

THE HUMANITARIANS

by

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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 through the lens of her night vision goggles, the African landscape glowed in an eerie, electric green. To her left, a dense brush thicket cast deep shadows, while the open plains rolled out ahead and to her right. The midnight air was alive with the distant, exotic calls of nocturnal wildlife. She moved with quiet intent, the subtle rustle of her gear tracking her footsteps across the dry, dirt ground.

Checking the altimeter strapped to her wrist, she reached down with a gloved finger. She flipped the master toggle to the on position and firmly pressed the start button. The engine sparked to life, its low idle quickly escalating into a high-pitched rev.

She sprinted forward, her boots pounding against the earth as she charged toward the open plains. Her heavy breathing mingled with the mechanical roar of the motor. With a sudden shift in physics, her feet left the ground. She was airborne.

As she gained altitude, the Serengeti shrank beneath her. Suspended under the canopy of her powered paraglider, she became a solitary silhouette cut against a velvet sky dotted with thousands of burning stars. Below, herds of animals drifted across the landscape like a slow, dreamlike mirage.

She dipped the controls, swooping down to treetop level to buzz a watering hole. Below, panicked wildlife scattered into the darkness. Ahead, her target materialized: a massive ranch house compound, fortified by a towering perimeter wall.

Reaching up, her gloved finger killed the switch. The engine died instantly, leaving only the rushing hiss of the wind through the lines. She glided silently over the wall. On the ground below, massive guard dogs scrambled in circles, looking up at the sky, utterly baffled by the ghostly whistling sound above them.

Before they could bark, thick steaks rained down from the sky. The hounds abandoned their confusion and sprinted for the meat.

Circling the compound, she lined up her approach behind a dense hedge row. The ground rushed up to meet her with terrifying speed. Twenty feet. Ten feet. Five.

At the final second, she flared the sail. The canopy caught the air, braking her momentum for a flawless landing. She unbuckled her gear, the sharp snap of her harnesses releasing into the quiet night.

Near the gatehouse, two private security guards smoked cigarettes, their backs turned to the lawn as they laughed over a shared phone screen, completely oblivious to the silent canopy deflating behind the hedge row.

Crouching low to keep her silhouette hidden, she moved toward the main house. She scanned the yard; the guard dogs lay completely motionless, pacified by the treated meat. Springing from the shadows, she darted across the lawn and vanished into the thick bushes flanking the structure.

Pressing her back against the wall, she peered through the glass of the bedroom window. Inside, General Nkwatcha lay fast asleep on the bed.

Recognizing the window was securely sealed, she slipped around the corner of the structure to a set of heavy glass French doors leading into the suite. She slid a slim tension wrench and a lock pick into the door's latch mechanism, applying steady, 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 interior of General Nkwatcha's bedroom was massive, crowded with an eclectic mix of West Indies furniture and traditional African decor. Through the eerie green glow of her night vision goggles, the walls seemed to watch her, lined with an extensive collection of tribal masks and the mounted heads of exotic animals.

Nearby, a collection of framed photographs caught her eye. They featured a round-faced Black man in a crisp military uniform, smiling alongside various world dignitaries. The gold nametag on the chest of the uniform read: NKWATCHA.

She stepped quietly toward the bed. General Nkwatcha lay fast asleep, a serene, closed-lip smile resting on his face. He tossed slightly under the sheets, his smile widening as if deep inside 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.

The suppressed firearm fired, tearing through the quiet room with a sharp, muffled *pop*.

CHAPTER TWO

*Washington, D.C.
One Month Later*

Pop.

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

One month later, the atmosphere could not have been more different. High above the grand ballroom of a luxury hotel, the formal gala looked like a swirling tapestry of wealth and celebration. A big band filled the air with lively swing music while hundreds of guests danced beneath the glittering chandeliers.

Down on the floor, a waiter carrying a silver tray wove through the crowd, pouring the effervescent liquid into crystal flutes. Manicured hands immediately reached out, snatching up the sparkling drinks. As the waiter turned to leave, a noticeably less-manicured hand reached out to claim the very last glass.

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

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

Standing beside her was Bill Roth, a tall, weathered Texas cattle and oilman in his sixties, who had been a longtime friend of Madelyn's family. His wife, Barbara—a tall, 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 traditional 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 taking a drink.

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

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

The half-drunk male 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." She raised her glass higher. "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 Madelyn with a look of amused suspicion.

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

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

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

Madelyn took it. Their fingers locked, and neither broke the grip as they held the handshake, staring deeply into each other's eyes.

"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."

"Umph! Excuse me," Mike interrupted himself. He downed his champagne quickly, placed the empty glass onto a passing waiter's tray without breaking eye contact with Madelyn, and covered his mouth, coughing slightly as the bubbles caught in his throat. He blotted his sleeve against his mouth. "Mike. It's just Mike. And I'll be looking for you in the future, Dr. Pugh."

Madelyn smiled, using a finger to gently push her bangs away from her eyes. "Madelyn. It's just Madelyn."

"Madelyn..." Mike said, his voice dropping slightly. "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, then turned his gaze back to Madelyn, a knowing smile playing on his lips. Madelyn watched him closely, a sharp mixture of suspicion and genuine interest flashing through her eyes.

"Congratulations, Dr.—" Mike caught himself, holding up a hand to cut off his own sentence. "Madelyn."

With a final nod, he ran a hand through his hair and slipped away from the circle, vanishing into the crowded ballroom. The remaining guests exchanged bewildered glances, thrown off by his sudden, intense departure. Madelyn didn't join in their hushed whispers; her eyes stayed locked on Mike's retreating figure until he disappeared entirely.

Mrs. Zumbado stepped closer, placing a gentle, comforting 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, exchanging glances as they realized Mrs. Zumbado had accidentally 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."

As the words left her lips, Madelyn's focus drifted. The grand ballroom faded away, and a faraway look clouded her eyes as memories from twenty-five years earlier rushed back 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 miniature jeans, boots, and a duster coat beneath her wide-brimmed hat, she screamed out for help, her voice hysterical with pure terror.

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

Terrified, young Madelyn launched herself into the arms of her father. Mr. Pugh was a rugged, weathered man in his late thirties, dressed almost identically to his daughter. His right hand instinctively gripped a large pistol, his knuckles white against the frame.

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

Clinging to her father with her feet dangling off the ground, Madelyn wept bitterly, 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 frowning into a deep, heavy scowl. He silently watched the lion drag the carcass of his daughter's pet calf into the thick brush. A dark, simmering look of cold revenge washed over his hardened features.

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

He let young Madelyn slide back down to the dirt, immediately catching her hand in his. As they began the long walk back toward the main house, Madelyn's frantic sobbing quieted into gentle, shuddering breaths. Mr. Pugh wrapped a heavy arm around her shoulders, pulling her tightly against his side.

"It'll be okay," he murmured.

Later that day, out on the open plains of the Pugh ranch, the lion lay stretched out in the tall grass, fast asleep. The carcass of the calf rested nearby, surrounded by the persistent hum of buzzing flies while vultures lurked quietly 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, young Madelyn watched the scene with her mouth agape. Her lower lip quivered, her face still damp from crying. As a fresh tear streaked down her cheek, she quickly wiped it away with the back of her hand.

Beside her, her father was crouched low on one knee, locking himself into a steady sniper position. He pulled back the heavy bolt of his rifle, chambered a round, and slowly pushed the mechanism forward until it clicked into place. Madelyn's face became a collage of pure nervousness and fear. She looked anxiously at her father.

"Do you have to kill him, vader?" she whispered. "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 reached out and clutched his right shoulder, pulling slightly. The motion nudged the rifle off-target. "But he was just feeding his family. Maybe it wasn't bad... maybe we... I don't know, vader."

Her chest heaved as she blinked quickly against the dust. When she stopped, her wide brown eyes sparkled like topaz in the sunlight—the look of youthful naivete from a child desperately seeking the truth.

Mr. Pugh sighed, lowering the rifle across his knee. He gently placed a hand on Madelyn's cheek, rolling his lower lip between his teeth as he looked at her. Reaching up, he brushed her bangs away from her face, locking his eyes onto hers.

"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 back to his shoulder and peered into the crosshairs. Through the scope, the sleeping lion's head filled the view, its lips curled into what looked like a faint smile.

"Sweet dreams, you bastard," Mr. Pugh muttered under his breath.

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

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

The memory shattered, and the sights and sounds of the Washington, D.C. grand ballroom rushed back to replace the African plains.

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

Smiling widely, Mrs. Zumbado stepped forward and wrapped Madelyn in a warm hug. "But how wonderful that you take care of our children."

The half-drunk male guest reached into his inner jacket pocket, pulling out a thick white envelope. "Well, I know why we're here—to

raise some money! I'll get the ball rolling." He handed the envelope to Madelyn with a grin.

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

Madelyn smiled humbly, blotting 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 the right words before looking up at them. "You're helping a little girl's dream come true."

Bill leaned in close, quietly slipping a handkerchief into her hand. "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 partially 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 a heavy arm through the air, fluttering his fingers downward 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 began massaging his temples. Madelyn noticed and gently touched his arm.

"I know you can, Bill," she said, her brow furrowing with concern. "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 just a bit. "But hell, everybody hurts. Never mind me, I'm just so proud of you!" He took Madelyn's hand, patting her arm affectionately as a warm look filled his eyes. "Congratulations, darl'n."

He stepped forward and pulled Madelyn into a tight, fatherly embrace.

"That's my girl," Bill murmured.

Before Madelyn could reply, the ballroom windows flared with a blinding flash of white. A violent crack of thunder boomed directly overhead, shaking the glass, and the chandeliers failed—plunging the entire room into total 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 sleek architectural masterpiece of glass and natural rock. The structure boasted a breathtaking, panoramic view of the Blue Ridge Mountains, which were currently awash with the fiery reds and deep golds of peak autumn. Above the peaks, the sky stretched out in a cloudless, crystal blue.

Inside, Madelyn padded into the expansive great room wearing her night clothes, cradling a warm mug of coffee. She made her way to a grand piano situated right beside a towering wall of windows. Setting her coffee down, she reached out to pick up a framed photograph resting on the polished wood.

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

"I miss you, vader," she whispered, setting the picture back down.

She pulled an acoustic guitar into her lap and reached over to press the play and record buttons on a desktop audio recorder. The pre-recorded track of a mandolin began to weave 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 the call and immediately toggled the speakerphone.

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

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

Madelyn picked up the remote and clicked on the television. On the screen, a polished anchorwoman was in the middle of a live broadcast.

ANCHORWOMAN: The government said rebel forces are responsible for General Nkwatcha's assassination two months ago. The Peoples Council of Kwatza has unanimously appointed Mr. Zumbado as Council General. Zumbado's plans to unite Kwatza are currently unknown. He will allow foreign businesses and humanitarian interests to help. Controversially, he also plans to expand oil and mining interests.

Madelyn's eyes widened slightly. "This is good!" She leaned closer to the speaker, hanging on every word.

ANCHORWOMAN: Zumbado's plans to unite Kwatza are currently unknown. He will allow foreign businesses—

"This is real good," Madelyn muttered to herself, a sense of relief washing over her. "I'll be damned."

She clicked the television off, walked over to the floor-to-ceiling 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, Michael? You seemed attracted."

"Anderson. Mike Anderson, just Mike," Madelyn corrected quickly, her tone defensive. "And I wasn't attracted. 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 slightly. "No kidding... 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 and hot on what little trail we have."

Madelyn ran a tense hand through her tousled hair, her brow furrowing deeply as a heavy grimace grew across her face. "Bill, I was actually going to call you. I have a bad feeling about this, and now 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 sudden note of exhaustion. "That's been my only dream since childhood. All of this is becoming... it's starting to feel wrong."

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

Madelyn reached out and picked up the photograph of her and her father again, holding it tightly 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 with absolute certainty. "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 enthusiastically 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 slightly. "Oh! A vacation?"

"My friends will sponsor your flying troupe on a trip," Bill explained. "They keep the top-floor suites at the Miraflores Palacio Hotel for business. It'll all be for you and your flying females."

"What's your plan?"

"Ruiz will be staying exactly one floor below you," Bill said, his voice dropping into a transactional tone. "He goes to bed every night at eleven p.m., like clockwork. I'm taking a boat down the Pacific coast, and you're gonna get sick the day before your group leaves."

Madelyn nodded to herself, calculating. "While you get things prepared, I'm going to Slovanka next week to visit the hospital. It's

up and running, and overflowing. They asked that I come—they said I need to see some things for myself."

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

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

Madelyn ended the call and set her phone down. Picking up her coffee, she turned back to the window and stared out at the sprawling mountains. A slow, treacherous smile crept across her face. She turned and walked toward the kitchen, completely unaware that as she passed the audio recorder on the desk, the red record light was still blinking.

Later that afternoon, the crisp autumn air had warmed enough for Madelyn to relax outside on the patio. She lay stretched out on a chaise lounge, typing an email on her laptop while occasionally taking a sip from a freshly mixed cocktail.

She drafted a message to her flight team: *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 carnival with their logos on our sails. I assume you're all in? Madelyn.*

With a quick tap, she pressed send and closed the laptop screen. She picked up her drink and let out a heavy, satisfied sigh.

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

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

CHAPTER FOUR

Siran, Slovanka *One Week Later*

The cramped interior of the small car winding along the Eastern European highway felt a world away from the peaks of North Carolina.

From the passenger seat, Madelyn gazed out at the rolling, picturesque countryside of Slovanka. Navigating the tiny vehicle down the tight roads was Dr. Matija Potonik, the hospital administrator. He was a benevolent, 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 remarked.

As they crested a steep hill, the winding road ahead snaked down the mountain toward Siran. Built entirely on a jagged peninsula, the ancient city jutted dramatically into the Gulf of Siran, where the water sparkled in the sunlight like a brilliant aquamarine gemstone.

"God, that's gorgeous!" Madelyn breathed, captivated by the view. "It's just idyllic."

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

Madelyn kept her eyes on the water. "It sure looks peaceful from up here."

"That, Dr. Pugh, is merely an illusion," Dr. Potonik said softly. He glanced over at her with a warm 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 sharply, waiting for a punchline, but his expression remained entirely earnest as he looked 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 instantly shattered, and Madelyn's smile faded into a look of heavy distress. She turned in her seat, listening attentively.

"The new administration cares nothing about the country's people," Dr. Potonik said, shaking his head with deep sadness. "They have let in foreign companies to exploit our natural resources and steal our jobs. But the children... the children always suffer the most from it all. Last week, the hospital was spilling over with injured little ones."

"What?" Madelyn asked, her breath catching.

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

Madelyn's face paled, the weight of the situation pressing down on her as the administrator continued.

"Last week, a bus full of children was caught in the crossfire. 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 at Madelyn, the deep, exhausting hurt for the children and his war-torn country evident in his eyes. "Thank you, Dr. Pugh."

Madelyn massaged her cheeks with her hand, a wave of distress and profound shock washing over her. She fought with everything she had to keep from breaking down completely right there in the passenger seat.

"Uh-huh," she muttered in a quivering whisper. "It's what I do... or, what I've done."

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

When they finally arrived at the hospital, a large crowd of children was already waiting outside. As Madelyn and Dr. Potonik

stepped out of the tiny car, a collective cheer erupted from the young crowd. Some of the children reverently made the sign of the cross as she approached, while others called out to her in a chorus of hope.

"Saint Madelyn! Saint Madelyn!"

As Madelyn drew closer, the true severity of their injuries came into sharp focus. Many of the children sat in wheelchairs; others were heavily bandaged or propped up on crutches. As she walked through the crowd, tiny hands reached out just to touch her coat. The sheer weight of it broke through Madelyn's defenses, and she began to cry.

Dr. Potonik watched the display 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. The Minister of Health is throwing you a celebration aboard his new yacht, and we must go and pay homage."

Madelyn wiped her face, looking back at the sea of injured children before turning to the administrator. "Homage?"

"Oh yes," Dr. Potonik explained with a hint of 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 help these children. He has even worked himself right into our annual budget."

Shaking her head slightly at the corruption, Madelyn followed Dr. Potonik through the heavy entrance doors.

The interior of the main lobby offered a startling, almost monastic juxtaposition. A state-of-the-art, modern children's medical facility had been built directly within the hollowed-out shell of a Roman-era building.

Dr. Potonik led Madelyn over to a striking woman in her late thirties. She had long, thick black hair and sharp, chiseled features that gave her the presence of a Roman goddess. Her expression, however, was stoic and completely cold.

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

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

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

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

"Ah, here she comes now," Leja said, her icy demeanor softening just a fraction. "My baby girl."

Madelyn turned around to greet the child, but the smile instantly died on her face. She went entirely pale, her legs trembling so violently beneath her that she nearly collapsed.

Another nurse was rolling a wheelchair toward them. Sitting inside it was Leja's ten-year-old daughter, Larisa. The little girl was completely missing her left hand and her left leg below the knee. Her severely disfigured face was still oozing from terrible, recent burns, and her right eye was gone entirely. Yet, despite the monstrous trauma written across her body, Larisa radiated an effervescent, boundless hope.

"Dr. Pugh! Dr. Pugh!" Larisa cheered.

The little girl practically launched herself forward, reaching out with her one remaining hand to hug Madelyn. Her joyful spirit seemed to completely defy the blood-stained bandages wrapping her tiny frame.

Madelyn forced herself to bend down, coming face-to-face with the child. She wrapped Larisa in a tight, loving embrace, but the emotional dam finally broke. Sobs wracked Madelyn's body. Unable to compose herself, she pulled away, breathlessly excusing herself to find the restroom.

Her footsteps echoed loudly against the cold marble floors as she ran into the ladies' room. Bracing her hands against the edges of the porcelain sink, she leaned forward, fighting off a sudden wave of physical sickness.

