"About what, or who?"

"About saving Sarraf," Madelyn said, her grip tightening on his fingers. "About saving the world..." She paused, then shot the rest of her whiskey. She slammed the glass on the table. Her hand flicked up, pushing her bangs back. "I told Bill I was through, and I mean it. I am through."

Mike raised his eyebrows, respect dawning on his features. He reached for his bottle of gin, refilling his glass before pouring another shot of whiskey into hers. For a long interval, they stared at the mountain range.

Finally, Mike turned to her. "How did you shoot Ruiz? I have to know."

Madelyn leaned closer, a flirtatious smile lighting up her face as she laughed. "Are you going to arrest me?"

"My mission is to keep the peace in the Middle East," Mike replied, lifting his glass. "As I see it right now, that mission is half-accomplished."

They clinked their glasses together in a toast and knocked back the shots.

“I hate to talk shop at home,” Madelyn said with a grin, setting her glass on the table. “But Ruiz... now that is a great story...”

CHAPTER TEN

CIA Headquarters

Langley, Virginia

Days Later

The Director, a man in his sixties with neat gray hair, paced across the office floor. He wore a dark blue suit with a white shirt and a red tie, an American flag pin catching the light on his lapel. The walls were lined with photographs of him alongside world dignitaries.

The Director walked to a lighted glass cabinet stocked with liquor, pausing to stare at frames featuring himself with Ruiz and Nkwatcha.

"Damn, I hate losing these allies," the Director muttered. "This is exactly the kind of crap that cannot happen again. Bill, we have got to put a stop to this."

He went to the decanters and poured two drinks. Walking to his mahogany desk, he handed a glass to Bill Roth and sank into his chair.

Bill sat opposite him in a leather wingback chair. "I'll see to it myself," Bill assured him, taking a sip. "I'll be on the ground in the Middle East to oversee every stage of the operation. I'm putting my top operative together with Agent Anderson."

The Director set his glass on the blotter, leaning forward with an analytical glare. "Don't let them trust each other, Bill. Make sure the right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing. The stakes in this operation are far too high, and I'm still not sure if we have a rogue or a mole among us."

"They both think they're on separate missions," Bill said, his voice dropping to a low hum. "And I already have an idea of who may have gone rogue."

The Director paused, his brow furrowing as he held his glass. "You don't think Ander—"

"No, no, no," Bill interrupted, waving a hand. "But give me some time, Director. Give me some room on this one. I may have to sail

into some uncharted waters here, do a few things that aren't exactly aboveboard."

The Director held up a hand, nodding. "Great, Bill. Handle it. Just don't let Sarraf come to any harm. Or better yet... don't let Nasir anywhere near that throne. Do whatever you have to do."

Bill finished his drink, setting the glass on the desk.

"You want another one?" the Director asked, gesturing toward the decanter. "My wife says everyone in this business drinks too much... but I'm not sure how else any of us would sleep at night."

"No, I'm good," Bill replied, pushing from the chair. He extended his hand, shaking the Director's before walking to the door. He opened it, paused on the threshold, and turned to the desk. "Don't worry, I've got a plan. I'll be leaving for the Middle East in a few days. I'll need a week on the ground to set things up, but I need to say goodbye to Barbara tonight."

With a nod, Bill stepped out, pulling the door shut.

In the hallway of CIA Headquarters, Bill walked toward the exit, a calculating grin spreading across his face.

"You want another one?" the Director asked, gesturing toward the decanter. "My wife says everyone in this business drinks too much... but I'm not sure how else any of us would sleep at night."

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He opened it, paused on the threshold, and turned to the desk.

"Don't worry, I've got a plan. I'll be leaving for the Middle East in a few days. I'll need a week on the ground to set things up, but I need to say goodbye to Barbara tonight."

With a nod, Bill stepped out, pulling the door shut.

In the hallway of CIA Headquarters, Bill walked toward the exit, a treacherous grin spreading across his face.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Above the Atlantic Ocean Eight Days Later

The hallways of Virginia vanished, replaced by a brilliant blue sky.

High above the Atlantic, a private Learjet banked, its white fuselage gleaming in the sun. Inside the cabin, the layout featured leather captain's chairs and polished tables.

Mike sat with a smile as Madelyn settled into the chair opposite him.

"This sure beats flying coach or business class," Mike remarked. "How much money do you actually make doing this?"

"It's a time-share," Madelyn explained. "The foundation pays for it out of our transport budget. I couldn't afford to hangar a machine like this myself, but it does get us to remote locations fast... plus, yeah, isn't it cool?"

Mike chuckled. "Sold me."

Madelyn said with a smile, "Thought it would."

"Look, Madelyn," Mike's tone turned serious. "Speaking of efficiency, we need to discuss the logistics of this mission. Roth has been on the ground over there for a week. He just sent an intelligence brief, but the data doesn't match your files at all. We're going to have to find a way to work around him."

Madelyn's expression tightened. "How are we going to keep Sarraf safe from Bill?"

"Getting around palace security is one problem," Mike said. "But making sure we have the right prince—now that is the real challenge."

"Aren't Nasir and Sarraf identical twins?" Madelyn asked, her brow furrowing.

"They are nearly impossible to tell apart," Mike nodded. "And with the threat of a coup, they'll both be utilizing body doubles. We need to know without a doubt that the man we are watching is the real Sarraf."

"Fingerprints?"

"It's the only sure thing, but unfortunately, there are none on file," Mike said. "I'm going to have to lift a set from a glass at the banquet. Once we identify Sarraf, we won't lose him until that crown is on his head. Believe me, this could turn into a shell game."

Madelyn leaned back. "But Sarraf is the firstborn. Doesn't he take the throne by birthright?"

"They have laws of succession designed to circumvent protocols," Mike explained, his voice growing tight. "And once that crown is laid onto a head—any head—they are the king."

Mike leaned into his headrest, closing his eyes. "But right now, I am going to get in some think-about-it time and force myself onto another time zone."

Within minutes, Mike dozed. Madelyn reached into her bag, pulling out her digital reader to pass the time.

The quiet of the cabin was interrupted. An insect buzzed past her face, landing on the cabin ceiling. On the floor, ants marched along the edge of the paneling. One disappeared into the cockpit; the second traveled toward the rear storage bay; and the third scaled Madelyn's chair.

