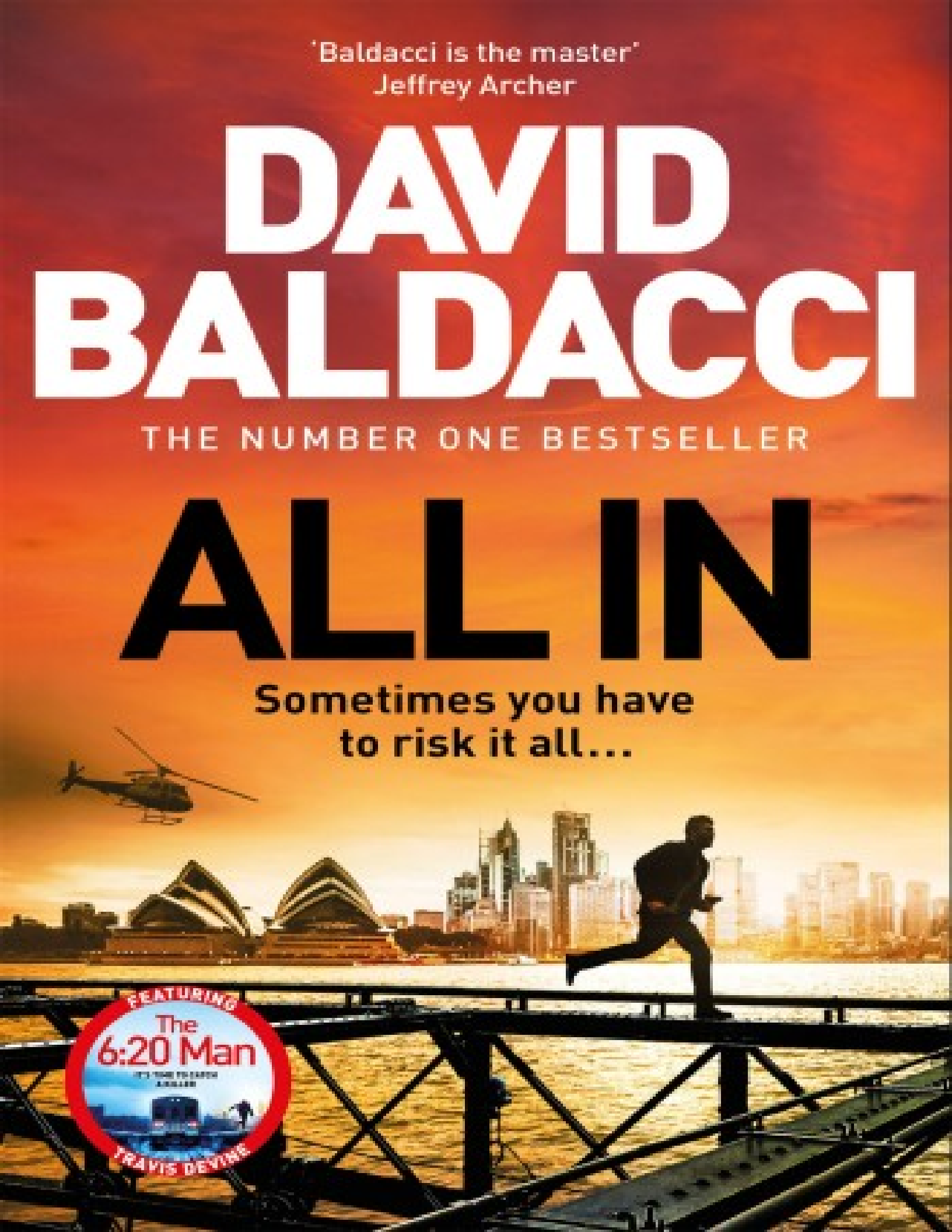
'Baldacci is the master'
Jeffrey Archer

DAVID BALDACCI

THE NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER

ALL IN

Sometimes you have to risk it all...



DAVID BALDACCI

ALL IN

MACMILLAN

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Acknowledgments

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To Aaron Priest, the man who led me out of the wilderness more than thirty years ago and on to the promised land. I owe you more than I can ever possibly repay. You are a true friend, a wise soul, and a man of the deepest principles. I cherish our friendship more than I can say. You are the man, Aaron. And I say that with the greatest respect.

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CHAPTER

1

THE WARMTH GAVE WAY TO a sudden chill as a beast of a storm rocketed straight at New York City after pounding neighboring Newark.

Delays had already popped up on the electronic displays at JFK and LaGuardia, much to the annoyance of a sea of already-weary air travelers.

This one was going to be something until it wasn't and the storm limped off into the Atlantic to die.

And yet with all that, the young woman's nimble steps on the pavement were unhurried, her slim briefcase swinging casually by her side. Surrounding her were some of the tallest buildings in the world, concrete, brick, and stone veneers, with steel skeletons and heavy bottoms sunk right into the New York City bedrock. Her obliviousness to the coming storm could have been these same buildings' collective fault. You really couldn't see much of the sky right now, at least the parts that were looking to unload on the Big Apple. As far as she was concerned, everything was right as rain, and without a chance of it.