Slowly, she raised her eyes to the mirror. She stared intently at her reflection, her gaze moving across her own features as if looking at a stranger, peering deep into her own soul.

"Who are you?" she whispered to the glass.

The heavy restroom door swung open. Leja walked in, her silent approach appearing in the mirror right behind Madelyn. She watched the doctor with a cold, searchingly intense 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 but heavy with an underlying grief. "She is my daughter. My pain for her stolen innocence is..."

Before Leja could finish, Madelyn turned around, threw her arms around the nurse, and wept openly against her shoulder. Leja stared straight ahead, her eyes completely empty. With a noticeable touch of resistance, she gently patted Madelyn's back before easing the doctor away, breaking the embrace.

They looked at each other for a long moment. Madelyn took a deep, shuddering breath and wiped her eyes. "I'm okay. I'm sorry."

When Madelyn and Leja returned to the main lobby, the tension had settled, and the others offered warm smiles.

Madelyn knelt back down near the wheelchair, looking at the little girl. "Oh sweetie, you don't want to be like me."

Larisa beamed, her single eye wide and full of genuine, unyielding warmth. "I do. I'm alive because of you. I'm so happy to be alive... my name even means joyful!"

Leja stood just behind the chair, her chiseled face tight and completely devoid of emotion as she listened to her daughter.

"And mine means weary, sorrowful," Leja said quietly, a dark trace of irony in her voice. "How strange names are. Come, Dr. Pugh, let's show you around. Please, follow us."

Leja turned the wheelchair and began pushing Larisa out of the lobby and into a long, arched hallway. Gathering her composure, Madelyn stepped into stride right behind them.

The hallway ceilings were arched, decorated with faded frescoes where cherubs and seraphim still peeked through the cracked plaster. The footsteps of the two women echoed loudly off the medieval travertine floor. As they paused to admire the artwork, it escaped no

one that several of the painted angels' faces bore an uncanny, ghostly resemblance to Madelyn herself.

Madelyn looked quietly at Larisa, then up at Leja. Larisa offered a bright, trusting smile. Leja merely glared at her, her eyes cold.

"This building has been a hospital several times throughout the millennia," Leja said, her voice flat. "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 with pure adoration. "The nun that ran the hospital back then was sainted. You should be sainted too, Dr. Pugh."

Leja raised a tight finger, pointing directly up at two specific angels in the fresco. "The angels are said to be a portrait of that sainted woman. But legend says her heart was not true. It says she was not a saint at all... but a devil."

The words left Madelyn completely numb. She forced her gaze back up to the ceiling, unable to look away from the painted faces. Leja watched her closely for a long moment before turning back to the hallway.

"I'm so glad you made this a children's hospital again," Larisa chirped, breaking the heavy tension. "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, her sharp glare softening into an expression of raw hurt and sorrow as she looked back at Madelyn. "I'm sorry, Dr. Pugh. I did not mean disrespect. We are all deeply grateful for your work." She leaned down, pressing a gentle kiss onto the top of Larisa's head. "I especially am. I just meant—"

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

As they continued their walk down the corridor, they passed room after room filled with injured, bandaged children. Yet, the further they walked, the more Madelyn's posture changed. The visible sorrow began to harden, her spine straightening as if she were undergoing a dark metamorphosis.

Dr. Potonik hurried down the hall to meet them. "Oh, 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're truly facing."

"Yes, Dr. Potonik," Madelyn said, her voice devoid of its earlier warmth. "I saw the problem very clearly... as if I were looking in a mirror."

From high above the city, the deep, resonant tolling of church bells began to echo through the valley.

"My goodness, the bells of St. George tell me it's getting late," Dr. Potonik said, checking his wrist. "I'll see you tonight then, Dr. Pugh." With a quick nod, the administrator hurried away.

Madelyn stooped down, bringing herself face-to-face with the little girl in the wheelchair. Larisa smiled broadly, her single eye darting back and forth as she admired 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 long corridor. Behind her, Larisa waved her one hand wildly, her single leg bouncing with excitement, her joyful smile lighting up the ancient hallway.

Later that evening, the dark waters of the Gulf of Siran lapped against the hull of a massive luxury vessel. Madelyn stood alone on the deck, leaning heavily against the polished perimeter railing as she stared out at the twinkling, distant lights of the city. Behind her, the muffled sounds of music, laughter, and clinking glasses drifted from the yacht's main cabin.

The heavy thud of footsteps approached, and Minister Vidmar stepped into the moonlight. In his late fifties and robustly built, he looked distinctly uncomfortable in an ill-fitting designer suit. His expensive toupee sat just as poorly on his head, and when he spoke, his voice carried a thick, raspy gurgle.

"Dr. Pugh, you miss your own party," Vidmar said, his thick Eastern European accent 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 finally turned to face him, her hands tightly gripping the railing behind her back. The sea breeze whipped her dark bangs across her face, but between the shifting strands of hair, her eyes burned with a blazing, dangerous intensity.

"No," she said, her voice entirely calm. "To all of your questions."

"Humph. Mr. Roth told me to expect as much," Vidmar muttered. He took a slow, deliberate sip of his drink, his eyes peering over the rim of the glass as he stared her down. "You and I share one thing, Dr. Pugh."

Madelyn tilted her head slightly. "And what would that be?"

"We both find fortune in others' misfortune."

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

"Well, Saint Madelyn, perhaps you need to count your blessings," Vidmar called back, his deep laugh echoing over the water as he disappeared into the darkness of the upper deck. "How many businesses let you create your own customers... like yours."

The sound of his amusement resonated in the night air long after he was gone.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Pacific Coast Three Weeks Later

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

Madelyn stood near the stern, methodically pulling the heavy straps of the powered parasail engine over her shoulders and cinching them tight. Bill stood right behind her, carefully holding the massive, folded canopy of the sail.

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

Madelyn scanned the vibrant landscape. "I feel like I'm standing in the Emerald City. It's so green."

Bill looked up at the churning night sky, his expression deeply strained. "I feel like we're in Kansas! Are you absolutely 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 cleanly. "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 sure worry a lot lately."

Without waiting for a response, she reached down and firmly 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 immediately released his grip on the fabric, and the massive sail flared open instantly, catching a violent gust. The sudden 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 terrifying second toward the black water below. Bill rushed to the railing, peering over the side.

A moment later, Madelyn shot straight up into the air right past him, tossing violently against the buffeting wind. She twisted the engine to full throttle, gaining rapid altitude as she climbed into the sky. Within seconds, her silhouette vanished from the ship's lights, swallowed entirely by the darkness.

As Bill continued to peer into the black void, the faint, distorted sound of her voice drifted back down to the deck, singing over the roar of the engine:

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

Suspended high above the Pacific, Madelyn watched the coastline rapidly approach. The glowing green beaches gave way to towering mountains covered in thick, wild jungle growth. The high-altitude winds slammed into her canopy, buffeting the sail and forcing her to fight the controls just to keep the glide path steady.

As she crested the mountain peaks, the brilliant, glittering lights of Porte Valerdera unfolded beneath her like a scattered handful of diamonds. She circled high above the city, the distant, muffled sounds of music and cheering from the ongoing street festival echoing up into the night air.

Spotting her target, the massive structure of the Miraflores Palacio Hotel loomed ahead. Madelyn pulled the control lines, beginning her steep descent.

Suddenly, a massive, erratic gust of wind slammed into her sail, pushing her completely off course. Muttering a curse, she veered away and swung the paraglider into a wide, secondary circle to line up the approach again.

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

She angled directly for the flat roof of the hotel, coming in dangerously fast and unsteady, though completely unnoticed by the festive crowds below. The roof itself was a chaotic obstacle course, cluttered with scattered powersail frames, lines, and aviation gear left behind by her flight team.

Madelyn narrowed her eyes, aiming for a small, narrow clearance amidst the technical junk.

"Damn it, damn it—damn it!"

She came in slightly too high, waiting until the absolute final fraction of a second to flare the sail. The canopy caught the air heavily, halting her forward momentum just six feet above the deck. She instantly killed the engine.

The fabric collapsed into a useless heap, and Madelyn dropped like a stone, landing heavily against the hard concrete of the roof.

Wincing in sharp pain, Madelyn rolled onto her side and tightly grabbed her right ankle. She forced herself to stand, but the relentless wind immediately caught her paraglider, dragging the heavy canopy across the roof toward the concrete ledge. The sharp, violent sound of nylon ripping cut through her pain.

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

"Kak!" she hissed.

Pulling a tactical knife from her leg sheath, Madelyn sliced the damaged sail loose from its lines. She scanned the remaining parasail equipment scattered across the deck. "Great, nothing but small sails," she muttered. "Just great. It's going to be a rough ride home."

Working quickly, she pulled a fresh, compact sail from the gear pile and attached it to her harness. She emptied her tactical backpack, stuffed the torn fabric deep inside the canvas, zipped it tight, and flung the heavy bag off the side of the hotel. It sailed through the darkness, landing with a soft thud on the roof of an adjacent building.

Locating a pre-staged climbing rope hidden near the service door, she clipped the carabiner to a sturdy roof stay, secured the

other end to her body harness, and swung her legs over the concrete ledge.

Madelyn lowered herself backward down the sheer face of the building, her boots pushing off the concrete facade. Every impact sent a sharp jolt through her injured leg. Reaching the correct level, she extended her foot and pushed against her suite's window. It was stuck fast. Steeling herself, she delivered a hard kick; the frame swung open, and she slipped silently into the dark room.

Peering through the green haze of her night vision goggles, Madelyn scanned the large parlor of her penthouse suite. She flicked her wrist to check her watch: 10:45 p.m. Unclipping her harness, she opened her tactical 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 .25 caliber casing.

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

Limping silently across the floor, she shifted a heavy round table to the side and pulled back the corner of the rug. She fed the socket through the knot hole and floor cavity at an angle. She unscrewed a plug from the chandelier medallion in the ceiling below, pulled out the socket with the plug attached, and set it on the floor. She fed the fiber optic camera through the holes and turned the camera on.

She flipped the monitor on. On the small screen, three armed men materialized in the lower suite's parlor: a fat guard leaning against the wall and two younger guards standing watch. Satisfied, she pulled the camera back up and moved into the adjacent bedroom, repeating the process by dropping the lens through one of the floor openings. On her screen, Ruiz, a man in his sixties, was retiring for the night. She checked her watch: 11:00 p.m. She carefully panned the camera to scope the rest of the room. Sitting in a plush armchair near the corner was Ruiz's personal guard, a man in his forties wearing a sharp black suit.

Madelyn waited in the dark, methodically massaging her ankle. She checked her watch: 11:25 p.m. On the monitor, Ruiz was asleep. She checked her gear one last time: 11:50 p.m. On the screen, the

personal guard stepped out of the bedroom, walking into the parlor to speak with the others. Madelyn fed the curved tube through the holes. She slammed the spent .25 caliber cartridge through the tube. On-screen she saw it land silently on the rug next to the bed. She removed the tube. On-screen, the personal guard entered the bedroom, closed the door, went to the window, opened it, leaned out the window, and watched the carnival. She slipped the gun barrel through the holes and turned on the gun's camera-scope. Ruiz was on-screen.

Madelyn looked at her watch: 12:00 a.m. Right on cue, the thunderous boom of the carnival's fireworks filled the air, completely rattling the windows. Madelyn aligned the crosshairs on Ruiz's head. She slowly squeezed the trigger. A spreading pool of blood appeared on Ruiz's pillow.

Without wasting a fraction of a second, she retrieved her gear, slid the wooden plugs back into the floorboards, and pulled the rug back into place. She dragged the table back to its exact original position, completely resetting the room.

Limping heavily, she made it back to the window and slipped out into the night. Using the rope, Madelyn began scaling the exterior wall, climbing back toward the roof. Behind her, brilliant bursts of red and gold fireworks exploded against the dark sky, casting long, shifting shadows across the hotel facade.

One floor below, the personal guard pulled himself back inside the window frame. He glanced toward the bed, and his expression instantly twisted into pure panic. He spotted a shell casing lying on the rug and scooped it up, his hands shaking. Ruiz was unresponsive.

"*Oh, mierda!* No, no, no," he stammered.

He ran to the heavy suite door and yanked it open, startling the three men in the parlor. "Señor Ruiz is dead!"

Madelyn dragged herself over the roof ledge and crawled toward her paraglider. Struggling to stand on her wrapped ankle, she managed to hoist herself into the flight harness. From far below, the distant, muffled echoes of the carnival music drifted up through the dark. She reached down and started the engine.

Down in the bedroom, the guards were frantically searching the space. Their suspicious eyes slowly turned toward the personal guard, who was backing away.

"I was looking out the window..." the man pleaded, holding his hands up defensively. "I turn around and he is dead. I found the shell."

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

"Point two-five caliber," the fat guard noted, his voice low. He gave a sharp nod, and the two younger guards instantly lunged forward, grabbing the personal guard by his arms.

They pinned the struggling man against the bedroom wall. The fat guard compared the found casing to the guard's own equipment, his face tightening. "You idiot, 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 the grip of the others.

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

On the roof, Madelyn pushed the throttle forward. The engine roared, and she tried to break into a run, but her injured ankle gave out, causing her to stumble. Gritting her teeth against the blinding pain, she hobbled forward, using her raw momentum to drive herself toward the roof ledge.

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

As she gained rapid altitude, the paraglider swept past the lower suite's window. Through the glass, Madelyn could see the frantic commotion inside. A grim, victorious smile spread across her face.

Climbing higher above the buildings, the dancing revelers in the streets below shrank until they looked like tiny ants. More fireworks

erupted in the distance, and the glittering city lights slowly faded away behind her. Ahead, the dark, jagged peaks of the coastal mountains came into view.

The turbulent air currents rushing over the ridges slammed into her small sail, making the controls incredibly difficult to manage. Fighting the erratic crosswinds, she pushed the engine harder, cresting the final peak only to fly directly into a massive, dense bank of fog.

Instantly, she was plunged into zero visibility.

Her wrist unit beeped frantically. The GPS signal was cutting out sporadically, and her altimeter showed she was hovering at thirty-five hundred feet. Knowing she had to clear the weather, she began a blind descent into the gray void. The fog thickened by the second. Without warning, a sudden, violent pocket of air caused one of the sail lines to slip. The right corner of the canopy collapsed completely. The paraglider dipped, losing altitude rapidly as it listed hard to the right.

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

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

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

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

"Madelyn! What's wro—" Bill's voice bled through the interference before being severed entirely.

On her wrist display, the GPS text blinked frantically: *No signal.* Her eyes darted to the altimeter. It read fifteen hundred feet and was 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 completely dissolved into a steady, rushing hiss of dead air.

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

There was no response. She glanced down again. 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!"

Suddenly, a brilliant trail of white-hot light rushed upward, tearing through the darkness from the surface of the sea. The dense fog bank instantly illuminated, glowing in a brilliant, burning green. Madelyn yanked her control lines, turning the paraglider hard toward the light.

One hundred feet. Sixty feet. Forty feet.

"I'm in the flare zone," she breathed, her heart hammering against her ribs. "I'm going down. I have to jettison the glider. I'm hurt."

On the deck of the yacht, Bill frantically panned a searchlight across the night sky, but the powerful beam bounced blindly off the thick wall of fog. A moment later, the distant hum of the paraglider's engine went completely dead.

The heavy, unmistakable sound of a splash echoed over the water nearby. Bill strained to hear, cupping his hands around his mouth as he yelled into the dark void. "Madelyn! Madelyn!"

A second splash broke the silence, followed by absolute quiet. "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 source of the noise.

Madelyn fought to stay afloat, treading the cold ocean water as heavy waves rolled over her head in slow motion. Through the lenses of her night vision goggles, the underwater world was a ghostly, translucent green. She could feel her strength rapidly draining from her limbs.

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

Her boots felt like lead anchors, pulling her down. She began to sink 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 her suddenly flared with a brilliant, blinding white light.

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

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

The heavy brass revolving doors of the Miraflores Palacio Hotel spun smoothly, opening into a grand lobby that felt worlds away from the ocean storm. Inside, the massive space was a stunning display of polished marble floors and elegant, old-world architecture. The room was bustling with affluent hotel guests and carnival revelers, many of them still dressed in elaborate, colorful costumes.

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

Standing just a few feet away from her were two other hotel staff members: the general manager—a distinguished-looking man in his fifties with impeccably tailored clothing and sleek gray wings in his hair—and a muscular, bald security officer who kept a hand hovering near his earpiece.

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

Without a word, a hand reached out and placed a heavy leather wallet onto the polished countertop, flipping it open to reveal a gold shield. The text on the identification badge was clear: *Mike Anderson, Special Agent CIA*.

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

Seeing the badge, the manager and the security officer immediately walked over to the station, giving the receptionist a brief nod to dismiss her. The two men stared down at the government

credentials, then exchanged a deeply quizzical look before turning their attention back to Mike.

"We weren't expecting you," the manager admitted, his thick accent strained. "Why is the American CIA here before our own local *policía*? You are here about Señor Ruiz? Yes?"

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

The high-pitched wail of police sirens cut him off cleanly. Everyone in the lobby turned toward the front entrance as flashing red and blue lights began to reflect wildly against the towering glass doors.

Outside, a convoy of local police cruisers screeched to a halt at the curb. Officers scrambled out of the vehicles, but leading the pack was a sharp, well-dressed detective in his forties. He possessed a lean, toned physique and carried the unmistakable aura of a heavy chain-smoker. The detective barked a series of rapid orders at his men, threw his cigarette to the pavement, and stomped it out with his shoe heel before marching through the entrance.

The detective stormed into the lobby, his eyes locking instantly on the manager and the stranger standing at the desk. Adjusting the knot of his tie with an agitated jerk, he glared at the hotel 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 defensively. "He is American... CIA."