Another insect landed on Madelyn's arm. She felt a prick. Swatting at her arm, she missed the bug, grunting.

The commotion woke Mike. He opened his eyes, blinking against the light.

"Damn it," Madelyn hissed, rubbing her forearm. "They're supposed to fumigate these private jets before every flight. This cabin is swarming with bugs."

Mike sat up, a smile spreading across his face. "What kind of bugs?"

Madelyn held out her arm, showing him a red pinprick on her skin. "Mosquitoes. One just bit me."

Mike laughed. Reaching over, he opened his laptop and typed a sequence into the terminal.

"Ah, mon chéri," Mike teased in a playful French accent. "These are very special bugs."

Mike spun the laptop, sliding it across the table. The monitor displayed a schematic detailing the layout of the jet—mapping the cockpit, the passenger cabin, and the cargo bays.

Madelyn stared at the blueprint, her jaw dropping. “You mean these pests are...”

“Drones,” Mike confirmed. “Insect drones. Surveillance tech. Check this out.”

Mike tapped a command, bringing up a real-time video feed. The monitor displayed the cockpit, capturing the two pilots talking as they navigated. He typed a shortcut, and the angle shifted to a view of the cabin, showing Mike and Madelyn sitting at the table.

“They fly, they walk, they listen, and they see everything,” Mike explained, his eyes flashing. “They are going to be our eyes and ears inside the palace walls.”

Madelyn scratched the mark on her skin, her eyes narrowing. “And the one that just bit me?”

Mike typed an encrypted sequence, then slid the laptop to her. The display refreshed, revealing Madelyn’s profile picture, her personal archives, and a breakdown of her DNA.

“It took your blood sample and put it into my terminal,” Mike explained, his voice tight. “But it could have just as easily given you an injection.”

He pointed at a technical readout detailing how the insect drone had released the fluid sample into its internal chamber for analysis.

“We can use DNA tracking to narrow down the real Sarraf and Nasir,” Mike continued, tapping the keyboard. “It’s the way to weed out the body doubles. Even though it is difficult to differentiate identical twins from a standard profile, it gives us a baseline.”

Madelyn studied the data on the monitor, impressed. “Cool technology. I guess that means there’s no time for standard methylation tests?”

“Time is of the essence on this one,” Mike said, shutting the terminal. “You’re going to be the one to release the drones inside the banquet hall.”

Madelyn laughed. “The banquet? That’s a joke, Mike. There is no way I’m getting inside that venue—it is men-only in that country.”

A smirk spread across Mike’s face. “Trust me, I got you in. You’ll see. And once you’re inside, you can deploy the rest of the drones.”

“And you don’t think anyone will notice?” she challenged.

Right on cue, an insect drone buzzed past Madelyn's face, landing on her forearm. Up close, its translucent wings and segmented body looked identical to a living organism. Madelyn stared at the pest, a dangerous smile breaking through her features.

"They are computer-guided," Mike assured her. "And no, no one is going to notice a random fly or an ant. That country is full of them."

"Well," Madelyn murmured, her eyes flashing. "That certainly brings bugging the place to a new level."

Without warning, the private jet jolted, the drop throwing them against their seats. The cabin lights flickered before dying, replaced by the amber glow of the emergency grid. The engines whined into a hollow rumble. Mike and Madelyn exchanged an anxious look.

The cockpit door opened, and the pilot appeared, his brow furrowed. "That wasn't turbulence, folks. We seem to be having some bugs with the electrical systems."

Before they could answer, he disappeared into the flight deck, slamming the door.

Madelyn looked at Mike. "Bugs?"

Mike shrugged, his eyes darting to his equipment. "They're not mine."

The aircraft jolted a second time, dropping several hundred feet in a lurch. The frame of the Learjet groaned, and the emergency lights flickered.

The pilot burst from the cockpit, his face pale and his breathing shallow. "We've lost the navigational computers," he shouted over the strain. "The mainframe has overridden our controls. It's forcing the engines to hold at half power... and the display says the system is going to shut down in twenty minutes. I have no idea what's going on."

He turned to the cockpit, stopping at the threshold. "Prepare for the worst."

"How far can we make it like this?" Mike demanded, his voice tight.

"I don't know!" the pilot yelled. "Probably over water, miles from the coast, maybe over land. But there is a zero percent chance we're making it to an airport. We're losing altitude... we're going down."

The door slammed, leaving them alone in the cabin. The engines moaned against the strain as the frame rattled around them.

Mike looked at Madelyn in the amber light. Unbuckling his harness, he slid to the seat beside her.

"There's no way I'm dying before I tell you how much I care about you," Mike said fiercely.

They held hands, anchoring their fingers as the jet continued its descent.

"I'm ready for whatever comes next," Mike murmured, looking at her. "As long as we're together..."

Suddenly, an electronic voice bled through the speakers. They looked at the terminal screen. Bill Roth's face filled the display, a calculating smile resting on his features.

"Well, it's about time you two realized what's truly important in life," Bill said.

In an instant, the cabin lights flashed back to brilliance. The engines roared with a surge of power, and the jet smoothed out, leveling off at cruise altitude. The cockpit door opened, and the pilot gave them a thumbs-up before returning to his station.

Madelyn and Mike remained frozen, staring at Bill on the monitor.

"Insect drones aren't the only technologies available to us," Bill explained, his voice flat. "I could have just as easily flown this jet into the palace wall, or into the ocean. Remember, this mission will be completed as it was assigned."

Madelyn and Mike exchanged a silent look, then turned their focus to the monitor.

"I'll let you two get back to it," Bill added, his smile expanding. "Now that you've realized the important things. I just wanted to provide a reminder of who's in charge of this symphony."

Bill delivered a mock salute, and the screen snapped black.

The two operatives sat in the quiet cabin, processing the warning. Madelyn shifted closer to Mike, her jaw tight as she stared at the empty display.

Madelyn looked at her hands, speaking softly. "I'm feeling the weight of this assignment now."

A silent understanding cemented between them. Madelyn drew back, looking into Mike's eyes as a resilient smile touched her lips.

“One of the perks of flying private,” she murmured, her gaze lingering on his lips before moving to his eyes, “is the privacy we have to explore... our next move.”

Mike smiled. They turned their attention to the mission files, working the keyboards as they began to rewrite the execution plan.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Royal Palace

Two Days Later

The hum of the jet engines faded, replaced by the rhythm of Arabic music and the heavy scent of burning *oud*.

The banquet room was a towering domed hall decorated to resemble a Moroccan tent. Persian rugs overlaid the floors, flanked by pillow lounges and platters of delicacies. Camels stood in sandbeds beneath potted palm trees, chewing their cud as smoke drifted through the air.

A troupe of dancers emerged from the arches, moving in unison. Their bedlah attire sparkled under the chandeliers as they crossed the rugs. Their faces were wrapped in silk bukruk veils, revealing nothing but their dark eyes. The guests grew alert, their chatter dying as the performance began.

Near the front of the hall, Bill Roth and Mike Anderson sat on a silk-covered lounge. Seated beside them was Prince Sarraf, a tall man with chiseled features. He wore a gold-trimmed bisht in the royal colors, his posture matching his status.

Palace guards stood at every exit, the security grid tight. Several of the dancers drifted from the center of the room, fanning out to surround the men. At their flanks, security personnel stood with hands resting near their waistbands.

Prince Sarraf lifted a golden goblet toward Bill and Mike, a smile breaking through his serious demeanor. "Welcome to my country," he said, his accent cutting through the music. "I arranged this banquet in your honor, so you can see both our old and our new customs. And perhaps, Mr. Anderson—"

"Please, Prince, call me Mike," Mike said, offering a nod. "It's just Mike."

"Yes, of course," Sarraf smiled. "And perhaps, Mike, you will find a suitable partner here. Our women are wonderful; it is not good for a man to be alone."

The dignitaries laughed in unison. Several of the women danced around the lounge, each pausing to perform in front of the guests. One dancer separated from the line, gliding forward to perform for Mike and Sarraf. As she moved to the rhythm, she locked her gaze on Mike. Between the silk strands of her veil, her brown eyes were familiar.

It was Madelyn.

As she bowed before them, her fingers moved with precision. Hidden by the sweep of her costume, she released an ant drone onto the rug. She rose back into her choreography, moving down the line of guests.

Sarraf watched her retreat, his eyes wide. "Now she is exotic. Her eyes captivate me." The Prince slapped his forehead, knocked back a shot of liquor, and laughed.

He set the empty glass on the table. Unnoticed, the ant drone climbed the table leg and attached to the hem of Sarraf's thawb.

"Now, I have to agree with you there, Prince Sarraf," Bill chimed in, leaning forward with a grin. "She definitely has intense eyes."

Mike cut a look at Bill, his jaw tightening. Turning to the host, Mike kept his voice level. "You know, Prince Sarraf, I bet there is a person right here in this room who would make a spectacular partner."

Bill smiled at Mike, an unreadable look passing between the two operatives.

Bill and Mike finished their drinks, setting their glasses on the tray. Moving with stealth, Mike palmed Sarraf's discarded glass, sliding it into his jacket pocket to secure the fingerprints.

"I am sorry that your colleague, Dr. Pugh, could not join us tonight," the Prince noted, gesturing to the masculine gathering filling the tent. "But it is our custom."

"Oh, she's here," Mike replied. "If only in spirit."

"Don't worry about Dr. Pugh," Bill added, a chuckle escaping him. "Nothing gets past her... usually." Bill leaned close to Mike, dropping his voice to a whisper that barely carried over the music. "I haven't

seen so many men dressed in long robes since we investigated the Klan back in the day."

Bill laughed at his joke, leaning back. "By the way, you two are going to end up watching the wrong prince anyway."

Across the room, Madelyn continued her performance, dancing around the perimeter of the tent. She deployed the drones near Sarraf's security captain and his advisors, while flying insects were released into the branches of the potted palms.

She danced before Prince Nasir. Except for the styling of his clothing, his features were identical to Sarraf's. Madelyn noticed her movements were scrutinized by Nasir's security. She danced past him and moved on, refusing to risk releasing drones within his perimeter.

Sarraf signaled a servant for more drinks, turning to his guests. "You will excuse my absence tomorrow, gentlemen, but I must visit my father. As you know, he is not well—he is dying."

"Of course," Bill said, his tone turning solemn. "We'll get together with you tomorrow evening to discuss the logistics. Please, give the king my highest regards."

The dancers exited the hall, and the feast continued. A moment later, Mike felt his phone vibrate. He checked the screen, receiving a text from Gloria: *Insects online / on the move.*

Bill leaned close to Mike, a smug expression on his face. "You'll be watching the wrong prince."

Mike rolled his eyes, shaking his head at the older man's persistence. Bill threw his hands up in surrender.

"Just saying," Bill murmured, turning to his drink.



The next morning, the banquet hall was replaced by the modern lines of Prince Sarraf's receiving room. Tapestries hung from the walls, complementing the Persian rugs and golden embellishments.

Sarraf and Nasir paced the floor, locked in an argument.

"You are my brother," Nasir bellowed, his face twisting. "But I will not let you open our country to these foreigners and their Western ways!"

"Like providing an education for our women?" Sarraf countered, stopping.

"Like allowing marriage to foreigners!" Nasir shouted. "You dilute our culture, and you cower to the demands of the United States."

Sarraaf looked at Nasir, then placed a hand on his brother's shoulder. "Brother, let us go and see our father together. He grows weaker by the hour."

Nasir pulled his shoulder away, his voice cold. "As does our country."

Without another word, they walked out.

In the corridor, Sarraaf headed toward the medical wing. Nasir remained at the threshold, watching his brother walk away.

Nasir turned, heading the opposite direction down the corridor. "I will come," he called coldly. "I must make an important phone call first."

The two brothers walked away from each other, vanishing down opposing corridors.

Inside the King's chambers, the space had been outfitted with medical equipment, functioning as a critical care suite.

Sarraaf sat by the bed, his fingers holding his father's frail hand. The King remained unresponsive, his breathing rhythmic under the machines, though his eyes were alert. Near the monitor, a doctor adjusted the ventilator.