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

The detective reached into his inner coat pocket, pulled out a heavy silver cigarette case, and tapped a fresh cigarette hard against the metal before placing it between his lips. He was visibly vibrating with nervous energy.

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

Mike hesitated for a fraction of a second, his sharp eyes scanning the growing 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 meeting tobacco. He took a long drag and looked down at his watch with deep, 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 nervously at the detective, then turned his gaze back to Mike. "Dr. Pugh is not here. She canceled her reservation the day before the others arrived. Her suite is empty. The rest of her group is scheduled to leave tomorrow."

The detective threw his arms up in mock surprise, gesturing grandly to the chaotic commotion filling the lobby. "Oh! So surprising, yes? But nonetheless, such perfect timing." He rolled his arm in a sweeping motion toward the elevator bank, bowing slightly with a heavy layer of false accommodation. "Come, Mr. Anderson, let us go up to Señor Ruiz's suite. His guards are currently holding the man they believe shot him."

The detective turned and marched toward the elevators, flanked by several police officers. Mike drew a deep breath, scanning the lobby one last time, and shook his head in absolute confusion before falling into stride behind the men.

Reaching the doors, the detective hammered his thumb against the call button, tapping the toe of his Italian loafer against the marble floor with intense impatience. He hit the button again and again in rapid succession until the brass doors finally slid open. The men crowded tightly into the small elevator cab. The detective threw his cigarette to the floor, stomping it out beneath his shoe 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 low, rapid words to his officers in Spanish. The only distinguishable term that bled through the quiet was "CIA," followed instantly by a chorus of deep, disapproving grunts from the uniforms. The detective pinched his upper lip thoughtfully. Mike ran a tired hand through his hair, and

they rode the rest of the way up to the penthouse level in total silence.

Out on the dark waters of the Pacific, the crew members of the luxury yacht hoisted Madelyn up over the railing of the lower deck. She was completely drenched, shivering violently, and slipping into a state of mild shock. Working quickly, they wrapped her in heavy, dry blankets and hurried her inside the warmth of the cabin.

They laid Madelyn down onto the plush sofa in the main salon. Bill knelt on the floor beside her, using his hands to rub her forehead in an attempt to bring warmth back to her skin.

"It's okay, Madelyn," Bill murmured gently. "It—"

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

"It's not okay," she whispered hoarsely. "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, the exhaustion claimed her, and she drifted off into a heavy, turbulent sleep.

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

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

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

A sudden crash shattered the tension as a heavy rock tore through the windowpane, showering the room in glass. Madelyn and her mother instantly 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."

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

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

Staring back at him, young Madelyn felt the fear evaporate, replaced by a cold, fearless resolve. Beside her, her mother stood perfectly still, her expression entirely emotionless and hollow.

"Yes, vader," Madelyn whispered.

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

Outside, a large, heavily built man named John stepped forward from the front of the mob. Seething with pure rage, he brandished a weapon as the crowd fell into a tense silence. Mr. Pugh marched out to meet him, a rifle held firmly in one hand while his other rested menacingly 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 all 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 around, gesturing wildly toward the huddled Black families. "These people were ordered to relocate, yet they still live and work right here on your land!"

The mob erupted into loud, angry shouts of agreement. The families looked around, completely terrified. From inside the house, Madelyn watched the confrontation through the broken window, her rifle raised and braced against the sill, ready to fire.

"All of you, get off my land... now!" Mr. Pugh ordered, his voice echoing across the yard.

The crowd began to mumble restlessly as John shook his weapon aggressively in Mr. Pugh's face. In the far distance behind the mob, a massive

cloud of dust began to rise over the horizon, accompanied by the faint, rhythmic wail of approaching police sirens. The protesters grew visibly 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 dead silent. The sound of the approaching authorities grew deafening as the dust cloud billowed higher. John whirled around toward the helpless families, raising his weapon to aim 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 open as officers scrambled out of their vehicles with weapons drawn. John spun back toward Mr. Pugh, glancing frantically between the arriving police and the man standing before him.

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

As the officers closed the distance, John suddenly raised the barrel of the weapon, pressing it tightly against his own temple. The entire yard fell completely silent, save for the low whistling of the wind across the plains. The mob stared on, frozen in horror. Suddenly, John turned his gun on Mr. Pugh.

A sharp, deafening gunshot rang out, tearing through the quiet.

The shocked faces of the crowd filled the space. From the bedroom window, young Madelyn screamed in terror, her finger instinctively pulling her own trigger. Her rifle kicked hard, sending a bullet striking John in the head, as the entire courtyard erupted into absolute, chaotic violence.

John dropped heavily to the ground.

Screaming hysterically, Madelyn sprinted out the front door, flinging her rifle into the dirt. In the doorway behind her, her mother stood paralyzed in shock, her hands clamped tightly over her mouth.

Madelyn threw her body over her father, sobbing uncontrollably as the authorities rushed in. When the police finally managed to pull her away from the scene, her face and white blouse were heavily smeared with crimson. She stared blankly ahead, her eyes boiling with an absolute, simmering rage.

"Vader! Vader! No! No!" young Madelyn screamed as the police dragged her back toward the house. Madelyn twisting violently in the grip of the police officer, screaming at John's lifeless body, "Lion! Lion!"

The horrific memory dissolved, returning Madelyn to the present. She lay fast asleep on the plush leather sofa in the main salon of the luxury yacht, tossing restlessly against the cushions.

Across the room, Bill poured a generous splash of amber whiskey into a crystal tumbler. He turned and walked closer to the sofa, leaning down to strain against the quiet hum of the yacht's motor to hear her low, troubled mumbles.

"Lion... lion," Madelyn whispered in her sleep.

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

The captain gave a quick nod and exited the room to carry out the commands. Bill walked to the heavy glass doors at the rear of the cabin, stepping outside onto the open deck with his drink in hand. Leaning heavily against the rear perimeter railing, he took a slow sip of his whiskey, staring down into the dark water. He watched the sparkling, iridescent trail of bioluminescence churning in the boat's wake, completely mesmerized by the glowing green foam.

Back at the hotel, the polished brass elevator doors slid open and the group of men stepped out onto the plush carpeted hallway. The detective immediately sparked 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 suite, the fat guard stood over the handcuffed personal guard, glaring down at him with a look of absolute fury. He shook his head at the prisoner as the detective and Mike approached.

"Don't touch anything!" the detective barked to his officers.

Mike leaned forward, peering past the men into the adjoining bedroom. The body of Ruiz lay motionless in the bed, the pristine white sheets heavily stained a deep, stark crimson.

"What the..." Mike muttered under his breath.

The detective marched directly over to the personal guard, squatting down on his haunches to stare him dead in the eyes. His sharp gaze darted across the man's terrified face, searching for any

telltale sign of guilt. The guard stared right back, his eyes unflinching but desperate as he pleaded for his life.

After a long, tense moment, the detective stood up. He turned a highly suspicious glance toward the fat guard. Caught off guard by the sudden scrutiny, the fat guard nervously shifted his weight and looked away. The surrounding police officers exchanged quick, uncertain glances. Standing near the back, Mike watched the entire display, looking quietly amused by the unfolding drama.

The only sound in the room was the rhythmic, hypnotic chopping of the ceiling fan cutting through the heavy air. The detective took a deep drag from his cigarette, exhaling a thick cloud of smoke as he swept his eyes across everyone present. He dropped the butt onto a tray and tamped it out.

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

A murmur of surprise rippled through the room. The personal guard let out a massive, shuddering breath of relief, dropping his head in gratitude. The fat guard took an aggressive step toward the detective, pointing at the prisoner.

"But detective, we found the empty casing right there," the fat guard argued, his voice rising. "He was the only one in the room with him. I think—"

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

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

The detective turned to him, giving a brief, validating nod. "You're welcome, my friend. I believe you're innocent." He pulled another cigarette from his silver case, tapping it tightly against the metal before placing it between his lips. He shook his head at the personal guard, turning on his heel to walk away while muttering darkly under his breath in Spanish. "But no one else will. You will pay for this crime."

The personal guard shrugged helplessly at the fat guard, shaking his head at the unfairness of it all. The fat guard responded by slowly dragging a single finger across his own throat.

"He said you're a dead man," the fat guard hissed.

Ignoring them, the detective lit his cigarette and began to slowly pace the perimeter of the room. He stopped directly in front of a

large police sergeant with a thick handlebar mustache, whose uniform looked distinctly ill-fitting.

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

He took a deep, lingering drag, exhaling the smoke upward toward the ceiling as his eyes scanned the plaster. Mike followed his gaze, looking up at the roof. 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 a single eyebrow, taking a slow, calculated drag from his cigarette. He exhaled loudly, nodding his head up and down in a slow, patronizing rhythm. "Ah yes, the informality of the *Americanos*. *Por favor*, after you, Mr. Mike."

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

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

The two men stepped into the quiet bedroom, walking directly 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 of them stood in silence, staring down at Ruiz.

The detective looks across the bed at Mike, takes a drag of his cigarette, looks up, points to the ceiling with his cigarette, ashes fall on Ruiz. Mike looks up at the detective, looks down at the ashes. Mike frowns. Detective looks at Ruiz, his attitude is nonchalant

The detective looked back down at Ruiz, his attitude entirely nonchalant. "He's going to be cremated anyway. What's a few more ashes, ¿?"

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 with his cigarette. "And so, Mike, you say you came to see a Mrs. Pugh... who was supposed to be staying in the suite directly above us?"

"Uh... yeah," Mike replied, his voice distracted as he continued to examine the scene. "Dr. Pugh."

"Who is mysteriously not here?" the detective asked, letting out a low hum. "Humph." He waved his hand dismissively over Ruiz's body, causing another small dusting of cigarette ash to fall onto Ruiz's body.

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

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

Mike didn't answer. His sharp eyes scanned the ceiling panels, his gaze shifting methodically from side to side. Suddenly, his movements stopped. His eyes widened into a fixed, intense stare, and a slow, knowing smile spread across his face.

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

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

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

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

The detective shrugged his shoulders dismissively. He dropped his cigarette into an ashtray and spread his arms wide as he turned toward the door. "Yes, of course, Mr. Mike... from the CIA."

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

He completely missed the subtle, 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 suite directly above. Mike looked around the room, taking in the pristine layout. Everything was in perfect, undisturbed order. He walked over to the windows, checking the hardware; the heavy snap locks were completely secured.

Without a word, he marched into the bedroom and immediately dropped to his knees, beginning a meticulous, inch-by-inch inspection of the flooring.

The detective remained entirely unconcerned by the display. He pulled another cigarette from his case, lit it, and leaned casually 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 sharply, not looking up from the floor. "Ballistics will tell a completely different story."

The detective bristled at the insult. Turning around, he opened the window and angrily flung his cigarette out into the night before facing Mike fully. "Oh, *¿*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 brief, dry smile escaping his lips before he returned to examining the pine planks. "With all due respect, detective, you don't seem particularly interested in finding out who really killed Ruiz."

The detective scoffed, extracting yet another cigarette from his silver case. He packed it tightly against the metal, lit it, and took a long, deep drag. Pinching his upper lip thoughtfully, he strolled over to where Mike was kneeling and looked him up and down.

"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 happily killed him themselves." He took another long drag, shrugging his shoulders as he exhaled a swirling cloud of blue smoke. "His own army was talking of a coup. I simply do not have the time to, as you say, investigate. Nearly every person in this country has a motive worthy of killing Ruiz."

Mike stood up slowly, quietly studying the man's face. The detective took a final drag, looked back at Mike, and raised an eyebrow before throwing his hands up in the air. He walked back to the window, staring out into the darkness.

"Who rented this suite?" Mike asked.

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

The detective opened the window and tossed his cigarette out into the open air and 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 walked over, extending a hand to shake the man's. "*Gracias*, detective. Buenas noches."

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

Left alone, Mike walked over to the open window, leaning his weight 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 tired hand through his hair, his eyes scanning the framing of the window.

"Well, hello..." he whispered, his voice slow and excited.

Mike grabbed a nearby chair, dragged it over to the window, and stepped up onto the seat. He leaned in close, inspecting the very top of the window frame. Etched clearly into the finished wood was a fresh rub mark, and caught in the splintered groove was a loose, synthetic rope fiber. He leaned all the way out of the open window, peering directly up toward the heavy concrete stays on the roofline.

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

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

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

Out in the carpeted hallway, Mike began pounding heavily on the surrounding doors, the loud thuds echoing down the corridor. One by one, the doors swung open. The women of the flying troupe stepped into their frames, looking sleepy, disheveled, and completely muddled by the sudden disruption. Before they could speak, Mike aggressively flashed his gold CIA credentials directly 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 perfectly mirrored the pale, blooming colors of the dawn sky as a light, cool breeze began to blow across the water.

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

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

Setting his mug aside, Bill stood up to help guide her into a chair. Madelyn let out a sharp grunt of intense pain as she settled onto the cushion. Bill took the crutches from her hands and passed

them over to the waiting steward, gesturing toward his own empty cup to signal for a refill for Madelyn. The steward gave a polite nod and slipped away 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 sharp, defensive grunt.

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

The first rays of dawn were just starting to strike the flat roof of the Miraflores Palacio Hotel, illuminating the chaotic mess of parasail equipment scattered across the concrete. The heavy rooftop service door swung open with a dull metallic groan. Mike stepped out onto the deck, escorting Susan—a fiery redhead—along with two other women from the flying troupe. All of them were in their late twenties or early thirties, athletic, slim, and striking, though still visibly 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 down to inspect the cleanly severed cords. Standing back up, he paced over to the concrete roof ledge and stooped low, closely examining the fresh scuff marks etched into the stone directly above the window of Madelyn's lower suite. He leaned over the edge, tracking the line of sight down the building facade until his eyes caught a dark shape resting on the roof of an adjacent, lower structure—an abandoned backpack.

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

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

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 flirtation. "I'll personally ensure your equipment is shipped back to you. You all have a safe trip home."

He ushered the remaining women through the frame, closing the heavy door behind them. Susan offered one final, silent flirtatious glance before disappearing inside. Left alone in the quiet dawn, Mike walked back to the ledge, staring down intently at the lonely backpack below.

A short time later, Mike stepped out onto the gravel-strewn roof of the adjacent building. He bent down and hoisted the heavy canvas backpack, glancing back up at the towering facade of the Miraflores Palacio to calculate the drop. Unzipping the main compartment, he tipped the bag over and dumped the contents onto the concrete.

Out fell Madelyn's torn black paraglider sail, several cut pieces of a flight harness, and a coiled length of heavy rope. A knowing smile spread across Mike's face as he methodically stuffed the incriminating gear back inside the canvas.

The sharp, deafening crack of a gunshot shattered the morning quiet.

A bullet slammed into the concrete right 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 open roof, diving for cover just as a second shot rang out, missing him wide.

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

"What the hell?" Mike muttered, his heart hammering. He stood up, quickly brushing the roof dust off his clothes, and checked his perimeter before darting toward the roof's exit stairs. "I'm going to find me that shooter."

Back on the open Pacific, the luxury yacht cut smoothly through the water. Bill and Madelyn sat side by side on chaise lounges, soaking in the midday sun. A steward approached quietly, setting down a tray

with a chilled pitcher of iced tea and two glasses, but Bill gave a sharp wave of his hand, dismissing the man instantly.

Bill sat up, bracing his elbows on his knees as he leaned in close to Madelyn. "Close call last night. Listen, I know you're in a little shock and a lot of pain, but I need to bring you up to speed on some things you don't know... and should."

Madelyn watched him, her brow furrowing with growing apprehension. "I sense bad news coming."

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

Madelyn shifted uncomfortably against the lounge. "You were friends. Close friends."

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

A muddled, confused expression crossed Madelyn's face as she tried to parse his words. "What are you talking about?"

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

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

Bill drew a deep breath, looking her straight 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 entirely 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 calm, almost clinical display of authority. "Well... it really is... kind of. But listen to me—"

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

In a sudden explosion of pure hysterics, she lunged forward, swinging her heavy aluminum crutch and striking Bill across the chest. The violence of the outburst instantly triggered the ship's security; the cabin door burst open, and a burly crewmember rushed out onto the deck, a weapon already brandished and ready in his hands.

Bill scrambled backward, clearing the radius of her physical reach as Madelyn painfully forced herself upright, trembling with rage.

"Madelyn, sit down," Bill pleaded, his hands raised in front of him. "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 mid-sentence, her gaze snapping over to the armed crewmember standing just a few feet away. She stared at the barrel of the gun, her expression shifting into defiant disgust as she shook her head. "And what?" she challenged, glaring back at Bill. "Are you going to shoot me?"

Bill's eyes hardened, the paternal warmth completely 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 seemed to drain out of her all at once. Madelyn sank heavily back into her chaise lounge, casting the crutch aside onto the deck boards to stare blankly out at the endless, rolling horizon of the ocean. After a long moment of silence, she turned her cold gaze back toward the armed guard.

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

Bill exhaled, looking toward the cabin door. "Bring the bottle."

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

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

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

The steward returned a moment later, breaking the tension just long enough to place a polished crystal decanter of whiskey and two matching tumblers on the patio table before slipping silently back inside. Madelyn turned toward Bill, resting her elbows heavily on the wood and spreading her hands open in a rare display of vulnerability.

"I just... I need to understand," she stammered, her voice cracking. "My father? Anderson? I don't... none of this connects."

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

"Let me make this simple for you, okay?" Bill said, his tone shifting into something clinical.

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

"Your father worked with the agency doing intelligence work during the apartheid era," Bill explained evenly. "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 her eyes against the glare of the sun. Her lips moved silently, mouthing a single, disbelieving word: *What?*

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

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

"He chose to—"

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

Bill shifted his gaze away from her, staring down at his glass as a heavy, undeniable wave of guilt washed across his weathered 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 undeniable talent. Honestly, you two would make a hell of a team."