"Father, I worry about my brother," Sarraaf whispered, his head bowed. "He seeks to undo all you have done for our country. He seeks a world war. He is crazy, father."

The doctor looked at Sarraaf from across the bed, his expression tightening into a cold look at the prince's words.

Suddenly, the doors opened and Nasir's body double entered, his eyes darting around the room, distracted. Sarraaf stood to greet him.

The Nasir double raised a hand, gesturing for the medical staff to leave. The doctor adjusted the ventilator, gathered his charts, and exited with the nurse, the doors clicking shut.

"Are you alright, my brother?" Sarraf asked, his brow furrowing as he approached. "You seem disturbed."

"I did not receive the news I wished to hear," the Nasir double replied, his eyes darting around the room. "And it upsets me to be near Father when he is like this."

On the mattress, the King stared at the double. Though his body was paralyzed, his alert eyes conveyed a deep discontent. Sarraf noticed his father's fixed glare but remained silent.

The double sneered, gesturing toward the ceiling. "Here Father lies, close to death, while you entertain infidels in his palace. It is a disgrace. If I were king, I would expel every foreigner from our borders, and I would destroy the infidels."

Sarraf's voice turned ice-cold. "You would start World War III."

"In Allah's name," the double countered.

"Allah would never allow such things as you talk about."

"Allah told me to do these things," the Nasir double insisted, his voice dropping to a whisper. "He speaks to me directly."

"Has he told you that you are crazy?" Sarraf challenged, stepping closer. "Besides, I am the heir to the throne."

High above them, an insect drone buzzed through the shadows. It dipped, landing on the back of the double's hand. The pest deployed its prick mechanism, harvesting a sample before tearing into the air.

The double swatted at his hand, scratching at the prick on his skin as he glared at Sarraf. "Your infidel friends have brought filth and flies to the palace—for they are dung."

"My brother, they are business associates," Sarraf sighed, turning away.

On the floor, an ant drone navigated the patterns of the Persian rug, attempting to reach the hem of the double's robe. But as the double turned to pace, the heel of his shoe crushed the device.



In her palace suite, Madelyn watched as one of her monitor screens dissolved into static. The adjacent displays continued to function, tracking the security layout via the remaining drones.

"Drone down," Madelyn muttered, her fingers working the keyboard.

A separate display showed a flying drone outside her bedroom door. She opened the door, and the machine zipped inside, landing on the docking pad connected to her terminal to deposit its syringe core.

Madelyn removed the sample from the drone and loaded it into the analyzer. A moment later, the machine beeped.

Madelyn looked at the display as the data finalized. Her eyes widened. The DNA profile on the screen did not match the markers for Prince Nasir.

Adjusting her headset, she dialed Mike's frequency. "Mike, we have problems developing here."



Back in the care chamber, Sarraf and the Nasir double continued their low argument beside the monarch.

"Brother, you talk nonsense—crazy talk," Sarraf said, shaking his head. "As king, I will do nothing to weaken our country or our people. But we must live, adapt, and do business in the twenty-first century."

The Nasir double stepped close, his demeanor shifting into a compliant mask. He placed his hands on Sarraf's shoulders, kissing his cheek in a fraternal greeting.

"Brother, let us not fight," the double murmured, offering a reassuring smile.

Suddenly, his thumb pressed the mechanism of a ring on his finger into Sarraf's neck. A fast-acting sedative surged into Sarraf's bloodstream.

Sarraf's eyes widened. He stared into the smiling face of the man he thought was his brother as his vision blurred and his knees buckled.

"To take the throne, you must be sworn in within one hour of the king's death," the double whispered into his ear, holding up his collapsing body. "Our laws dictate an immediate passage of power. If you are missing when he passes... Nasir will become king."

"When I come back..." Sarraf slurred, his voice heavy as his brain fought the chemical.

His eyes rolled back, and he passed out, going limp in the double's arms.

"Who said you were ever coming back?" the double muttered.

From the bed, the paralyzed King watched. His eyes darted across the space, his body motionless under the sheets.

The Nasir double reached out, pressing a mechanism in the wall. A door behind a tapestry popped open. Two armed operators stepped from the darkness. Moving with efficiency, they stripped the *bisht* from Sarraf's shoulders and dragged his body into the passage.

The Nasir double put on Sarraf's clothing, adjusting the robes. A moment later, a second double—styled like Nasir—stepped into the chamber.

The King's eyes focused on the man now posing as his firstborn son.

"Your son Nasir will become the king," the new Sarraf double said coldly, stepping to the console. "He will rid this country of your Western plagues. He will rid the world of all infidels."

With a flick of his wrist, the Sarraf double deactivated the medical machinery. The ventilator went dead.

The King's eyes opened wide, darting in a silent scream as his lungs failed. Within a minute, the monitor flattened. The King passed away.

Moving quickly, the Sarraf double reactivated the equipment to mask the play, and both impostors exited the chambers to announce the tragedy.



Deep within the subterranean levels, the vault was constructed of thick stone, hidden from the palace floor plans.

Prince Nasir stood across the room, staring at his brother. Two guards stood by Sarraf's side. Sarraf's head lolled, his body swaying from the effects of the drowsiness.

"I have no intention of harming you, my brother," Nasir said, his voice echoing off the stone. "I only want the throne."

Sarraf looked up, fighting the chemical fog. "This... this won't work, Nasir."

"But it is already working," Nasir countered with a triumphant smile. "In less than one hour, I will be crowned king. You will still be missing, unnoticed by your guards and your Western friends. And after I am king, you will be sent to the furthest corner of my kingdom, to live out your days comfortably... and unseen."

"My brother," Sarraf breathed. "You are mad."

"And about to be king," Nasir replied. He turned and exited, the stone door sealing shut.



Back in Madelyn's suite, she and Mike stood by the monitors as the palace erupted into chaos following the King's death.

"I'm losing track of who's who on these feeds," Madelyn admitted, her voice tight as she adjusted the cameras. "I can only see one Sarraf and one Nasir on the main levels at a time. I've lost the path of the impostor."

"I told you it was a shell game," Mike said. "We need proof of who is Sarraf, and we need it soon."

Madelyn kept her eyes on the workstation, watching a screen that displayed the grid inside Prince Nasir's chambers. On the feed, the Nasir double was complaining to a security official about Sarraf's Western ways. The adjacent monitors tracked the throne room and the hallways leading to it. On the surface, everything appeared in order.

"I wish we could find a way to get inside the King's bedchamber," Madelyn muttered, chewing her lip.

A knock echoed at the door. Mike opened it. Nasir—posing as his brother Sarraf—entered the parlor, his head bowed. Madelyn stepped out of the bedroom, her eyes meeting Mike's in a silent exchange of warning.

"Forgive me, my friends," Nasir said, his voice heavy. "I do not like to see my father in his condition."

"How is he doing?" Madelyn asked, her voice guarded.

"He is weak," Nasir sighed, shaking his head. "The doctor has just adjusted his ventilator, but I worry."

Mike stood with a rigid posture. "Prince Sarraf, with the stakes so high right now, and with Nasir's capacity for trickery, we need to know

for certain that it is you who will be taking that throne. We need to stay by your side until you are crowned. We are here to protect you."

"Of course, my friends, I understand," Nasir replied, his expression radiating confidence. "How can I help you achieve this peace of mind?"

"We need a DNA test and a fingerprint scan," Madelyn stated.

"Of course."

Madelyn went into the bedroom, returning with a diagnostic kit and her laptop. She drew a blood sample from Nasir's finger and executed a fingerprint scan. Throughout the process, Nasir remained calm and cooperative.

The results populated across her screen. As anticipated, the genetic data matched both Sarraf and Nasir. However, the fingerprint analysis finalized a beat later—the markers matched the prints Mike had palmed from the glass at the banquet.

Mike exhaled, a wave of relief washing over his face as a smile broke through his tension. Madelyn shrugged, closing the program.

"It looks like he's our prince," Madelyn confirmed.

"There," Nasir said, adjusting his robes. "We are all now sure it is me. Even in this age of technology, fingerprints are still the key to the truth."

"Prince Sarraf, I'm sorry for any doubts we had," Mike said, his tone turning apologetic. "You know our government backs your plans for peace and change. The world leaders simply needed to be sure before the coronation."

"I understand, Mr. Anderson," Nasir said. He shifted his eyes onto Madelyn. "And we know my brother would never tolerate peace, nor the world's beliefs. He calls you infidels. But, Mr. Anderson—"

"Please, Prince, call me Mike," Mike interrupted.

Nasir looked at him, shaking his head. "I am not used to your Western ways, Mr. Anderson. As I was saying, I am not like my brother. I will learn to adjust to the ways and the cultures of this world."

Madelyn and Mike exchanged an uneasy look.

Suddenly, the doors burst open. The doctor and several armed security guards rushed into the room, their faces tight with panic.

"The King is dead," the doctor announced.

Nasir turned, his expression shifting into shock. "But you just adjusted his ventilator! What have you done?"

"You must come with us immediately," the security captain urged. "We have no reigning king. Word will spread through the city within minutes."

Desperate to buy a few more minutes of operational time to process the chaos, Madelyn scrambled for an excuse. "Prince Sarraf, would you mind if I run a rapid methylation test on your DNA sample? I... uh... I just want to be entirely sure."

Nasir locked eyes with Madelyn, his expression tightening, insulted by the request. Still, he maintained his composure.

"Dr. Pugh, it is time for me to be crowned," Nasir said, his voice hardening into steel. "You know our laws of succession. I must go right now. I am sorry that you still choose to doubt me, but you have the fingerprints. I must leave."

Nasir and his security detail moved toward the exit. At the threshold, he paused, turning back to Madelyn.

"If it is any consolation to you, Dr. Pugh," Nasir added with a smirk, "we also conduct our own strict tests to ensure that an acceptable man is crowned king."

He turned to depart, but before he could step out, Bill Roth rushed into the room, causing the security guards to stiffen and reach for their weapons. Bill held his hands up, his palms facing out, cool and calm.

"Good, you're all still here," Bill said, his voice level. "I have just received word that there is immediate danger. We need to stay in this room for a couple of minutes, until the area is secure."

As he spoke, Bill's fingers moved beneath his jacket, deploying a swarm of insect drones. Caught up in the tension, no one noticed the machines take flight.

"I was just notified that there are rogue men from your security detail lurking in the shadows," Bill explained, stepping into the parlor. "They are hiding in the corridors between here and the throne room. Their objective is to stop you from becoming king."

The security guards exchanged glances, shifting their weight as they adjusted their positions around Nasir. Hidden by the commotion, the drones zipped through the air, stinging the necks of the guards and the doctor. All of the men instinctively rubbed their skin with a frown.

Mike cut a look across the room at Madelyn. Madelyn stared back at Bill, a sense of dread settling as she tracked his movements.

"I was sent here to ask you to wait a few minutes while the corridors are given a security sweep," Bill continued smoothly. "And hopefully, Prince Sarraf, we can locate and eliminate those who oppose your ascension."

Before the guards could reply, their eyes rolled. One by one, the men and the doctor collapsed to the floor, unconscious from the sedative.

In a flash, Bill drew his weapon, training the barrel on Nasir's chest.

"Don't move, Nasir," Bill commanded, his voice calm.

Mike's eyes widened as he looked from the weapon to the prince. Bill didn't break his gaze, turning his expression toward Madelyn.

"Do it, Madelyn," Bill ordered, his voice echoing in the suite. "Complete the mission as assigned. Take the shot."

"Bill, this is Sarraf, not Nasir!" Madelyn shouted, refusing to move. "We ran the diagnostics. We have his fingerprints right on the terminal! I'm not doing this, Bill."

"Finish the task, Madelyn," Bill growled, his jaw tightening. "Or I promise you, the agency will permanently dismantle your foundation by tomorrow morning."

"The agency has nothing to do with this plan," Madelyn countered. "You and your network want Sarraf eliminated to force a conflict. It is not going to happen, Bill."

Bill remained unaware that Mike had stepped behind him, raising his firearm to train it at the older man's back. In the center of the room, Nasir stood still, maintaining silence as he tracked the shift in power.

"Madelyn," Bill growled, his eyes narrowing. "Finish the job... or I will."

"Agent Roth, lower your weapon," Mike commanded, his voice cold.