"What?"

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

"And you knew he was... is, 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 fucking circus poodle? You've been playing me this entire time, Bill... say it."

Bill pursed his lips, raising his eyebrows in a slow, calculated nod. "Well, darl'n... as they say back home in the Carolinas, I've been playing you like a well-tuned fiddle."

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

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

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

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

"Sense?" Madelyn repeated, her voice rising to a frantic pitch. "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 sound of the wind.

"That's not what I saw 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 you manufactured a monster."

"Be sensible, Madelyn."

"How can I be sensible when absolutely none of this makes sense?" she challenged, shaking her head. "I feel like a cog in a machine. For good reasons or bad reasons, people die, revolutions begin, and then even more people die." She stared at him, a horrifying wave of clarity washing over her as the reality of her life clicked into place. "Revolution. In every single country your 'friends' wanted something from. My hospitals, the children, me... we were all just pawns in your political theater. You bastards. That's not right."

"That 'theater' paid for your Ivy League education," Bill reminded her coldly. "Those exact friends finance every single one of your hospitals. Face it, honey—the CIA gave you your dream."

Without another word, Madelyn grabbed her crutches. Bill flinched instinctively, pulling his weight back. Forcing herself upright, she balanced against the handles and began to hobble aggressively toward the heavy cabin doors. Halfway there, she stopped, swinging her body around to face him fully.

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

She turned and threw her weight into the crutches, moving away. Bill stood up slowly, looking past her toward the bridge. He gave a sharp, definitive nod to the captain. The captain returned the gesture, signaling the surrounding crewmen, and the deck instantly erupted into a flurry of motion.

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

Madelyn yanked open the heavy cabin door.

"Madelyn, get your things ready to go!" Bill called out after her. "A chopper is coming in to transport us all 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 completely. "I am not asking you. I am telling you: be ready in ten minutes."

Bill knocked back the last of his drink, rubbing his temples as he stepped out from under the awning to search the open sky. In the

far distance, the low, rhythmic thumping of a helicopter began to echo across the flat water.

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

Bill remained at the railing, his eyes locked onto the gray horizon as the deafening, heavy chopping sound of the approaching rotor blades filled the air, drowning out the roar of the ocean.

A massive Chinook transport helicopter hovered directly overhead, the powerful downwash from its tandem rotors blasting a violent ring of white water outward and flattening the swells directly beneath the hull. Steel life lifts lowered from the open cargo bay. One by one, the crew and passengers were strapped in and hoisted up through the blinding mist, boarding the belly of the military transport.

Inside the rattling fuselage, Bill caught the pilot's eye and shook his index finger, giving the definitive signal to clear the area. The heavy transport helicopter tilted forward, roaring away from the coordinate. Bill turned in his seat, looking out the small porthole window back at the luxury 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.

High above the Pacific, the aerial view tracked the lonely yacht as it rocked against the swells. In a sudden, blinding flash, the entire vessel vanished inside a massive fireball—a deafening explosion tearing the structure into a million burning fragments that rained down into the sea.

CHAPTER SIX

Houston, Texas
Same Day

Ramp agents on the tarmac of the Air Force Base in Houston, Texas, used glowing orange batons to guide the heavy Chinook toward a designated landing pad. The wheels touched down gently against the concrete. As the rotors began to slow, the rear cargo ramp lowered, and the passengers stepped out into the humid Texas air.

A sleek luxury Town Car pulled directly up to the edge of the landing zone. Barbara Roth stepped out of the driver's side, offering a warm wave to her husband. Bill and Madelyn walked toward the vehicle in silence. Madelyn moved like a zombie, her face completely drained of life. Bill wrapped his wife in a brief hug before opening the front passenger door and stepping inside. Madelyn bypassed them entirely, slipping into the rear seat like an angry, sullen teenager and slumping deep into the leather.

Nearby, uniformed military personnel quietly loaded their bags into the trunk. Barbara climbed back behind the wheel, twisted the key in the ignition, and steered the vehicle away from the flight line.

Barbara navigated the luxury Town Car onto the open lanes of the Houston highway. Trying to break the heavy, suffocating silence in the cabin, she glanced up at the rearview mirror. "How was y'all's trip?"

Through the glass, she tracked Madelyn, whose posture remained frozen as she stared icily at the back of Bill's head.

Bill didn't even turn around. "What's for dinner?"

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

Later that evening, the tense atmosphere shifted to the grand dining room of the Roth estate. Bill, Barbara, and Madelyn sat around a massive Queen Anne table, which had been meticulously set with fine china, crystal stemware, and polished sterling silver. A tiered crystal chandelier overhead cast a brilliant light across the traditional

room, illuminating the paneled wainscoting, a heavy mahogany sideboard, and a sprawling Aubusson rug. Soft candlelight flickered between a massive feast of food spread out across the table.

“Mmmm, mmmm,” Bill chewed loudly, cutting into his dinner with aggressive strokes. “Honey, this is absolutely delicious. Now this is a truly 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 massive bite, exaggerating his enjoyment for the room. At his flank, an old Golden Retriever sat quietly, gently resting a heavy paw against Bill’s thigh. Bill sliced a prime piece of steak from his plate and held it out. The dog took the meat with absolute gentleness from his fingers.

“Now see, even old King knows a good thing,” Bill chuckled, his voice dropping into a dangerous cadence. “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 directly across the table, locking his eyes onto Madelyn. She didn’t flinch, returning his stare with a sharp, angry smirk.

Bill suddenly slammed his fork down hard against the fine china, the sharp clang echoing through the dining room. He shook his steak knife in her direction, talking past the food still in his mouth. “We can dance around this issue all night, Madelyn, but I am simply not in the mood to attend a masked ball. So let’s cut the crap—you need to make a serious decision here.”

“I already told you, Bill,” Madelyn said, her voice entirely flat. “I’m through. That’s it. I’ve had enough. I am completely finished, and I want a change.”

Bill swallowed heavily, letting out a sharp, sarcastic laugh that rattled through the quiet room. He set his knife down, wiped his mouth with a linen napkin, and slapped the polished wood of the table hard with the palm of his hand.

“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 seriously, drastically underestimating the consequences of your current 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 gentle, pulling pressure. Madelyn turned her head sharply. Barbara’s face was lined with a heavy, profound worry, her eyes openly pleading with the younger woman.

“Madelyn, honey,” Barbara whispered, her voice tight with anxiety. “Just listen to Bill.”

Madelyn searched her face, her eyes scanning the raw tension written across the older woman’s features. Barbara patted her hand reassuringly, nodding her head up and down in a slow, rhythmic motion.

“Honey... just listen,” Barbara repeated softly.

Madelyn glanced back across the table at Bill. With a slight, tight nod, she rolled her hand forward in a small gesture, yielding the floor to him.

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

Bill picked up his wine glass, took a slow, calculated sip, and set it back down on the silver coaster. He locked his gaze onto 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 sat back, completely startled by the target, her eyes darting over to Barbara. Barbara merely forced a small, cracked smile, her expression conveying a silent, tragic sense of confirmation.

“Sarraf needs to go,” Bill stated coldly. “This operation is going to require a massive amount of inside preparation and deep 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 in even closer across the china, his face just inches away 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 completely 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 playing the forty questions game," Bill interrupted smoothly. "The preparation and the logistics ahead of you will be absolute top-tier. We already have a rogue agent pre-staged in the area to act as the perfect fall guy. Every single angle of this is covered. This is—"

"Insane," Madelyn spit out, shaking her head in disbelief. "This entire plan is so dangerous, so destabilizing, it's—"

"Your only choice," Bill cut her off, his voice hardening into steel. "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, warning register. "Madelyn, honey, these people aren't playing around. You'll go down for Nkwatcha and Ruiz. They'll extradite you across international lines, and you know as well as I do that you won't survive long enough to make it through both trials."

Madelyn absorbed the blow, her fingers tightening 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 entire operation is going to be full of illusions, Madelyn. You won't be able to trust your own heart, or even what you think you see with your own eyes. You're just going to have to trust me."

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

Bill stared across the table at her, a rare, distinct sadness lingering deep 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 back into her chair, frozen in silent shock. Bill carefully wiped his mouth with his linen napkin, set it down beside his plate, and pushed his heavy chair back from the table. A heavy, physical groan escaped him as he labored to his feet. Walking around the perimeter of the Queen Anne table, he stopped behind Barbara, wrapping his heavy arms around her shoulders to press a gentle, lingering kiss onto the crown of her head.

“Honey, that dinner was absolutely delicious,” Bill murmured softly. “I love your cooking. I’d miss that second only to your smile.” He looked back toward the rest of the room, adjusting his glasses. “You ladies excuse me, I’m going straight to bed. I have a hell of a headache right now.”

He turned and walked toward the large dining room doors. As he moved away, he lifted a hand to massage his forehead, his face twisting into a sharp grimace of intense pain while his back was turned to them.

“Madelyn, sleep on it,” he called out over his shoulder, his voice echoing in the grand space. “It’s either-or. You only have one real decision to make here. Make the right one.”

He stepped through the threshold, his heavy footsteps trailing away as he disappeared up the grand staircase. A moment later, his muffled voice drifted back down from the upper floor. “By tomorrow morning!”

Madelyn pushed her chair back, preparing to rise from the table, but Barbara reached out, her fingers lightly catching her arm. “Let’s talk for a while,” the older woman pleaded.

Sensing the deep desperation in her voice, Madelyn slowly sank back into her seat. Barbara reached for the decanter, pouring a fresh splash of dark red wine into both of their crystal glasses. She lifted her glass high into the candlelight.

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

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

The emotional dam broke completely. “Oh, honey, it’s Bill,” Barbara sobbed, burying her face in her hands. “He’s not well. He has to get... he...”

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

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

Barbara cut herself off mid-sentence, forcing a breath down to compose her erratic thoughts. She pushed herself up from the table and began to pace around the dining room, her tightly closed fist bumping gently against her mouth as she tried to stop the shaking. Finally, she stopped directly in front of Madelyn, reaching down to place both of her hands firmly on the younger woman’s shoulders.

“Madelyn, Bill is right about one thing. There is no time,” Barbara said, her eyes boring into Madelyn’s with absolute urgency. “You need to believe how dangerous his friends truly are—the agency, whoever they are. Honey, if you fight them, they will systematically take everything you have. If I were in your shoes, I...”

Barbara stopped, looking up at the crystal chandelier. She let out a deep, exhausting exhale and wiped the moisture from her eyes.

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

Left alone, Madelyn sat in a hollow, frozen stare.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Maggie Valley, North Carolina
The Next Day

“Turn right in one hundred feet,” an automated GPS voice chimed smoothly.

Mike Anderson glared at the dashboard display, his frustration mounting by the second. A thousand miles away from Houston, the morning sun was just beginning to cut through the heavy trees of Maggie Valley, but Mike was too busy being hopelessly lost to appreciate the view.

He shifted his gaze to the right, staring up at a near-vertical, rocky mountainside that offered absolutely no path forward. Muttering under his breath, he shook his head in disbelief and drove straight past it.

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

“You sound like a wife!” Mike grumbled aloud to the empty cabin. “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 roadside restaurant parking lot ahead, Mike yanked the steering wheel, bringing the vehicle to a sharp stop across the gravel. He reached into his pocket and dialed a secure sequence on his cell phone, pressing it to his ear as the line began to ring.

“Hey, Mike, what’s up?” a voice answered on the other end.

“I need a quick favor, Gloria,” Mike said, leaning his elbow against the window sill. “I need a direct link to our tactical satellites. I’m literally driving in circles out here. Did your system say Pugh is definitely at home? Wherever that actually is.”

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

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

Mike ended the call, threw the car back into drive, and accelerated out of the parking lot, pulling back onto the main roadway.

The rental car tracked steadily up the escalating grade of the mountain passes, the engine roaring against the incline.

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

Mike drove past the final outskirts of the small town center, navigating the winding, narrow blacktop as it cut deeper into the dense foliage of the Appalachian Mountains. He swung the vehicle into a steep, private driveway that was draped heavily with overhanging pine trees. Reaching the crest of the hill, the trees cleared, and Mike pulled the car to a stop in front of Madelyn’s home—a striking, modern design perched cleanly on the mountain peak.

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

He turned off the ignition. Reaching inside his jacket, he checked his shoulder holster to ensure his firearm was securely in place. He glanced briefly into the rearview mirror, ran a hand through his hair to smooth it down, and gave the concealed weapon one final pat through the fabric. Satisfied, he pushed the door open and exited the car into the quiet mountain air.

Mike approached the perimeter of the structure, his shoes crunching softly against the gravel as he walked purposefully toward the rear. The vast, sweeping silhouette of the surrounding mountains and his own moving reflection were sharply captured in the towering glass walls of the modern home.

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

He tapped firmly on the thick glass of the rear door, stepping back to wait. There was no answer. Cupping his hands against his brow, he peered through the pane and spotted a cell phone and a laptop resting on a nearby side table. A complex jumble of jumper

wires snaked out from the electronic devices, running directly into a customized, matte-black enclosure where a series of small LED indicators blinked continuously.

Mike walked the entire physical perimeter of the house, calling out for Dr. Pugh at every corner while scanning through each window he passed. Finding no one, he returned to the rear entrance. Reaching into his inner pocket, he pulled out a specialized lock-picking tool. He worked the mechanism for a brief beat until the lock clicked, swung the door open, and slipped silently inside.

Inside the expansive great room, Mike scanned the area, keeping his voice level. "Hello! Dr. Pugh? Mike Anderson, CIA. Are you home?"

Receiving only silence in return, he gave a slow nod of approval as he took in the vaulted ceilings. "Nice house..."

He began a methodical sweep of the interior, pacing through the great room, into the high-end kitchen, and down the long central hallway. He examined various shelves and knickknacks as he went, memorizing the layout. Stepping into Madelyn's master bedroom, he checked the attached bathroom and the walk-in closets before sliding open a series of mahogany dresser drawers. He deftly sifted through her personal items, nodding to himself before pushing the drawer back toward the frame—accidentally leaving it just a fraction of an inch ajar.

Mike returned to the great room, his attention drawn to a collection of photographs resting on the grand piano. He picked up the frame containing the picture of a younger Madelyn, her father, and their pet calf, studying their faces before setting it back down exactly where he found it. Pacing around the instrument, he idly pressed a few keys, then reached out to strum the strings of an acoustic guitar as he passed.

Spotting the desktop audio recorder, Mike leaned down and pressed the play button. The pre-recorded track of a mandolin instantly filled the room, followed by the acoustic guitar she had tracked earlier. Mike walked over to the towering fireplace, examining the intricate masonry details and running his hand across the rough, cold stones.

Suddenly, the recorded music was cut off by the taped sound of a ringing telephone. The background guitar tracking stopped entirely, though the mandolin loop continued to play.

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

Mike swung his head around instantly, his eyes locking onto the blinking device. “Hello indeed!” he muttered, a sharp smile spreading across his face.

He hurried back over to the desk, pulled out his personal cell phone, and immediately began recording the playback.

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

“This needs to happen,” Bill’s voice boomed in response. “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, holding his phone steady. “Oh yeah, so done! You are so done.”

“Great! That’s my girl!” Bill’s recording continued enthusiastically. “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 over the speaker. As soon as the recording cut to static, he hit the stop button and immediately dialed Gloria.

“Gloria, it’s Mike,” he said into the receiver. “I’m staying out here in North Carolina for a bit, so go ahead and book me a room nearby. I’m sending over an encrypted audio file right now. As soon as you get it, I need you to run a full sweep and locate the current coordinates for Dr. Pugh and Bill Roth.”

“Will do, Mike,” Gloria replied.

Mike ended the call and slipped his phone back into his pocket. He walked over to the rear glass door, yanked it open, and paused on the threshold to scan the grand room one final time.

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

He stepped outside, pulling the door shut firmly behind him.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Houston, Texas

The Next Day

The quiet scrape of silverware against porcelain broke the afternoon silence.

The next afternoon, under a brilliant Houston sun, Madelyn, Barbara, and Bill sat around a polished iron table on the estate patio, finishing the remnants of a lavish brunch. Behind them stretched a lush, immaculately manicured garden and a sweeping green lawn. A quiet steward in a dark suit stepped forward, methodically clearing away the empty plates.

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

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

Suddenly, Bill slammed his open palm down hard against the tabletop. The loud crack startled both women, their shoulders tensing instantly.

"Well, Madelyn," Bill demanded, his eyes boring into hers. "Just say yes or no right now, and then we will discuss any of the related details or questions."

Madelyn looked back at him, her expression entirely exasperated. An extended, suffocating silence fell over the patio. Bill began to rhythmically 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 turning back to face Bill fully.

"Yes," Madelyn said.

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

"How soon?" Madelyn asked flatly.

"A month—tops," Bill replied, counting on his fingers. "There is a massive amount of up-front preparation work to handle, and that foot of yours needs some serious time to heal. What else?"

"How fast can you get me home?"

"Today."

"I'll be packing," she muttered, disappearing through the door.

Left alone on the deck, Bill turned to Barbara, patting her hand gently as a triumphant smile settled on his face. He was entirely secure in his victory.

CHAPTER NINE

Maggie Valley, North Carolina
Later That Day

Madelyn's security, however, was already compromised.

Later that evening, a yellow taxicab pulled up the steep, tree-lined driveway, stopping at the crest of the mountain. Madelyn exited the rear seat, using her crutches to carefully navigate the dark walkway. She unlocked the heavy entrance door and limped inside.

Stepping into the pitch-black foyer, she immediately checked the digital keypad of the home security system. The screen glowed faintly in the dark, reading: *UNARMED*.

The cab driver carried her heavy suitcases inside, setting them down on the hardwood. Madelyn passed him a handful of cash, and he offered a polite nod before exiting, closing the front door firmly behind him.

Left alone in the quiet house, Madelyn leaned heavily on a single crutch, her head tilting as she looked around the dark space with sudden suspicion. Reaching into her handbag, she quietly extracted a small pistol, checking the chamber. Moving with absolute silence, she cleared the kitchen, then made her way down the long hallway with her weapon drawn.

She stepped into her bedroom. Her eyes instantly dropped to her dresser, noticing that one of the middle drawers was left slightly ajar. She pulled it open, her brow furrowing deeply as she realized her personal belongings had been systematically disturbed. She scanned the perimeter of the bedroom with intense concern, then closed the drawer with a firm, decisive click.

Turning back to the hallway, she limped into the great room and marched directly over to the stone fireplace. She reached out, pressing her fingers against a specific, hidden seam in the masonry.

With a soft mechanical whirr, a concealed stone panel slid away from the wall, exposing a high-tech console fitted with six glowing video screens. She pressed a master button on the interface.

Instantly, the monitors refreshed, displaying archived security footage from earlier that day. Madelyn stood frozen in the glow of the screens, watching intently as the video captured every single movement Mike Anderson had made inside and outside of her home.

Her jaw tightening, Madelyn reached for her cell phone and dialed Bill's direct line.

"I didn't expect to hear from you so soon," Bill's voice answered over the speaker.

"Anderson was here," Madelyn hissed into the receiver, 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 and unbothered through the speaker. "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 smoothly. "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 single thing."

Madelyn let out an exasperated sigh, pulling open a small drawer in the console to retrieve a pen and a pad of paper. "Ready."

"757-555-0007."

Madelyn let out a sudden, 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 held the phone away from her ear, staring down at the blank screen in disbelief. She shrugged her shoulders and hung up the line.

“That’s it?” she muttered to the empty room. “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 crossed over to the sleek wet bar, pouring herself a generous measure of whiskey. She walked over to the sofa, settling back against the deep cushions as she took a slow sip from her glass, a dangerous grin spreading across her face. She reached up and pushed her bangs out of her eyes.

“Come on down, Mike Anderson!” she whispered to the dark windows. “You’re our next contestant...”

She took another sip of the whiskey, a tiny stray drop spilling down her chin. She idly blotted it away with her jacket 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 the soft sound of piano keys. Madelyn sat at the grand instrument, her fingers idly tracing a slow melody across the ivory.

Suddenly, the sharp, loud chime of the doorbell echoed through the vaulted room.

Madelyn stopped playing. Reaching for her crutches, she pushed herself up and began to limp toward the foyer. Through the patterned glass pane of the front door, Mike Anderson’s broad silhouette was cleanly visible. Madelyn stopped, drawing in a deep, steadying breath before exhaling it slowly.

“It’s showtime!” she whispered in a theatrical, Bob Fosse cadence.

She flung the heavy front door open with explosive energy.

“Hi, Mike! How are you?” she cheered, her voice beaming. “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 both of her arms high into the air, lowering them in a fluid, sweeping motion like a television game-show model. The sudden, theatrical burst of energy caught Mike completely off guard. He stood frozen on the threshold, his mouth slightly open, utterly speechless.

“What’s wrong, Mike?” Madelyn teased, tilting her head. “Cat got your tongue?”

Before he could answer, she hooked her hand firmly around his forearm, forcefully pulling him through the threshold and into the foyer. “Come on in, Mike... again.”

Madelyn turned on her heel, limping purposefully past him toward the expansive great room. Instead of stopping, she pivoted down the central hallway, disappearing around the bedroom door frame.

“I just need to grab a jacket!” she called out, her voice echoing from the back of the house. “Go on in, make yourself at home—you already know where everything is anyway. I’ll be right out!”

Mike stood alone in the center of the room, staring down the empty hallway as her words registered. He stepped further into the great room, looking completely bewildered and highly suspicious of the reception. His hand instinctively twitched toward his coat, his fingers automatically patting the hidden weight of his holstered firearm.

Inside her bedroom, Madelyn pulled open the middle dresser drawer. She glided her fingers over the neatly folded clothing, pinpointing and retrieving the exact pair of black silk panties Mike had disturbed several days before. Sliding the delicate fabric deep into the side pocket of her light jacket, her expression hardened into a focused, clinical, and ice-cold calm.

Back in the great room, Mike paced the wide expanse of the hardwood floor, his sharp eyes continuously scanning his surroundings for any hidden threats.

“I’ll be right there, Mike,” Madelyn’s voice called out from the hall. “Get yourself something to drink. There’s some fresh tea in the fridge.”

Madelyn limped back into the room, crossing the floor to take a seat on a plush armchair situated right beside the massive glass wall. She positioned herself facing inward, gesturing with a fluid wave of her hand for Mike to occupy the seat directly opposite her. Settling in, she propped her injured leg up on the arm of the chair, her high-slit skirt shifting slightly with the movement.

Mike crossed the room and sat down, trying to force his voice to remain steady as he fought against an internal stammer under her intense, deliberate scrutiny.

“Well, Mike, what’s up?” Madelyn asked, leaning her head back. “What is so incredibly important that you would search the whole wide world just to come see little old me?”

“Yeah, uh, it’s really beautiful up here...” Mike stammered, clearing his throat as he looked around. “Look, I need to ask you... ah —”

He cut himself off mid-sentence, losing his train of thought as Madelyn reached slowly into her jacket pocket. With a fluid, deliberate motion, she pulled out the black silk panties and dropped them squarely onto the small table between them, sliding them right next to Mike’s resting hands.

Mike froze instantly, his eyes locking onto the fabric. Across the small table, Madelyn offered a devilish, victorious smile.

“You have expensive taste, Agent Anderson,” she said, her voice dripping with mockery. “But if you’re going to break into a field operative’s 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 upright from his chair, running a tense, agitated hand through his hair as his cool investigator shield instantly shattered into pieces. “Okay. I can tell—”

“Tell what, Mike?” Madelyn interrupted.

She stood up from her chair in a single, fluid motion, entirely abandoning her crutch as she closed the physical distance between them.

She stepped directly into his personal space, locking her eyes onto his as she looked straight up into his face. The playful, theatrical facade vanished entirely.

“Can you tell I’m aware that you broke into my house?” Madelyn asked, her voice dropping into a dangerous, icy register. “I know you went through my things.”

Mike stood in absolute, frozen silence as he waited her out. His jaw remained tight, his expression locked down like a vault. Madelyn brushed her dark bangs back from her forehead with a cold, precise flick of her wrist.

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

The psychological blow landed cleanly. Mike sank back down into his armchair, his face locking into a strict, completely unreadable poker face. He remained dead silent, refusing to give her an inch. Madelyn turned on her heel and limped purposefully toward the wet bar; Mike completely missed the sharp, victorious grin that flashed across her face the exact moment her back was turned.

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

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

Madelyn poured the spirits, handling the bottles with practiced ease. She walked over toward the large glass patio door, balancing a filled glass in each hand. She looked over at Mike, then dropped her gaze down to the brass handle.

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

Mike got up from his seat, walking past her with his eyes fixed intently on her face. He shook his head slowly, a faint grunt of an amused grin finally breaking through his hard investigator defenses.

He reached out, unlocked the frame, and swung the door open, allowing them to step out into the crisp mountain air.

"Hit play on the audio recorder on your way out, Mike," Madelyn added, not looking back. "You know exactly where that is, too. And leave the door open when you come out."

Mike walked over to the desk, reaching down to press the play button on the machine. The recorded conversation cut off, and a smooth, mellow jazz track filled the expanse of the great room. Turning, he exited the house onto the timber deck.

Out on the patio, Mike and Madelyn took their seats opposite each other at the heavy wrought-iron table. Mike shifted his gaze past her, tracking the majestic, sprawling mountain peaks that rolled out into the distance.

"It really is beautiful here," Mike admitted softly. He turned his eyes back to Madelyn, a genuine, faint smile breaking through his guarded posture. "Everything is."

Madelyn didn't miss a beat, playing along with an exaggerated, theatrical flair. She fanned her face with her hand, fluttered her eyes impishly, and lowered her chin as she peered back at him over her lashes. "Aw, shucks. I bet you tell all the girls that."

They each took a slow, measured sip of their drinks. The air between them dropped into a brief, heavy silence as they both hunted for their next words. Madelyn cut through the quiet instantly, leaning her elbows on the table.

"Tell me what you think you know," she commanded, her voice turning sharp again. "I have some things to say to you, too, so get directly to the point."

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

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

"Not that concern me," Mike said flatly.

"Do you have any actual physical evidence that could convict me in a court of law?" she challenged, her eyes boring into his. "Honestly—yes or no?"

"No."

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

She took another measured sip of her drink, pausing deliberately to let the staggering weight of the confession hang in the open air between them.

“But you do,” she added.

Mike’s stoic expression remained completely fixed, showing absolutely zero emotion at the revelation. Without a word, he knocked back his gin in a single, aggressive shot. The heavy spirit caught in his throat; he choked slightly, setting the empty crystal glass down hard against the table.

“Got any proof?” Mike asked as soon as he could speak, his voice tight. “Yes or no?” He shook his head, coughing a little as he tried to recover his composure from the sudden, burning bite of the alcohol.

Madelyn let out a sharp, genuine laugh at his expense. “Proof that you can’t handle your liquor? Yes—first at the fundraiser gala, and now right here. You choke every single time, Michael. Didn’t you ever go to college?”

“Yeah, I went to college,” Mike replied, looking thoroughly 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 entire time to see how good your tactical tracking skills are—to see if you could get this close to his top assassin.” She took a slow sip, then reached across the table, placing her cold hand firmly over Mike’s fingers. “Oh, and he thinks we’d make a truly great team.”

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

Madelyn stood up from the table. “Need another drink?”

“How do I know you’re not—”

“You don’t,” Madelyn interrupted cleanly. “But Gloria does.”

Reaching into her jacket pocket, Madelyn pulled out her cell phone and rapidly dialed the specific 007 sequence Bill had given her. She tossed the phone across the table, and it landed cleanly in Mike's lap as she turned to walk back toward the house.

Mike caught the device, lifting it to his ear with a deep frown. The sound of a connection chimed through the line, followed instantly by a familiar voice.

"Hey, Mike, surprise!" Gloria's voice cheered over the speaker. "Everything she's told you is completely true. Senior Agent Roth is sitting right here 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 completely dead.

Mike slowly lowered the phone from his ear, setting the device face-down on the iron table. He picked up his empty glass, staring silently into the bottom of the crystal before turning his head back toward the kitchen doors.

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

A moment later, Madelyn returned to the deck, a devious, victorious smile painted on her face. She carried two fresh, sweat-beaded bottles, refilling both of their glasses to the brim before sliding back into her seat.

In a single, unified motion, they both lifted their glasses into the sunlight. Madelyn raised her drink toward him, her eyes flashing with a dangerous spark.

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

They clinked their crystal glasses together in a quiet, solemn toast.

Mike leaned forward, his elbows resting 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 into a flat, distant cadence. "You've probably read every single internal file on me. My father was a field operative for the agency. I believe they executed him. Bill and Barbara... they're the only real family I've had since I was a teenager." She paused, turning her head to track the vast, rolling silhouette of the mountain peaks.

“And killing... well, killing is quite literally all I’ve ever known to get things done.”

Madelyn looked down at the table, a sudden wave of emotion hitting her as she fought to hold back tears. Her chin began to quiver. Steeling herself, she forced her eyes back up, locking her gaze directly onto Mike’s.

“I don’t want to do this anymore,” she whispered fiercely. “I’ve told Bill that several times now. But he explicitly told me the agency would systematically ruin me if I tried to walk away. Mike... I have to do this next mission.”

Mike drew his head back in sudden surprise. Madelyn took a slow sip of her whiskey, tilting the heavy glass toward him like a weapon.

“Oh, and by the way,” she added with a cold smirk. “You’re my new partner.”

“In what?” Mike asked, his brow furrowing.

“To eliminate Prince Sarraf,” Madelyn revealed smoothly. “We need to clear the way so Nasir can take the throne.”

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

“Bill said—”

“I don’t give a damn what Bill said!” Mike snapped, cutting her off cleanly. “You told me just a minute ago that you don’t actually work for Roth. Who do you really work for?”

“I honestly don’t know anymore,” Madelyn admitted, her shoulders dropping. “It was always Bill’s high-profile friends with the massive oil and cattle interests. The funding came directly from them... or, at least, that’s what I was always led to believe.”

“I thought so,” Mike muttered. He tilted his head back, staring up at the graying sky for a long moment as he ran both hands through his hair. Leaning heavily across the iron table, he pushed directly into Madelyn’s personal space, his eyes boring into hers. “Madelyn, my specific assignment is as an expert on Middle Eastern affairs. Namely... keeping the peace. I’ve been investigating the deaths

of Ruiz and Nkwacha because they were flagged in intelligence chatter about a possible coup in the Middle East.”

Mike lifted his glass and shot his gin. This time, he didn’t choke or grimace. He slammed the empty glass down. “A coup that would stir up massive trouble on a global scale—exactly the kind of trouble you’re talking about right now.”

Madelyn sat back slightly. “Are you saying—”

“I’m saying that your financial backers are the exact warmongers I’ve been tracking for months,” Mike explained, his voice tight. “They make billions of dollars perpetuating wars and funding rebellions. They’ve been systematically using you for years to serve their own self-interests.”

Madelyn looked down at her hands, visibly hurt by the raw truth of it. “I’ve started to realize that, but I still have to—”

“Do the right thing,” Mike interrupted firmly. “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 little plan is simply not going to happen.”

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

“One lives so millions won’t die...” she murmured. “It’s the perfect, inverted creed to the one I’ve lived by for years—that one must die so many may live.”

Mike looked thoroughly puzzled. Madelyn merely held up her hand, shaking her head at him in a silent, defensive gesture that clearly meant *don’t ask*. She looked back across the table, reaching out to gently hold Mike’s hand.

“So, what do we do?” she asked softly.

“About what, or who?”

“About saving Sarraf,” Madelyn said, her grip tightening on his fingers. “About saving the world...” She paused, looking around the empty deck before shooting the rest of her whiskey. She slammed the empty crystal glass down onto the table and pushed her bangs back from her eyes. “I told Bill I was through, and I mean it. I am through.”

Mike raised his eyebrows, a slow look of respect dawning on his face. He ran a hand through his hair and reached for the bottle, pouring them both another shot. For a long, heavy interval, they both stared out at the sweeping mountain range in total silence.

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

Madelyn leaned in close across the table, a sudden, flirtatious smile lighting up her face as she let out a low laugh. "Are you going to arrest me?"

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

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

"I absolutely hate to talk shop at home," Madelyn said with a devious grin, setting her glass down. "But Ruiz... now that is a truly great story..."

CHAPTER TEN

CLA Headquarters

Langley, Virginia

Days Later

That story eventually echoed all the way to the stately, wood-paneled walls of the Director's office.

The Director, a sharp man in his sixties with a full head of neat gray hair, paced across the expensive office floor. He wore a crisp, dark blue suit with a stark white starched shirt and a tasteful red tie, a small American flag pin catching the light on his lapel. The walls behind him were lined with framed photographs of himself posing alongside various world dignitaries.

The Director walked toward a built-in, lighted glass wall where the shelves were stocked with high-end liquor. He passed the row of photographs, pausing for a brief beat to stare at the frames featuring himself alongside the late politicians Ruiz and Nkwatcha.

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

He shook his head in disapproval, stepped up to the crystal decanters, and poured two drinks. Walking back over to his massive mahogany desk, he handed one of the glasses to Bill Roth and sank heavily into his executive chair.

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

The Director set his glass down on the blotter, leaning forward with a cold, 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 specific operation are far too high, and honestly... I'm still not entirely sure if we have a rogue or a mole among us."

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

The Director paused, his brow furrowing as he turned the glass in his hand. "You don't think Ander—"

"No, no, no," Bill interrupted smoothly, waving a dismissive hand. "But give me some time, Director. Give me a little bit of 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, giving a slow, validating nod of approval. "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 the rest of his drink, setting the empty crystal down.

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

"No, I'm good," Bill replied, pushing himself up from the leather wingback chair. He extended his hand, shaking the Director's firmly before walking over to the heavy mahogany door. Pulling it open, he paused on the threshold and turned back to face 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 about a week on the ground to set things up, but I need to go say goodbye to Barbara tonight."

With a final nod, Bill stepped out, closing the heavy, soundproof door behind him.

Out in the sterile, brightly lit hallway of CIA Headquarters, Bill walked down the long corridor toward the exit, a cold, treacherous grin slowly spreading across his face.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Above the Atlantic Ocean Eight Days Later

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

High above the sparkling water of the Atlantic Ocean, a sleek private Learjet banked hard to the left, its white fuselage gleaming intensely in the afternoon sun. Inside the cabin, the layout was the epitome of high-end corporate luxury, featuring six plush leather captain's chairs and polished tables designed for work or leisure.

Mike sat comfortably, a satisfied smile playing on his lips as Madelyn settled into the chair directly across from him.

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

"It's a time-share," Madelyn explained, adjusting her posture. "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, international locations fast and efficiently... plus, yeah, isn't it cool?"

Mike chuckled. "Sold me."

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

"Look, Madelyn," Mike's tone shifted, turning serious as he leaned across the table. "Speaking of efficiency, we need to discuss the logistics of this mission. Roth has already been on the ground over there for a week. He just sent over 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 completely."

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

"Getting around the palace security is one problem," Mike said, tapping his fingers against the table. "But making sure we actually 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 imminent threat of a coup, they’ll both be utilizing high-level body doubles. We need to know without a single shred of a doubt that the man we are watching is the real Sarraf.”