Bill shifted his gaze toward Mike over his shoulder, but refused to drop his aim from Nasir's chest. Madelyn watched Bill, her eyes pleading with him to stop. Yet Nasir stayed calm.

"You're both disobeying a mandate," Bill said, his tone dropping. "You've tracked the wrong target, Mike. This man is Nasir." Bill looked at Madelyn, his demeanor shifting to a soothing, fatherly cadence. "Madelyn... one must fall so that many may survive."

"One doesn't die this time, Bill," Madelyn whispered, her voice trembling. "Many do."

"Agent Roth, lower the weapon," Mike pressed, his finger tightening. "Bill, drop it."

Nasir remained still, his eyes tracking Bill, then Mike. Bill ignored the threat at his back, focusing on Madelyn.

"Madelyn, you are misreading the field," Bill said softly. "This is why I needed you to execute the target you believed was Sarraf." He watched her for a beat, letting the words sink in. "Dar'l'n, you have to trust my guidance—not what you see with your eyes, and certainly not what you feel in your heart."

Madelyn looked at Mike, searching his face for answers.

"Hon, I know this breaks your protocol," Bill murmured, his voice gentle. "He's awake, but—"

"But it fits mine," Mike interrupted.

Mike pulled the trigger. Bill fired simultaneously.

The gunshots shattered the quiet of the suite. Nasir dropped to the rug, wounded but breathing. Bill collapsed to the floor, a dark stain expanding across his shirt.

Mike lowered his firearm, crossing the room to secure Bill's weapon. Madelyn stood frozen, staring at Mike before kneeling by Bill's side.

Bill let out a murmur, his fingers grasping Madelyn's hand. "That's my girl..." he choked, his chest heaving. "Knew you would navigate... the right path in the end... my device... retrieve my device."

"Why did you orchestrate this, Bill?" Madelyn sobbed, her tears breaking.

Bill gasped against the pain, guiding Madelyn's hand toward his jacket. She extracted his mobile terminal from the pocket. Blinking across the screen was a single command: *Transfer*.

With a weak finger, Bill tapped the button. Madelyn watched him, her face washed with sorrow. The screen refreshed, reading: *Transfer in Progress*.

"Bill..." she whispered.

The layout updated: *Transfer Complete — Fifty Million Dollars*.

A smile broke across Bill's face. Madelyn stared at the screen, a tear rolling down her cheek before she swept it away with her hand.

"Why?" she breathed.

"For you..." Bill whispered, his voice fading. "For Barbara... for me... for the timeline."

Mike knelt beside them, his eyes clinical as he observed the operative. "You set yourself up as the rogue target from the beginning. You engineered this scenario so I would be forced to take the shot... because you knew Madelyn would never willingly execute a target again."

Bill turned his head toward Madelyn, his breathing shallow. "I wasn't a rogue operative, darl'n... In this agency, the truth is always partitioned. That man on the floor... he is indeed Nasir. Verify the terminal... Sarraf... the surveillance drones... I deployed the drones myself."

Bill gestured with his eyes toward the computer station. Madelyn looked at the monitor. The surveillance layout had refreshed, displaying the real Prince Sarraf and his two unconscious abductors inside the subterranean vault.

"Extract Sarraf..." Bill wheezed, his knuckles whitening. "Nasir's print... custom latex caps on his fingers... a fabrication to fool your scanner. Secure Sarraf."

Bill coughed, the light in his eyes starting to fade as he looked at Madelyn.

"Don't harbor resentment toward Mike, Madelyn... he simply bypassed the physical degeneration. The tumor... this was my extraction protocol."

Bill breathed a final, shuddering breath. With his strength, he squeezed Madelyn and Mike's hands together, patting their fingers as

his blood transferred onto their skin. He offered a smile, and his head dropped to the floor. Bill was dead.

Nearby, the wounded Nasir looked at the body, his expression thoughtful.

Suddenly, the doors burst open. Nasir's security detail rushed into the parlor, weapons aimed at Mike and Madelyn. Nasir lifted a hand toward his guards. The men froze, lowering their barrels.

"It is handled," Nasir commanded, his voice steady as he pressured his wound. "Go, extract my brother Sarraf from the vault immediately, and escort him to the throne room. Let us maintain stability."

In the corridor, Madelyn and Mike ran behind the guards, moving through the marble hallways until they breached the King's chambers.

A security official pressed his palm against the wall. With a click, the door opened, and they plunged into the passage.

Deep inside the vault, the two abductors sat zip-tied against the pillars, unconscious. Prince Sarraf stood as the guards bowed before him.

Sarraf stepped forward, bypassing his guards to embrace Mike and Madelyn.

"Mike! My friend, you located my position," Sarraf said, his voice filled with relief. "Nasir... is he..."

"He's secured," Mike replied, checking his watch. "We need to get you prepared for the coronation immediately, Prince Sarraf—we're running out of time."

They exited the passage, racing toward the light of the throne room.

The double doors loomed ahead, guarded by security. The high council, dressed in ceremonial thawbs, stood waiting. Sarraf, Mike, and Madelyn approached the delegation, their footsteps echoing off the floor as they walked down the corridor.

A contingent of guards stepped forward. Moving with authority, they blocked the path, holding Mike and Madelyn back.

Sarraf turned to stand in front of the two operatives. "I am sorry, my friends," he said, his voice heavy with protocol. "You cannot enter the throne room. It is our law."

Before they could protest, Sarraf placed his hands on Mike's shoulders, looking into his eyes.

"You have done a great thing for peace," Sarraf said. "A great thing for the world. I shall see you again once I am king. Thank you, Mike."

Sarraf delivered an embrace, pressing a fraternal kiss onto Mike's cheeks. Turning, he rejoined the high council as the doors of the throne room opened to receive them.



Inside, the throne room was a vast expanse. The architecture was decorated with ancient artifacts tracking the kingdom's history. In the center of the hall sat a golden throne beneath a stained-glass dome.

"My king," the council leader announced, his voice echoing off the dome. "How may I serve you?"

Sarraf looked over his court, his features hardening. "Bring my brother, Nasir, before me."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Houston, Texas

Days Later

Inside the living room, surrounded by an eclectic mix of antiques that showcased decades of wealth, Barbara and Madelyn sat on velvet sofa, sharing a pot of tea.