“Fingerprints?”

“It’s the only sure thing, but unfortunately, there are absolutely none on file,” Mike said, shaking his head. “I’m going to have to lift a clean set from a glass at the state banquet. Once we officially identify Sarraf, we won’t let him out of our sights until that crown is securely on his head. Believe me, this whole thing could turn into betting on a high-stakes shell game.”

Madelyn leaned back against the leather. “But Sarraf is the firstborn. Doesn’t he automatically take the throne by birthright?”

“They have all kinds of ancient laws of succession designed to circumvent standard protocols,” Mike explained, his voice growing tight. “And once that crown is physically laid onto a head—any head—they are legally the king.”

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

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

The quiet of the cabin was suddenly interrupted. A tiny, flying insect buzzed directly past her face, circling the air before landing silently on the fabric of the cabin ceiling. Down on the carpeted floorboards, three small ants marched methodically along the edge of the paneling. One turned left, disappearing into the cockpit; the second traveled toward the rear storage bay; and the third began to slowly scale the leather of Madelyn’s chair.

Another flying insect dipped low, landing squarely on Madelyn’s exposed arm. She felt a sharp prick. Swatting at her arm, she missed the bug entirely, letting out a sharp grunt of deep disapproval.

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

“Damn it,” Madelyn hissed, rubbing her forearm. “They’re supposed to completely fumigate these private jets before every single flight. This entire thing is swarming with bugs.”

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

Madelyn held out her arm, showing him a fresh, slightly red pinprick mark on her skin. “Mosquitoes. One just bit me.”

Mike let out a genuine laugh. Reaching over, he picked up his tactical laptop, flipped the screen open, and began typing a rapid sequence into the terminal.

“Ah, mon chéri,” Mike teased in an exaggerated, playful French accent. “These are very special bugs.”

Mike spun the laptop chassis around, sliding the screen across the table toward her. The monitor displayed a complex, high-tech engineering schematic that detailed the exact layout of the jet—mapping the cockpit, the passenger cabin, and the lower cargo bays.

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

“Drones,” Mike confirmed smoothly. “Insect drones. Highly sophisticated surveillance tech. Check this out.”

Mike tapped another command on the keyboard, bringing up a crisp, real-time video feed on the screen. The monitor displayed a clear view inside the cockpit, capturing the two pilots talking as they navigated the aircraft. He typed another shortcut, and the camera angle instantly shifted to a wide-angle view of the cabin, showing Mike and Madelyn sitting opposite each other 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 continued to scratch at the small mark on her skin, her eyes narrowing with suspicion. “And the one that just bit me?”

Mike typed one final, encrypted sequence into the keyboard, then slid the laptop all the way into her hands. The digital display refreshed, revealing Madelyn’s official government profile picture, her heavily encrypted personal archives, and a complete, real-time breakdown of her DNA profile.

"It took your blood sample and put it directly into my computer," Mike explained, his voice tight. "But it could have just as easily given you an injection of some type."

He pointed down at a complex technical readout flashing on the laptop screen, which detailed exactly how the mechanical insect had released the collected fluid sample into its internal chamber for immediate, real-time analysis.

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

Madelyn studied the data on the monitor, looking thoroughly 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 down halfway. "You're going to be the one to release the remaining drones inside the banquet hall."

Madelyn let out a sudden, cynical laugh. "The banquet? Ha! That's a joke, Mike. There is absolutely no way I'm getting through the front doors of that venue—it is strictly men-only in that country."

A confident smirk spread across Mike's face. "Oh, trust me, I got you in. You'll see. And once you're safely inside, you can deploy the rest of the drones."

"And you don't think anyone will notice?" she challenged.

Right on cue, a tiny, flying insect drone buzzed directly past Madelyn's face, circling her head before landing squarely on her forearm. Up close, its translucent wings and segmented body looked completely, terrifyingly identical to a living organism. Madelyn stared down at the mechanical pest, a slow, dangerous smile finally breaking through her sharp features.

"They are fully computer-guided," Mike assured her, watching the drone. "And no, no one is going to notice another random fly or an ant. That entire country is full of them."

"Well," Madelyn murmured, her eyes flashing. "That certainly brings bugging the place to a whole new level."

Without warning, the private jet jolted violently, the sudden drop throwing them against their seats. The interior cabin lights flickered erratically before dying out completely, replaced instantly by the dim, amber glow of the emergency backup grid. The powerful engines whined down into a low, hollow rumble. Mike and Madelyn exchanged a sharp, anxious look.

The cockpit door frame swung open, and the pilot stuck his head out into the cabin, his brow furrowed. "That definitely wasn't turbulence, folks. We seem to be having some serious bugs with the core electrical systems."

Before they could answer, he disappeared back inside the flight deck, slamming the door shut.

Madelyn turned her head sharply, looking at Mike with deep questioning. "Bugs?"

Mike shrugged his shoulders defensively, his eyes darting to his equipment. "They're not mine."

The aircraft jolted a second time, dropping several hundred feet in a terrifying lurch. The frame of the Learjet groaned against the sudden shift in physics, and the emergency lights began to flicker violently.

The pilot burst completely out of the cockpit, his face entirely pale and his breathing shallow and visibly nervous. "We've completely lost the navigational computers," he shouted over the mechanical strain. "The main frame has totally overridden our manual controls. It's forcing the engines to hold at half power right now... and the display is telling us the entire system is going to shut down completely in twenty minutes. I have absolutely no idea what's going on."

He turned back toward the cockpit, reaching the threshold of the door before stopping to face them one last time. "Prepare for the worst."

"How far can we actually make it like this?" Mike demanded, his voice tight.

"I don't know!" the pilot yelled back. "Probably over open water, miles out from the coast, maybe over land. But there is a zero percent chance we're making it to an airport. We're slowly losing altitude... we're going down."

The door slammed shut behind him, leaving them alone in the shuddering cabin. The engines let out a low, agonizing moan against the strain as the structural frame rattled around them.

Mike looked across the small table at Madelyn, their eyes locking together in the dim, amber light. Unbuckling his harness, he slid across the cabin to take the seat directly beside her.

“There’s no way I’m dying before I tell you how much I care about you,” Mike said fiercely.

They reached out for each other’s hands, anchoring their fingers together as the jet continued its steady, blind descent through the sky.

“I’m ready for whatever comes next,” Mike murmured, looking deep into her eyes. “As long as we’re together...”

Suddenly, a crisp, electronic voice bled loudly through the laptop speakers. They both snapped their heads down, staring at the terminal screen. Bill Roth’s face filled the display, a cold, treacherous smile resting on his features.

“Well, it’s about time you two realized what’s truly important in life,” Bill said smoothly.

In an instant, the main cabin lights flashed back to full brilliance. The engines roared with a sudden, deafening surge of power, and the entire jet immediately smoothed out, leveling off effortlessly at cruise altitude. The cockpit door opened again, and the pilot stepped out, shrugging his shoulders in absolute disbelief before giving them a swift thumbs-up and returning to his station.

Madelyn and Mike remained frozen, staring down at Bill on the glowing monitor.

“Insect drones aren’t the only advanced technologies available to us,” Bill explained, his voice flat and unbothered. “I could have just as easily flown this jet into the palace wall, or straight into the bottom of the ocean. Remember, this mission will be completed exactly as it was assigned.”

Madelyn and Mike exchanged a heavy, silent look, the reality of the threat pressing down on them before they turned their focus back to the monitor.

“I’ll let you two get back to your focus now,” Bill added, his smile expanding. “Now that you’ve finally realized the important

things. I just wanted to provide a quick, friendly reminder of who's actually in charge of this symphony."

Bill delivered a mock, two-finger salute to the camera, and the laptop screen snapped completely black.

The two operatives sat in the quiet cabin, processing the lethal warning. Madelyn shifted closer to Mike, her heart hammering against her ribs as the adrenaline continued to course through her veins.

Madelyn, looking down at her hands, spoke softly, "I'm definitely feeling the full weight of this assignment now."

They looked at one another for a long moment, a brand-new, silent understanding cementing itself between them. Madelyn drew back just slightly, looking directly into Mike's eyes as a faint, resilient smile touched her lips.

"One of the major perks of flying on a private jet," she murmured, "is the absolute privacy we have to coordinate our next move."

Mike offered a brief smile in return, but they both turned their attention back to the encrypted mission files, their fingers flying across the keyboards as they began to rewrite the execution plan.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Royal Palace

Two Days Later

The hum of the jet engines gave way to the echoing rhythms of traditional Arabic music and the rich, heavy scent of burning oud.

The state banquet room was an expansive, towering domed hall, meticulously decorated from floor to ceiling to resemble a massive, regal Moroccan tent. Intricate, hand-woven Persian rugs overlaid the polished floors, flanked by lavish pillow lounges and silver platters of exotic delicacies.

To complete the theatrical display, several unfazed stunt camels stood quietly in artificial sandbeds beneath massive, potted palm trees, rhythmically chewing their cud as the fragrant smoke drifted through the air.

Suddenly, a troupe of dancers emerged from the arched entryways, moving in perfect unison. Their traditional *bedlah* attire sparkled intensely under the glittering chandeliers as they moved across the rugs. Their faces were wrapped tightly in protective, silk *buknuk* veils, revealing nothing to the audience but their sharp, dark eyes. The high-profile guests in attendance grew visibly more alert, their chatter dying down as the performance began.

Near the front of the hall, Bill Roth and Mike Anderson sat comfortably on a low, silk-covered lounge. Seated directly alongside them was Prince Sarraf, the absolute epitome of tall, dark, and handsome. He wore an elegant, gold-trimmed *bisht* adorned with the kingdom's official royal colors, his sharp, chiseled features and immaculate stature solidifying his undeniable royal status to everyone in the room.

Palace guards were stationed at every exit, the visible security grid around the perimeter exceptionally tight. Suddenly, several of the

dancers drifted over from the center of the room, fanning out to loosely surround the small group of men. At their flanks, heavy, muscular security personnel stood ready with their hands resting near their waistbands.

Prince Sarraf lifted a heavy golden goblet toward Bill and Mike, a hospitable smile breaking through his serious demeanor. "Welcome to my country," he said, his thick Middle Eastern accent cutting through the music. "I arranged this banquet specifically in your honor, so you can see both our old and our new customs. And perhaps, Mr. Anderson—"

"Please, Prince, call me Mike," Mike interrupted smoothly, offering a polite nod. "It's just Mike."

"Yes, of course," Sarraf smiled. "And perhaps, Mike, you will find a suitable partner here. Our women are truly wonderful; it is simply not good for a man to be alone."

The surrounding dignitaries laughed in unison at the remark. Several of the women began to dance closely around the low lounge, each pausing briefly to perform in front of the high-profile guests. One specific dancer separated herself from the main line, gliding forward to perform directly for Mike and Sarraf. As she moved to the rhythm, she locked her gaze directly onto Mike's face. Between the silk strands of her veil, her sparkling brown eyes were instantly, undeniably familiar.

It was Madelyn.

As she bowed low before them in a fluid, theatrical extension, her fingers moved with flawless tactical precision. Hidden by the sweep of her glittering costume, she cleanly released a tiny mechanical ant drone onto the rug. She transitioned effortlessly back into her choreography, rising to move down the line of guests.

Sarraf watched her retreat, his eyes wide. "Now she is exotic. Her eyes are, how do you say... they captivate me completely." The Prince slapped his forehead, knocked back a sharp shot of liquor, and threw his head back, laughing loudly.

He set the empty crystal shot glass down on the small table. Unnoticed by anyone at the lounge, the newly released ant drone navigated the intricate fibers of the Persian rug, climbed the table leg, and attached itself firmly to the inside hem of Sarraf's formal *thawb*.

"Now, I have to agree with you there, Prince Sarraf," Bill chimed in, leaning forward with a knowing grin. "She definitely has intense eyes."

Mike cut an icy, lethal look directly at Bill, his jaw tightening. Turning back to the royal host, Mike kept his voice level. "You know, Prince Sarraf, I bet there is a person right here in this very room who would make a spectacular partner."

Bill smiled right back at Mike, a cold, entirely unreadable look passing between the two operatives.

Bill and Mike finished their drinks, setting their empty glasses back down on the silver tray. Moving with practiced stealth, Mike smoothly palmed Sarraf's discarded shot glass, sliding the crystal directly into his inner jacket pocket to secure the prince's fingerprints.

"I am truly sorry that your colleague, Dr. Pugh, could not join us tonight," the Prince noted, gesturing broadly to the sprawling, masculine gathering filling the tent structure. "But it is our strict custom."

"Oh, she's here," Mike replied evenly. "If only in spirit."

"Don't worry about Dr. Pugh," Bill added, a dry chuckle escaping his throat. "Nothing gets past her... usually." Bill leaned in close to Mike, dropping his voice to a low, gravelly 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 let out a sharp laugh at his own joke, leaning back over toward Mike's side of the lounge. "By the way, you two are going to end up watching the wrong prince anyway."

Across the expansive room, Madelyn continued her performance, dancing seamlessly around the perimeter of the tent. She deftly deployed the remaining ant drones near Sarraf's security captain and his top political advisors, while several flying insect drones were released directly into the branches of the massive potted palms.

She drifted toward the opposite side of the hall, dancing before Prince Nasir. Except for the distinct styling of his clothing, his features were completely, terrifyingly identical to Sarraf's. Madelyn noticed that her every movement was being heavily scrutinized by Nasir's personal security detail. She danced past him and moved on,

refusing to risk releasing any surveillance drones within his immediate perimeter.

Sarraaf signaled a servant for more drinks, turning back 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 appropriately solemn. "We'll get together with you tomorrow evening to discuss the business logistics. Please, give the king my highest regards."

The dancers finally exited the hall through the rear arches, and the grand feast continued around them. A moment later, Mike felt his phone vibrate. He checked the screen, receiving a secure text notification from Gloria. It read: *Insects online / on the move.*

Bill leaned in close to Mike one last time, a smug expression on his face. "You'll be watching the wrong prince."

Mike rolled his eyes, dropping his jaw as he shook his head in absolute disbelief at the older man's persistence. Bill simply threw his hands up in defensive surrender.

"Just saying," Bill murmured, turning back to his drink.

The next morning, the opulence of the banquet hall was replaced by the modern Arabic architectural lines of Prince Sarraaf's private receiving room. Deep tapestries hung from the high walls, complementing the rich Persian rugs and heavy golden embellishments.

Sarraaf and Nasir were actively pacing the wide expanse of the floor, locked in a heated, echoing argument.

"You are my brother," Nasir bellowed, his face twisting with rage. "But I will absolutely not let you open our country to these foreigners and their Western ways!"

"Like providing a proper education for our women?" Sarraaf countered sharply, stopping in his tracks.

"Like allowing marriage to foreigners!" Nasir shouted back. "You dilute our sacred culture, and you cower to the demands of the United States."

Sarraf stopped his pacing entirely. He looked directly into Nasir's angry eyes for a long moment, then reached out, placing a calm, fraternal 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 exited the receiving room together.

Out in the grand corridor, Sarraf headed immediately down the hallway toward the medical wing. Nasir remained standing at the open threshold of the door frame, watching his brother's back retreat into the distance.

Nasir turned sharply, heading in the exact opposite direction down the corridor. "I will come," he called out coldly. "I must make an important phone call first."

The two brothers walked rapidly away from each other, splitting the palace wing.

Inside the King's private chambers, the atmosphere was vast, plush, and explicitly befitting a reigning monarch. The space had been outfitted with state-of-the-art medical equipment, functioning as a fully private, in-house critical care suite.

Sarraf sat tightly by the edge of the massive bedside, his fingers holding his father's frail hand. The King remained entirely unresponsive, his breathing rhythmic under the machines, though his eyes were open and alert. Near the monitor, a specialist doctor carefully adjusted the settings on the breathing ventilator.

"Father, I worry about my brother," Sarraf whispered into the quiet room, his head bowed. "He seeks to completely undo all you have done for our country. He seeks a world war. He is crazy, father."

The specialist doctor looked over at Sarraf from across the bed, his subtle expression tightening into a cold, distinctly disagreeable look at the prince's words.

Suddenly, the heavy chamber doors swung open with a dull thud. Nasir's body double entered the space, his eyes darting around the room, looking visibly distracted. Sarraf stood up immediately from the bedside to greet him.

The Nasir double raised a firm hand, gesturing sharply for the medical staff to leave the room. The specialist doctor adjusted the ventilator controls one final time, gathered his charts, and exited the chamber alongside the head nurse, leaving the heavy doors to click shut behind them.

Sarraf stepped forward.

"Are you alright, my brother?" Sarraf asked, his brow furrowing with genuine concern as he stepped away from the bedside. "You seem deeply disturbed."

"I did not receive the news I wished to hear," the Nasir double replied smoothly, his eyes darting around the medical equipment. "And it upsets me greatly to be near Father when he is like this."

On the mattress, the King stared directly at the Nasir double. Though his body was completely paralyzed, his alert eyes conveyed a deep, visceral discontent. Sarraf noticed his father's fixed, unblinking glare but remained silent.

The Nasir double sneered, gesturing toward the ornate ceiling. "Here Father lies, close to death, while you entertain infidels in his palace. It is an absolute disgrace. If I were king, I would expel every single foreigner from our borders, and I would completely destroy the infidels."

Sarraf's voice turned ice-cold. "You would start World War III."

"In Allah's name," the double countered without hesitation.

"Allah would never allow such horrific things as you talk about."

"Allah told me to do these things," the Nasir double insisted, his voice dropping to a fanatical whisper. "He speaks to me directly."

"Has he told you that you are completely crazy?" Sarraf challenged, stepping closer. "Besides, I am the rightful heir to the throne."