Madelyn placed her hand over Barbara's arm, tightening her grip. "Barbara, I am so sorry," she murmured. "I've been so worried about you."

"Honey, don't be," Barbara replied, her voice steady. "I'm fine, really. I've known this day was coming; plus, I have all of Bill's government benefits and his retirement package. And... I received a very generous gift from King Sarraf."

Barbara held out her hand, showing Madelyn an enormous, bejeweled ring that caught the light. She dropped her voice to a whisper. "It has a matching brooch and a bracelet, too. But really, honey, I'm fine. I just miss Bill."

Barbara looked at the floor, sighing before looking up to take Madelyn's hand.

"I know this sounds awful," Barbara admitted, "but I understand why Bill wanted to be cremated. It saved me the grief of a public funeral. Besides... who really were Bill's friends anyway?"

"Barbara, if you ever need anything," Madelyn pressed, patting her hand. A spark of her old focus returned to her eyes. "I could put you on the board of directors for the foundation. It would keep you busy, give you something to focus on."

"No, I'm going to travel," Barbara said, shaking her head. "I want to live in new places. When Bill went on his final confessional spree before he left, he told me things I had suspected for a long time. I just want a new life now—one with truth in it."

Madelyn nodded in agreement. "Me too."

"I found out that three percent of the profits from every business venture Bill ever opened doors for has been accumulating in a blind trust for decades," Barbara added. "They call it his insurance policy. I am a wealthy woman, Madelyn. But I appreciate your concern."

"At least there's a light in all this darkness," Madelyn said, leaning back. "I still can't understand some of Bill's final actions, even with the medical prognosis of the tumor. I just wish I knew the whole truth."

Barbara's smile faded, replaced by a grave expression. "I know you've been through so much, Madelyn. But there are final things I need to share with you. Truths that Bill had to carry to his grave... but there is no way I can keep them hidden."

Madelyn sat upright, her posture rigid. "After everything we've just been through across the world, what could possibly shock me now?"

Barbara took a final sip of her tea, setting the cup onto its saucer with a click. She looked into Madelyn's eyes, squeezing her fingers.

"Bill was your father."

Madelyn froze, stunned as the words rippled through the room. Her jaw dropped, her breath catching.

"Ah... ah, what?..." she stammered, blindsided. "I... I didn't see that one coming. All these years... why... why didn't anyone ever tell me?"

Madelyn ran out of words. Barbara squeezed her trembling hand as they sat in silence. Madelyn's mind raced, her eyes wide.

"Honey," Barbara whispered, her expression turning frightened. "There's more."

Madelyn watched her, her chest heaving.

"Bill and your mother were having an affair," Barbara confessed, breaking down. She turned back to Madelyn, her hand reaching up to brush Madelyn's bangs back. "Oh, it was more than that, honey. They were in love for years. Bill was going to leave me for your mother. You see, I wasn't able to have children."

Barbara swallowed, wiping her eyes as the history poured out. "Bill did lead your father—Mr. Pugh—down a dangerous operational path to his death. He orchestrated it. But in the end... Bill couldn't do it. He couldn't bring himself to leave me. Your mother was so distraught when he broke it off."

Barbara rubbed Madelyn's shoulder. "That's why she ended her own life, Madelyn... oh honey, you know the story from there. I am so sorry to have to tell you all of this."

They fell into a suffocating silence. Madelyn sat still on the sofa, emotionless as the architecture of her life shattered.

"Oh, Madelyn," Barbara wept, "I'm so sorry."

"My entire life has been a deception," Madelyn said, her voice dropping to a hollow whisper. "Everything. By everyone. I believed—"

"In yourself," Barbara interrupted. "And Bill knew that. Everyone was living their own lies, Madelyn. It's just how people in the agency live. Lies are the only truth they have. He didn't do any of this to hurt you."

Madelyn laughed, bitter and sharp, tears breaking past her defenses. She swept them away with her hand.

"Bill wanted you to pursue your dream," Barbara explained, her voice softening. "He set up that Middle East project to get you out of the network for good. That's why he did those things—to get you out of their reach." Barbara leaned in, drawing Madelyn into a protective maternal embrace. "You are finally free now. You don't exist to them anymore. No more lies. You can go out and live your own life."

Barbara stood and went to an antique desk in the corner. She opened a drawer, removed an envelope, and walked back to hand it to Madelyn.

"This is from Bill."

Madelyn looked at the paper. "What is it?"

"I don't know," Barbara said.

Madelyn opened the envelope, pulling out the letter. As she scanned the handwriting, Bill's voice echoed in her mind:

Madelyn, I'm sure by now Barbara has told you all she knows. I'm sorry for the secrecy—it is the nature of the game. Regardless, it was your mother's wish that I never tell you the truth while I was still alive. I honored her wish to the end.

Madelyn wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, forcing her focus back to the text.

Give Mike a real chance, hon. He is a gentleman, and you'll find that you both share the same dreams. I handpicked him for you a long time ago. Go, live, and follow your heart. Love, Bill, your father.

A tear slipped from Madelyn's eye, dropping onto the ink of the signature. The word *father* smeared, the letters blurring into a smudge on the page.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Maggie Valley, North Carolina
Months Later

Inside the mountain house, Madelyn and Mike lay together on a wool blanket in front of the stone fireplace, sharing a bottle of wine. A fire crackled behind the hearth, flanked by candles that turned the great room into a sanctuary.

"What are you going to do now that you've quit the agency?" Madelyn asked, leaning on one elbow to look at him.

Mike smiled, looking at the ceiling. "Follow my passion. Use my degree to help children for a change."

Madelyn raised an eyebrow. "Doing what? Do you want to teach?"

Mike brushed her bangs back, cupping her cheek. Madelyn tilted into his touch, a smile breaking through her features. Mike laughed.

"No, I'm a pediatric nurse practitioner," he revealed. "I just got a sidetracked in life... I think you understand better than anyone how that happens."

Madelyn's eyes widened. "I didn't know that. I would have never guessed."

"Yeah, well," Mike said, his expression turning reflective. "I guess we've both been so busy living in the shadow of the agency, we forgot that our passion is to save lives, not end them."