High above them in the cavernous airspace of the room, a tiny flying insect drone buzzed through the shadows. It dipped low, landing squarely on the back of the Nasir double's hand. The mechanical pest instantly deployed its automated prick mechanism, harvesting a clean biological sample before tearing back into the air.

The Nasir double swatted violently at his hand, scratching at the small prick on his skin as he glared at Sarraf with rising anger. "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.

Down on the floorboards, a small mechanical ant drone navigated the intricate patterns of the Persian rug, attempting to reach the hem of the Nasir double's long robe. But as the double turned sharply to pace the room, the heel of his shoe unknowingly crushed the miniature surveillance device directly into the floor.

In the secure bedroom of her palace suite, Madelyn sat frozen in front of her high-tech workstation. She watched as one of her small monitor screens suddenly dissolved into a wall of gray static. Fortunately, the adjacent displays continued to function, tracking the palace security layout via the remaining active drones in the network.

"Drone down," Madelyn muttered to herself, her fingers flying across the keyboard.

A separate terminal display refreshed, showing a flying insect drone hovering right outside her heavy bedroom door frame. She crossed the room instantly, swinging the door open. The tiny machine zipped inside, flying directly to the custom docking pad connected to her computer terminal, where it deposited its automated syringe core.

Madelyn carefully removed the biological sample from the drone chassis and loaded it into the analyzer. A moment later, the computer terminal let out a sharp, echoing electronic beep.

Madelyn looked up at the main display as the genetic sequencing data finalized. Her eyes widened. The DNA profile on

the screen did not match the official markers for the real Prince Nasir.

Adjusting her tactical headset, she hooked the radio system tightly over her ear and dialed Mike's frequency. "Mike, we have some serious problems developing here."

Back in the critical care chamber, Sarraf and the Nasir double continued their intense, low-voiced argument beside the dying monarch.

"Brother, you talk absolute nonsense—crazy talk," Sarraf said, shaking his head. "As king, I will do absolutely 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 directly into Sarraf's personal space, his demeanor suddenly shifting into a warm, compliant mask. He placed his hands affectionately on Sarraf's shoulders, leaning in to kiss his cheek in a traditional fraternal greeting.

"Brother, let us not fight," the double murmured, offering a warm, reassuring smile.

Suddenly, his thumb firmly pressed the hidden mechanism of a large ring on his finger directly into the side of Sarraf's neck. A highly potent, fast-acting pharmaceutical sedative surged straight into Sarraf's bloodstream.

Sarraf's eyes widened in absolute shock. He stared back into the smiling face of the man he thought was his flesh and blood as his vision violently blurred and his knees buckled.

"To successfully take the throne, you must be officially sworn in within one hour of the king's death," the Nasir double whispered maliciously into his ear, holding up his collapsing weight. "Our laws dictate an immediate passage of power. If you are missing when he passes... Nasir will legally become king."

"When I come back..." Sarraf slurred, his voice heavy and spacey as his brain fought the chemical.

His eyes rolled back into his head, and his body passed out completely, going totally limp in the double's arms.

"Who said you were ever coming back?" the double muttered.

From the bed, the paralyzed King watched the entire treasonous display unfold. His eyes darted frantically across the space in a state of absolute, helpless terror, his physical body remaining entirely motionless under the sheets.

The Nasir double reached out, pressing a hidden stone mechanism built directly into the wall's architecture. A secret structural door hidden behind a heavy hanging tapestry popped open with a soft click. Two heavily armed tactical operators stepped out from the darkness of the hidden corridor. Moving with practiced efficiency, they stripped the royal *bisht* from Sarraf's shoulders and dragged his limp body into the secret passage.

The Nasir double instantly put on Sarraf's royal clothing, adjusting the robes. A moment later, a second double—this one styled exactly like Nasir—stepped into the chamber from the main hallway.

The dying King's eyes, filled with absolute horror, focused directly on the man now posing as his firstborn son.

"Your son Nasir will become the king," the new Sarraf double said coldly, stepping over to the medical console. "He will completely rid this country of your Western plagues. He will rid the world of all infidels."

With a brutal flick of his wrist, the Sarraf double deactivated the core medical machinery. The ventilator went dead.

The King's eyes opened wide, darting frantically from side to side in a silent, paralyzed 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 foul play, and both impostors exited the King's chambers to announce the tragedy.

Deep within the subterranean levels of the royal palace, the secret chamber was a cavernous, windowless vault constructed of thick, ancient stone. The space was Spartan, sterile, and entirely hidden from the palace floor plans.

Prince Nasir stood across the room, staring down at his brother. Two rigid guards stood by Sarraf's side, holding him upright. Sarraf's head lolled, his body swaying heavily from the lingering effects of the intense drowsiness.

"I have absolutely no intention of harming you, my brother," Nasir said, his voice echoing off the cold stone. "I only want the throne."

Sarraf forced his eyes open, 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 officially crowned king. You will still be missing, completely unnoticed by your own guards and your precious 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 entirely unseen."

"My brother," Sarraf breathed heavily. "You are completely mad."

"And about to be king," Nasir replied coldly. Turning on his heel, he exited the secret chamber, leaving the heavy stone door to seal shut.

Back in Madelyn's suite, she and Mike stood side by side, their faces illuminated by the intense glow of the surveillance monitors as the palace erupted into chaos following the King's death.

"I'm completely losing track of who's who on these feeds," Madelyn admitted, her voice tight with frustration as she panned the cameras. "I can only see one Sarraf and one Nasir on the main levels at a time. I've completely lost the path of the impostor."

"I told you it was going to be a high-stakes shell game," Mike said, his voice laced with growing agitation. "We need some solid, definitive proof of who is actually Sarraf, and we need it soon."

Madelyn kept her eyes glued to the workstation, watching a screen that displayed the real-time surveillance grid inside Prince

Nasir's private chambers. On the feed, the Nasir double was actively complaining to a high-ranking security official about Sarraf's dangerous Western ways. The adjacent monitors tracked the heavily fortified palace throne room and the sprawling, marble-lined hallways leading directly to it. On the surface, everything appeared perfectly in order.

"I wish we could find a way to get back inside the King's bedchamber," Madelyn muttered, chewing her lip.

A sharp, demanding knock suddenly echoed at the door of their suite. Mike stepped forward and pulled it open. Nasir—posing seamlessly as his brother Sarraf—entered the parlor with his head bowed in mock grief. Madelyn stepped out of the bedroom, her eyes meeting Mike's in a silent exchange of warning.

"Forgive me, my friends," Nasir said smoothly, his voice heavy. "I do not like to see my father in his current condition."

"How is he doing?" Madelyn asked, her voice guarded.

"He is weak," Nasir sighed, shaking his head. "The specialist doctor has just adjusted his ventilator settings, but I worry greatly."

Mike took a step forward, his posture rigid. "Prince Sarraf, with the global stakes so incredibly high right now, and with Nasir's known capacity for trickery, we need to know for absolute certain that it is you who will be taking that throne. We need to stay directly by your side until you are officially crowned. We are here to protect you."

"Of course, my friends, I completely understand," Nasir replied, his expression radiating absolute confidence. "How can I help you achieve this peace of mind?"

"We need a rapid DNA test and a clean fingerprint scan," Madelyn stated flatly.

"Of course."

Madelyn disappeared into the adjoining bedroom, returning a moment later with a compact field diagnostic kit and her tactical laptop. She quickly drew a small blood sample from Nasir's finger

and executed a high-resolution fingerprint scan. Throughout the entire process, Nasir remained utterly calm and cooperative.

The data results instantly populated across her terminal screen. As anticipated, the genetic sequencing data matched both Sarraf and Nasir perfectly. However, the fingerprint analysis finalized a beat later—the markers matched the exact prints Mike had previously palmed from the shot glass at the banquet.

Mike let out a breath, a visible wave of relief washing over his face as a smile broke through his tension. Madelyn shrugged her shoulders at him, closing the diagnostic program.

"It looks like he's our prince," Madelyn confirmed.

"There," Nasir said, adjusting his royal robes with a satisfied nod. "We are all now entirely sure it is me. Even in this age of advanced technology, fingerprints are still the ultimate key to the truth."

"Prince Sarraf, I'm truly sorry for any doubts we had," Mike said, his tone turning apologetic. "You know our government fully backs your long-term plans for regional peace and structural change. The world leaders simply needed to be absolutely sure before the coronation."

"I understand completely, Mr. Anderson," Nasir said. He shifted his dark eyes directly onto Madelyn. "And we all know my brother would never tolerate peace, nor the world's different beliefs from his own. He openly calls you infidels. But, Mr. Anderson—"

"Please, Prince, call me Mike," Mike interrupted gently.

Nasir looked at him, slowly shaking his head in disapproval. "I am simply not used to your informal Western ways, Mr. Anderson. As I was saying, I am not like my brother. I will learn to adjust to the different ways and the various cultures of this world."

Madelyn and Mike exchanged a brief, uneasy look. Mike shook his head slightly, sensing a subtle shift in the man's demeanor.

Suddenly, the heavy suite doors burst open. The specialist doctor and several heavily armed palace security guards rushed into the room, their faces tight with panic.

"The King is dead," the doctor announced breathlessly.

Nasir spun around, his expression shifting into a mask of sudden shock. "But you just adjusted his breathing apparatus! What have you done?"

"You must come with us immediately," the security captain urged, gesturing toward the corridor. "We currently 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 visibly tightening as he looked thoroughly piqued and insulted by the request. Still, he maintained his rigid, royal composure.

"Dr. Pugh, it is time for me to be officially crowned," Nasir said, his voice hardening into steel. "You know our laws of succession. I must go right now. I am truly sorry that you still choose to doubt me, but you have the fingerprints. I must leave."

Nasir and his security detail pivoted sharply toward the exit. But as he reached the threshold, he paused, turning back to face Madelyn one last time.

"If it is any consolation to you, Dr. Pugh," Nasir added with a cold, knowing 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 into the hallway, Bill Roth rushed into the room, his sudden entrance causing the security guards to instantly stiffen and reach for their weapons. Bill immediately held his hands up at waist height, his palms facing out as he remained entirely cool, calm, and collected.

"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 right here in this room for just a couple of minutes, until the area is secure."

As he spoke, Bill's fingers moved with practiced stealth beneath his jacket, discreetly deploying a swarm of automated insect drones into the room. Caught up in the tension, not a single person noticed the tiny machines take flight.

"I was just notified that there are rogue men from your own security detail, Prince Sarraf, who are currently lurking in the shadows," Bill explained, stepping further into the parlor. "They are hiding in the corridors directly between here and the throne room. Their sole objective is to stop you from becoming king."

The palace security guards exchanged sharp, nervous glances, shifting their weight as they unconsciously adjusted their defensive positions around Nasir. Hidden by the commotion, the miniature drones zipped through the air, delivering targeted automated stings directly to the necks of the security guards and the specialist doctor. All of the men instinctively reached up, rubbing at their skin with a frown.

Mike cut a sharp, questioning look across the room toward Madelyn. Madelyn stared back at Bill, a cold, foreboding sense of dread settling deep in her stomach.

"I was sent up here to personally ask you to wait a few minutes while the main corridors are given a full 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 back. One by one, the security men and the doctor collapsed, their bodies sliding heavily onto the polished floor, completely unconscious from the potent sedative.

In a flash, Bill drew his tactical weapon from his shoulder holster, training the barrel directly on Nasir's chest.

"Don't move, Nasir," Bill commanded, his voice dead calm.

Mike's eyes widened in shock as he looked between the weapon and the prince. Bill didn't break his gaze, turning his cold, unyielding expression toward Madelyn.

"Do it, Madelyn," Bill ordered, his voice echoing in the quiet suite. "Complete the mission exactly as assigned. Take the shot."

"Bill, this is Sarraf, not Nasir!" Madelyn shouted, refusing to move. "We ran the full diagnostics. We have his fingerprints right here on the terminal! I'm not doing this, Bill."

"Finish the task, Madelyn," Bill growled, his jaw tightening as he kept his gun locked on the impostor. "Or I promise you, the agency

will completely and permanently dismantle your entire foundation by tomorrow morning."

"The agency has absolutely nothing to do with this execution plan," Madelyn countered, her voice ringing with absolute certainty. "You and your private network want Sarraf eliminated strictly to force a regional conflict. It is simply not going to happen, Bill."

Bill remained entirely unaware that Mike had stepped up silently behind him, raising his tactical firearm to train it directly at the older man's back. In the center of the room, Nasir stood perfectly still, maintaining absolute silence as he tracked the shift in power.

"Madelyn," Bill growled, his eyes narrowing as he kept his gun locked on the prince. "Finish the job... or I will."

"Agent Roth, lower your weapon," Mike commanded, his voice cold and steady.

Bill shifted his gaze slightly toward Mike over his shoulder, but he refused to drop his aim from Nasir's chest. Madelyn watched Bill, her eyes pleading with him to stop before it was too late. Yet, through it all, Nasir stayed remarkably calm.

"You're both actively disobeying a direct mandate," Bill said, his tone dropping. "You've tracked the wrong target, Mike. This man standing before you is Nasir." Bill looked back at Madelyn, his tone and demeanor suddenly shifting into a calm, soothing, almost 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, please, lower the weapon... right now," Mike pressed, his finger tightening on the trigger. "Bill, drop it."

Nasir remained a stone statue, his eyes tracking Bill, then looking over at Mike. Bill ignored the threat at his back, focusing his entire universe on Madelyn.

"Madelyn, you are completely misreading the field," Bill said softly. "This is precisely why I needed you to execute the target you believed was Sarraf." He watched her for a beat, letting the words sink in. "Darl'n, you have to trust my guidance right now—not what you see with your eyes, and certainly not what you feel in your heart."

Madelyn looked toward Mike, her eyes searching his face for answers.

"Hon, I know this breaks your standard protocol," Bill murmured, his voice gentle. "He's awake, but—"

"But it fits mine," Mike interrupted.

Mike pulled the trigger. Bill pulled his trigger simultaneously.

The double crack of the gunshots shattered the quiet of the suite, the deafening noise echoing off the walls. Nasir dropped immediately to the Persian rug, wounded but breathing. Bill collapsed heavily to the floor, a dark crimson stain rapidly expanding across the crisp canvas of his shirt.

Mike slowly lowered his firearm, crossing the floor with clinical precision to safely secure Bill's fallen weapon. Madelyn stood frozen in absolute shock, staring at Mike for a split second before rushing over to kneel by Bill's side.

Bill let out a faint, shuddering murmur, his fingers weakly reaching out to grasp Madelyn's hand. "That's my girl..." he choked out, 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 finally breaking.

Bill gasped against the mounting pain, using the last of his physical strength to guide Madelyn's hand toward the inside of his jacket. She reached into the blood-stained pocket, extracting his encrypted mobile terminal. Blinking across the main display screen was a single, flashing command word: *Transfer*.

With a trembling, weak finger, Bill reached up and tapped the button. Madelyn watched him, her face completely washed with sorrow. The terminal screen refreshed, reading: *Transfer in Progress*.

"Bill..." she whispered.

The digital layout updated instantly: *Transfer Complete — Fifty Million Dollars*.

A faint, peaceful smile broke across Bill's weathered face. Madelyn stared down at the screen, a single tear rolling down her cheek before she swiftly swept it away with the back of her gloved hand.

"Why?" she breathed.

"For you..." Bill whispered, his voice fading. "For Barbara... for me... for the timeline."

Mike knelt down squarely beside them, his eyes clinical as he observed the dying operative. "You set yourself up as the rogue target from the very beginning. You engineered this entire scenario so I would be forced to take the shot... because you knew Madelyn would never willingly execute a target again."

Bill rolled his head weakly toward Madelyn, his breathing growing shallow. "I wasn't a rogue operative, darl'n... In this agency, the full 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 weakly with his eyes toward Madelyn's active computer station across the room. Madelyn shifted her gaze to the monitor screen. The live, automated surveillance layout had refreshed, displaying the real Prince Sarraf and his two unconscious abductors trapped inside the hidden subterranean vault space.

"Extract Sarraf..." Bill wheezed, his knuckles whitening. "Nasir's tracking print... custom latex caps on his fingers... a complete fabrication to fool your scanner. Secure Sarraf."

Bill coughed violently, the light in his eyes starting to fade as he looked up into Madelyn's face one final time.

"Don't harbor any resentment toward Mike, Madelyn... he simply bypassed the physical degeneration. The tumor... this was my extraction protocol."

Bill let out a final, shuddering breath. With his remaining strength, he squeezed Madelyn and Mike's hands together, placing them directly on top of one another. He patted their gripped fingers, his own lifeblood transferring onto their skin. He offered one last, faint smile, and his head dropped back against the floor. Bill was dead.

On the floor nearby, the wounded Nasir looked down at the body, his expression deeply thoughtful.

Suddenly, the heavy suite doors burst open with a crash. Nasir's tactical security detail rushed into the parlor, their automatic weapons brandished and aimed at Mike and Madelyn. Nasir calmly lifted a single hand toward his guards. The men froze instantly, lowering their barrels.

"It is handled," Nasir commanded, his voice tight but steady as he pressured his wound. "Go, extract my brother Sarraf from the vault architecture immediately, and escort him directly to the throne room. Let us maintain absolute stability in this region."

Out in the grand corridor, Madelyn and Mike moved with urgent speed, falling into stride behind the rushing guard detail. They ran through the labyrinth of polished marble hallways before finally breaching the late King's private chambers.

A security official stepped up to the wall, pressing his palm against a hidden stone mechanism in the architecture. With a heavy mechanical click, the secret structural door popped open. Together, they all plunged into the darkness of the hidden passage.

Deep inside the subterranean secret chamber, the two abductors sat tightly zip-tied against the cold stone pillars, completely unconscious. Prince Sarraf pulled himself to his feet just as the arriving security personnel bowed low before him in reverence.