Madelyn rested her head on his chest, fascinated by the discovery. "What got you interested in pediatrics in the first place?"

"I joined the Marines right after high school," Mike explained, taking a sip of wine. "Over time, I transitioned into counterintelligence, which led to working alongside the CIA on deployments." He chuckled. "During my tours in the Middle East, I saw a lot of hurt children—kids damaged for life from the carnage of conflict. It pulled at my heart. So, as soon as I left the Marines, I went back to school."

"And how did you end up back in the CIA?" Madelyn asked.

"The same way you did," Mike admitted, shaking his head. "I didn't recognize the trap when I stepped into it. I did some intelligence work for them while I was finishing my degree, and they convinced me to sign on full-time as soon as I graduated. I did... and here I am. Out of work, looking for a job."

Madelyn sat up on the blanket, her expression beaming. "I love this story! I had no idea, Mike."

Setting her wine glass on the floor, she slid closer, looking into his eyes. "You know, I happen to know where you can find a job. But I have to warn you... it comes with a set of conditions. And a catch."

Mike smiled. "Don't they all. And where can I find this job?"

"With me," Madelyn murmured, leaning in. "Come work with me at the foundation. But like I told you, it has a catch."

"What's the catch?" Mike whispered.

"You."

Madelyn leaned down and kissed him. They wrapped their arms around each other, leaning back against the pillows as they kissed against the backdrop of the hearth.

Suddenly, Madelyn pulled away, looking into Mike's eyes.

"Mike, will you marry me?"

Mike sat up, surprised by the proposal. A smile broke across his face. He reached out, pulled Madelyn close, and kissed her. When she drew back, she was breathless.

"Was that a yes?" she teased.

Mike nodded, pulling her down. They laid back together on the blanket. Behind them, a log in the fireplace popped, sending a spray of embers into the chimney like fireworks.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*Maggie Valley, North Carolina
Months Later*

Mike and Madelyn broke from their kiss, standing hand-in-hand before the minister in the sun-drenched sanctuary. Madelyn looked stunning, the lace train of her dress framing her. Opposite her, Mike stood handsome in a black tuxedo.

The guests erupted into applause for the newlyweds. Mike and Madelyn turned, walking down the aisle toward the oak doors at the back. As they passed the front pews, they saw a row of familiar faces: Barbara, King Sarraf, Susan, Dr. Potonik, Leja, and little Larisa.

Larisa was beaming with joy. In her white lace dress, she looked angelic. Madelyn paused at the girl's seat. Reaching into her bouquet, she pulled out a flower and wove it into Larisa's hair before pressing a kiss onto the little girl's cheek.

Madelyn and Mike stepped into the mountain air, where a Land Rover sat shoe-polished with newlywed slogans.

A chorus of cheers followed them as the guests threw rice. Mike and Madelyn climbed inside, pulled the doors shut, and drove away. The "Just Married" sign caught the sunlight as the vehicle vanished into the rolling Appalachian hills.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Desert Months Later

"Greetings, my friends," Sarraf said. He stepped forward, embracing them and pressing a fraternal kiss onto Mike and Madelyn's cheeks before turning toward the compound.

On his command, guards threw open the entry gates, exposing a modern Arabic structure. It was a state-of-the-art children's hospital, sitting peacefully amidst the flora of the desert oasis.

They walked into the sun-drenched courtyard. Sarraf stopped, turning to face them.

"My gift to you," Sarraf said, his voice heavy with emotion. "And you are a gift to our children." He bowed his head in gratitude. "May Allah bless you both."

Sarraf signaled to his escort. A guard stepped forward, carrying a parchment envelope. Sarraf locked eyes with the couple.

"Perpetuate your kindness to our children's children," Sarraf said. He nodded to his guard, who handed the envelope to Madelyn. The paper was sealed with the crimson wax insignia of the kingdom. "Some thought my death was worth millions. How much more should my country reward you for saving my life?"

He offered a bow to Madelyn and Mike, and they returned the gesture. Sarraf looked at the envelope in Madelyn's hands. "From my country... thank you, Dr. Pugh."

"Thank you, King Sarraf," Madelyn said.

Sarraf turned to Mike, placing his hands on the operative's shoulders. "And what can be given to the man who saved the world from a nuclear war? Mike, my friend, I have arranged a special gift for you."

He took Mike's hand, locking it in a handshake. The royal ring on Sarraf's hand caught the desert sun.

Then, the world dissolved.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Washington, D.C.

One Year Later

The handshake was exactly the same, but the desert was gone.

Chandeliers shone down on an elevated stage inside a packed ballroom. Sarraf still held Mike's hand, wearing his gold-trimmed bisht, while Mike stood beside him in a black tuxedo. A sweeping view captured the black-tie gala.

Sarraf smiled at Mike, then stepped to the microphone at the podium.

"Distinguished guests," Sarraf's voice boomed over the speakers, silencing the room. "Tonight, we honor and present Mike Anderson —" He looked toward Mike, his smile widening. "—with this year's Humanitarian Award. His courage has maintained world peace and averted war."

Sarraf held an arm toward Mike. "Because one man lives, so do millions."

The audience erupted into a standing ovation.

Madelyn walked from the wings, joining the men under the lights. Sarraf leaned to kiss her cheek before addressing the microphone.

"Dr. Madelyn Pugh, the recipient of last year's Humanitarian Award, will now present this year's honor to her husband, Mike."

Sarraf stepped aside. Madelyn took the award and presented it to Mike, her eyes shining. Across the ballroom, the guests cheered, and camera flashes popped in the dark like a field of stars.

Mike and Madelyn embraced, blocking out the noise of the crowd as they kissed. As they held each other, Madelyn reached down, taking Mike's hand and running it across her belly.

Mike's eyes widened, a smile breaking across his face. Madelyn leaned up, whispering into his ear over the roar of the applause.

"Maybe it's time we take care of our own children for a while."

Mike blinked, his breath catching. "Children? Did you say children... plural?"

Madelyn nodded, smiling up at him. They pulled each other into an embrace, holding onto one another.

Sarraf turned to the couple, addressing the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Sarraf announced. "The Humanitarians."

The audience continued their standing ovation. In the center of the white lights, Mike and Madelyn stood locked in a kiss.