Sarraf stepped forward, bypassing his guards to warmly embrace Mike and Madelyn in a traditional greeting.

"Mike! My friend, you located my position," Sarraf said, his voice filled with relief. "Nasir... is he..."

"He's secured," Mike replied quickly, checking his watch. "We need to get you prepared for the coronation protocol immediately, Prince Sarraf—we're running out of time."

Turning on their heels, they exited the secret passage in unison, racing back toward the light of the throne room.

The heavy double doors of the inner palace loomed ahead, guarded by an elite security force. The high council, elegantly dressed in pristine ceremonial *thawbs*, stood waiting in a rigid line. Sarraf, Mike, and Madelyn approached the delegation, their footsteps echoing off the polished stone as they fell into stride together down the main corridor.

Suddenly, a contingent of armed security personnel stepped forward. Moving with firm, unquestionable authority, they blocked

the path, holding Mike and Madelyn back from advancing any further.

Sarraaf detached himself from the council, turning back to stand directly in front of the two operatives. "I am sorry, my friends," he said, his voice carrying the heavy weight of royal protocol. "You cannot enter the throne room. It is our strict law."

Before they could protest, Sarraf placed his hands firmly on Mike's shoulders, staring directly into his eyes for a long, quiet moment.

"You have done a great thing for peace," Sarraf said softly. "A great thing for the world. I shall see you again once I am king. Thank you, Mike."

With a deep sense of respect, Sarraf delivered a traditional, formal embrace, pressing a fraternal kiss onto Mike's cheeks. Turning on his heel, he aligned himself back with the high council as the heavy, ornate entry doors of the throne room swung open to receive them.

Inside, the throne room was a vast and breathtaking expanse. Every inch of the ornate architecture was decorated with ancient, priceless artifacts tracking the kingdom's centuries of history. Directly in the center of the hall sat a magnificent golden throne, resting beneath the vibrant colors of a massive, towering stained-glass dome.

"My king," the council leader announced, his voice echoing off the dome. "How may I serve you?"

Sarraaf looked out over his court, his features hardening. "Bring my brother, Nasir, before me."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Houston, Texas

Days Later

The echoing demands of the palace throne room faded, replaced thousands of miles away by the quiet luxury of the Roth estate.

Inside the spacious living room, surrounded by an eclectic, tasteful mix of high-end antiques that showcased decades of wealth, Barbara and Madelyn sat opposite each other on a plush velvet sofa, sharing a steaming pot of tea.

Madelyn reached out, wrapping her hand over Barbara's arm in a comfortingly tight, supportive grip. "Barbara, I am just so incredibly sorry," she murmured, her voice thick with emotion. "I've been so worried about you."

"Honey, don't be," Barbara replied, her voice remarkably 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 little gift from King Sarraf."

Barbara extended her hand over the tea tray, showing Madelyn an enormous, shimmering bejeweled ring that caught the afternoon light beautifully. She dropped her voice to a low, conspiratorial whisper. "It has a matching brooch and a bracelet, too. But really, honey, I'm fine. I just miss Bill."

Barbara shifted her gaze down to the floor, exhaling a slow, deep sigh before looking back up to take Madelyn's hand.

"I know this sounds completely awful," Barbara admitted quietly, "but I truly understand now why Bill wanted to be cremated. It really did save me the immense grief of a public funeral. Besides... who really were Bill's friends anyway?"

"Barbara, if you ever need anything," Madelyn pressed, gently patting her hand. A sudden, sharp spark of her old focus returned to her eyes. "You know, I could easily 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 smiled warmly, shaking her head. "I want to live in new places. When Bill went on his final confessional spree before he left, he told me a lot of things I had already suspected for a long time. I just want a brand-new life now—one with actual truth in it."

Madelyn dropped her head, nodding silently in agreement. "Me too."

"I found out that three percent of the profits from every single business venture Bill ever opened doors for has been accumulating in a blind trust for decades," Barbara added casually. "They call it his insurance policy. I am a very wealthy woman, Madelyn. But I truly appreciate your concern."

"At least there's a light in all this darkness," Madelyn said, leaning back against the cushions. "I still just 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, heavy expression. "I know you've been through so much, Madelyn. But there are some final things I need to share with you. Truths that Bill had to carry to his grave... but there is absolutely no way I can keep them hidden."

Madelyn sat bolt upright, bracing her posture rigidly against the frame of the sofa. "After everything we've just been through across the world, what could possibly shock me now?"

Barbara gracefully took a final sip of her tea, gently setting the delicate porcelain cup back onto its saucer with a soft click. She locked her eyes directly onto Madelyn's, squeezing her fingers with a tight, desperate pressure.

"Bill was your father."

Madelyn froze entirely, completely stunned as the words rippled through the quiet room. Her jaw dropped, her breath catching in her throat.

"Ah... ah, what?..." she stammered, completely blindsided. "I... I didn't see that one coming. All these years... why... why didn't anyone ever tell me?"

Madelyn ran completely out of words. Barbara squeezed her trembling hand even harder as they sat in an absolute, echoing silence. Madelyn's mind raced wildly, unable to focus on a single object in the room, her eyes wide but unable to even form tears.

"Honey," Barbara whispered, her expression turning somewhat frightened by the revelation she had left to give. "There's more."

Madelyn tracked her face, her chest heaving.

"Bill and your mother were having an affair," Barbara confessed, breaking down as she shifted her gaze away to catch a trailing tear with the tip of her finger. She turned back to Madelyn, reaching out with a trembling hand to gently push Madelyn's dark bangs back from her eyes. "Oh, it was much more than that, honey. They were deeply in love for years. Bill was actively going to leave me for your mother. You see, I wasn't able to have children of my own."

Barbara swallowed hard, wiping at her eyes as the raw history poured out. "Bill did lead your father—Mr. Pugh—down a highly 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 utterly distraught when he broke it off."

Barbara gently rubbed Madelyn's frozen shoulder. "That's why she ended her own life, Madelyn... oh honey, you know the story from there. I am so, so sorry to have to tell you all of this."

They dropped back into a heavy, suffocating silence. Madelyn sat perfectly still on the sofa, utterly emotionless as the entire architecture of her life shattered into pieces.

"Oh, Madelyn," Barbara wept softly, pulling her hand away. "I'm so sorry."

"My entire life has been a deception," Madelyn said, her voice dropping into a hollow, trembling whisper. "Everything. By everyone. I believed—"

"In yourself," Barbara interrupted gently. "And Bill knew that. Everyone was living their own lies, Madelyn. It's just how people in the agency live. Lies are the only real truth they have. He didn't do any of this to hurt you."

Madelyn let out a sharp, bitter laugh, the tears finally breaking past her defenses. She violently swept them away with the back of her gloved hand.

"Bill wanted you to pursue your dream," Barbara explained, her voice softening. "He set up that entire Middle East project specifically as a way to get you out of the network for good. That's why he did all those strange, convoluted things—to get you completely out of their reach." Barbara leaned in closer, wrapping her arms around the younger woman and drawing Madelyn into a tight, fiercely protective maternal hug. "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 up, pacing over to a heavy antique desk in the corner of the room. She opened a drawer, removed a sealed white envelope, and walked back over to hand it to Madelyn.

"This is from Bill."

Madelyn looked down at the paper. "What is it?"

"I don't know," Barbara said softly.

Madelyn slid her thumb under the seal, opening the envelope to pull out the neatly folded letter inside. As her eyes scanned the elegant handwriting, Bill's voice echoed clearly in her mind:

Madelyn, I'm sure by now Barbara has told you all she knows. I'm truly sorry for the secrecy—it is simply the nature of the game. Regardless, it was your mother's absolute wish that I never tell you the truth while I was still alive. I honored her wish to the very end.

Madelyn wiped her damp eyes with the back of her hand, forcing her focus back onto the text.

Give Mike a real chance, hon. He is a true gentleman, and you'll find that you both share the exact same dreams. I handpicked him for you a very long time ago. Go, live, and follow your heart. Love, Bill, your father.

A solitary tear slipped from Madelyn's eye, dropping squarely onto the ink of the final signature. The word *father* smeared instantly, the written letters blurring into a dark, illegible smudge on the page.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Maggie Valley, North Carolina

Months Later

The dark shadows of that loss eventually gave way to the warm, flickering glow of a winter hearth.

Inside the mountain house, Madelyn and Mike lay together on a thick wool blanket stretched out in front of the massive stone fireplace, sharing a bottle of red wine. A roaring fire crackled behind the hearth, flanked by dozens of burning candles that turned the great room into a deeply romantic sanctuary.

"What are you going to do now that you've officially quit the agency?" Madelyn asked, propping herself up on one elbow to look down at him with quiet curiosity.

Mike smiled, staring up at the ceiling. "Follow my real passion. Use my college degree to actually help children for a change."

Madelyn raised an eyebrow. "Doing what? Do you want to teach?"

Mike reached up, his fingers gently pushing her dark bangs back from her face before cupping her cheek in his palm. Madelyn tilted her head into his touch, a genuine smile breaking through her features. Mike let out a soft, low laugh.

"No, I'm actually a pediatric nurse practitioner," he revealed. "I just got a little sidetracked in life... I think you understand better than anyone how that happens."

Madelyn sat up slightly, her eyes widening. "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 our lives in the dark shadow of the agency, we completely forgot that our true passion is to save lives, not end them."

Madelyn cuddled close against his side, resting her head on his chest, completely 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 slow sip from his wine glass. "Over time, I transitioned into counterintelligence, which led to me working alongside the CIA on multiple deployments." He let out a brief, dry chuckle. "During my tours in the Middle East, I saw a lot of hurt children—kids who were damaged for life from the indiscriminate carnage of conflict. It really pulled at my heart. So, as soon as I left the Marines, I went right back to school."

"And how did you end up back in the CIA?" Madelyn asked.

"The exact same way you did," Mike admitted, shaking his head. "I didn't recognize the trap when I stepped right into it. I did some freelance intelligence work for them while I was still 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 brand-new job."

Madelyn sat up squarely on the blanket, her expression beaming with sudden infatuation. "I absolutely love this story! I had no idea, Mike."

Setting her wine glass down on the hardwood, she slid closer to him, gazing alluringly into his eyes. "You know, I actually happen to know exactly where you can find a job. But I have to warn you... it comes with a strict set of conditions. And a catch."

Mike rolled his eyes playfully, matching her smile. "Don't they all. And where exactly can I find this mystery job?"

"With me," Madelyn murmured, leaning in. "Come work with me at the foundation. But like I told you, it has a major catch."

"What's the catch?" Mike whispered.

"You."

Madelyn leaned down and kissed him. They wrapped their arms around each other, laying back together against the pillows as they kissed passionately against the backdrop of the glowing hearth.

Suddenly, Madelyn pulled away, sitting up straight to look directly down into Mike's eyes.

"Mike, will you marry me?"

Mike sat up instantly, entirely surprised by the sudden proposal. A broad, brilliant smile broke across his face. He reached out, pulled Madelyn in close, and kissed her deeply. When she drew back slightly, she was breathless.

"Was that a yes?" she teased.

Mike nodded fiercely, pulling her back down. They slowly laid back down together on the blanket. Behind them, a heavy log in the fireplace popped loudly, sending up a brilliant, dazzling spray of glowing embers into the chimney that looked exactly like miniature fireworks.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Chapel
Maggie Valley, North Carolina
Weeks Later

A flowing white bridal gown cascaded elegantly down the altar steps.

Weeks after the fireside proposal, Mike and Madelyn broke from their wedding kiss, standing hand-in-hand before the minister in the sun-drenched sanctuary. Madelyn looked stunning, the long lace train of her dress framing her perfectly. Opposite her, Mike stood exceptionally handsome in a tailored black tuxedo.

The assembled wedding guests erupted into joyful applause for the newlyweds. Mike and Madelyn turned, walking hand-in-hand down the center aisle toward the heavy oak doors at the back of the sanctuary. As they made their way past the front pews, they passed a row of familiar, smiling faces: Barbara, King Sarraf, Susan, Dr. Potonik, Leja, and little Larisa.

Larisa was beaming with pure, unadulterated joy. In her crisp white lace dress and radiant smile, she looked entirely angelic. Madelyn paused at the edge of the girl's seat. Reaching into her bridal bouquet, she gently pulled out a single fresh flower and wove it into Larisa's hair before pressing a soft kiss onto the little girl's cheek.

Madelyn and Mike continued out the front doors of the church, stepping into the crisp mountain air. Waiting for them at the curb was a rugged Land Rover, its panels shoe-polished with traditional newlywed slogans.

A chorus of cheers followed them down the stone steps as the wedding guests threw handfuls of rice. Mike and Madelyn slipped into the front seats, closed the heavy doors, and drove away from the chapel, the "Just Married" sign on the rear glass catching the sunlight as the vehicle slowly disappeared into the rolling Appalachian hills.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Desert Months Later

The crisp mountain air of North Carolina was gone, replaced by an oppressive, dry heat. A swirling cloud of white dust rose high into the afternoon sky, tracking a traveling Land Rover as it cut across a vast highway on the other side of the world.

On the shimmering, baking horizon, a lush oasis broke through the intense heat haze, centered around a massive, gleaming architectural structure. Madelyn sat behind the wheel, keeping her eyes fixed on the road as she drove a steady line through the sand.

Beside her, Mike looked up through the windshield frame. A military helicopter roared past them—flying low, fast, and kicking up a violent spray of sand—before touching down gently within the perimeter of the oasis. Madelyn steered the Land Rover up to the compound's massive security gates and brought the engine to a stop.

Prince Sarraf stepped out of the helicopter as Mike and Madelyn exited their vehicle. The three of them walked toward one another, meeting in the absolute center of the dusty clearing. Sarraf greeted them with open arms, a genuine, brilliant smile breaking across his features.

"Greetings, my friends," Sarraf said warmly. He stepped forward, wrapping them each in a traditional embrace and pressing a respectful kiss onto Mike and Madelyn's cheeks before turning his attention toward the main compound.

On his command, two stone-faced palace guards threw open the massive, ornate entry gates, exposing a gleaming, modern Arabic structure. It was a state-of-the-art children's hospital, sitting cleanly and peacefully amidst the vibrant, lush green flora of the desert oasis.

They walked together into the open, sun-drenched courtyard. Sarraf stopped, turning around to face Mike and Madelyn fully.

"My gift to you," Sarraf said, his voice thick with emotion. "And you are a gift to our children." He bowed his head toward them in a gesture of deep, profound gratitude. "May Allah bless you both."

Sarraf signaled to his security escort. A uniformed guard stepped forward immediately, carrying a thick parchment envelope. Sarraf locked eyes with the couple.

"Perpetuate your kindness to our children's children," Sarraf said softly. He gave a brief nod to his guard, who handed the heavy envelope to Madelyn. The paper was sealed tightly with the detailed, crimson wax insignia of the royal kingdom. "Some people thought my death was worth millions of dollars. How much more should my country reward you for saving my life?"

He offered a deeply respectful bow to Madelyn and Mike, and they both returned the gesture in unison. Sarraf looked down at the envelope in Madelyn's hands. "From my country... thank you, Dr. Pugh."

"Thank you, King Sarraf," Madelyn said.

Sarraf turned his gaze to Mike, stepping forward to place both of his hands firmly on the operative's shoulders. "And what can possibly be given to the man who single-handedly saved the world from a nuclear war? Mike, my friend, I have personally arranged a very special gift for you."

He took Mike's hand, locking it in a firm, powerful handshake. The gleaming royal insignia 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. Now, glittering chandeliers shone down on a grand, elevated stage inside a packed Washington, D.C. ballroom. Sarraf wore his immaculate, gold-trimmed royal *bisht*, while Mike stood tall beside him in a sharp, tailored black tuxedo. High above the floor, a sweeping view captured the massive, formal black-tie gala.

Sarraf smiled warmly at Mike, then stepped up to the microphone stand at the center of the podium.

"Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen," Sarraf's voice boomed over the speakers, silencing the ballroom. "Tonight, we honor and present Mike Anderson—" He looked back over his shoulder toward Mike, his smile widening. "—Mike, this year's Humanitarian Award. His incredible courage has maintained world peace and averted an unspeakable war."

Sarraf held an outstretched arm back toward Mike, anchoring the stage. "Because one man lives, so do millions."

The massive audience instantly erupted into a thunderous, deafening standing ovation.

Madelyn walked gracefully from the wings of the stage, joining the men in the center of the lights. Sarraf leaned in to kiss her cheek before stepping back to address the microphone one final time.

"Dr. Madelyn Pugh, the recipient of last year's Humanitarian Award, will now officially present this year's honor to her husband, Mike."

Sarraf stepped aside from the podium. Madelyn took the heavy, polished award from the stand and proudly presented it to Mike, her eyes shining. Across the ballroom, a sea of guests cheered, and hundreds of camera flashes popped continuously in the dark like a field of tiny stars.

Mike and Madelyn slid into a warm, desperate embrace, blocking out the noise of the crowd as they shared a deep, passionate kiss. As they held each other tight, Madelyn subtly reached down, taking Mike's hand and running it gently across her belly.

Mike's eyes widened in sudden, absolute shock. A massive, brilliant smile instantly broke across his face. Madelyn leaned up on her toes, whispering directly 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, her brown eyes bright as she smiled up at him. They pulled each other back into a fierce, protective hug, holding onto one another as if they were the only two people left in the world.

Sarraf turned back toward the center of the stage, stretching out his arms toward the couple to address the roaring crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Sarraf announced proudly. "The Humanitarians."

A final, sweeping view captured the entire stage as the audience continued their thunderous standing ovation. In the center of the blinding white lights, Mike and Madelyn stood locked in a final, passionate kiss.