Thus, later, when the first low rumble of thunder appeared, she looked up in surprise at the rapidly darkening sky.

The woman immediately looked around for a cab. There was always one around, right? Nope, not when you really needed it.

She defaulted to her ridesharing apps. However, after consulting two of them she found the closest driver was ten minutes away. She knew that was no sure thing because better offers for the gig operators might just crop up, especially with the heavens about to open.

The woman picked up her pace and turned left and then right, her shortest route to get to where she was going, but she was ultimately heading straight into the deepening darkness.

Even those few people relatively close by were shadowy presences in the dimness. It was all quite eerie, she decided. Yet she'd been in battle-torn countries as a war correspondent. This hardly compared to that.

Lightning bolts started to lick the sky. The accompanying sounds of thunder reminded her of the bombs dropped nearly on her head in distant places. She had never imagined herself dying in such circumstances, but looking back she realized it was a miracle she hadn't.

She hurried on and approached a low-rise brick building with a covered niche that would provide adequate relief from the rain until it passed. She was about to duck into it as the first few drops started to fall, when a man stepped out from the space and confronted her.

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CHAPTER

2

THE GENTLEMAN WAS IN HIS late forties and tall, with thick, wavy hair. He wore an expensive, dark suit that hung baggy on him, as though he'd recently lost weight. The accompanying Patek Philippe watch, manicured nails, and glistening rock on his ring finger marked him as a man of means and perhaps style. He also wore rimless specs that gave him a professorial air. His face was thin and his skin pale, almost translucent. His expression was calm and neutral. He held a stout black umbrella with a sharp, pointy end.

All in all, he looked a bit intimidating there in the stormy darkness. Despite that she smiled in recognition, her expression happy.

Then he started speaking. And as he did, the woman's smile faded. And her expression turned to disbelief, and next, to disappointment; finally, her features welled to anger. It was a transformation so complete that, on observing this, the suddenly alarmed man's final words tumbled out like the empty casings from a machine gun feed.

As the storm exploded like fireworks over both their heads, neither seemed to notice or, if they did, to care.

When he had finished speaking and fell silent, he looked at her with fear and expectation flitting over his wan features. For her part, she looked like a human Vesuvius about to pop right there in Manhattan.

Yet she ended up saying nothing. Trembling, she turned and marched down the street directly into the face of the approaching weather. She was now moving with the urgency of a person who needed to get away from something patently uncomfortable. Her expression had been full of anger, but now she only seemed deeply disappointed.

To complicate matters, the rain started to fall in sheets as the storm unloaded all that pent-up moisture. She lifted the briefcase to shield her

head and again scanned the street for a cab. Quickly soaked, as her flimsy briefcase failed to keep the wind-flung rain off her, she flitted down a side street, hoping for a better option in that direction. This turned out not to be a good decision, she soon realized. It was ill lighted, empty of any people, and the storefronts held no illumination; she couldn't even see the end of the street through the rainy haze.

Stupid, she thought, but there was no going back now.

Then, like the stalker in a Hitchcock flick, the man made the turn onto the street, his umbrella open and raised; seeing her, he increased his pace. She was fit, limber, and far younger than he was, but she wore heels and his legs were much longer than hers. That made it a fairer contest than it otherwise might have been.

"Theresa," he called out. "We need to talk it out. We can't leave it like this."

"Not interested in talking, Bill," she called over her shoulder. "You've said all that needs to be said and I have *no* words, okay? No words."

"But I need to explain in more detail," he shouted over the noise of the storm.

Now she turned her head to look at him, though she kept striding along. "Same answer." Then she flipped him off as the exclamation point.

"Just give me a chance," he pleaded. "Don't you owe me that?"

This salvo did what his previous words had failed to do.

Theresa stopped, whirled, and waited for him, her soaked, long brown hair hanging in her face, her mascara transformed into dark rivulets meandering crookedly over her high cheekbones. She looked like a painted high priestess of some sinister religion about to drop the curse of all curses onto the man determinedly heading her way.

As a bolt of lightning shot diagonally across the sky and nearly speared the faraway Empire State Building, they faced off on the empty street like gunslingers.

For the next thirty seconds they went verbally toe-to-toe. It was difficult to tell who was more of an aggressor as the battle ebbed and flowed like the storm above. Theresa finally barked, "Bill, you screwed me over like I have never been screwed over before. So go fuck yourself!"

"I'm sorry, but there was nothing I could do," said Bill. "And I want to make amends."

Something seemed to occur to her. “Wait a minute. How did you know where I was?”

His expression, along with his shoulders, drooped. “What?”

“In this great, big city, you just happen to run into me? You were following me, admit it, you bastard.” Then her expression changed to one of even greater shock. “Or else you knew where I was going.” Angry suspicion crept across her expression and held there. “Oh my God, please do not tell me—”

He cut in, “Look, I—” He stopped when the first man appeared from out of the gloom like a shadow given sudden, magical life by the storm’s energy.

He was dressed in dark clothes with a black ski mask covering his head and face.

“Oh, shit—” Bill closed his umbrella and pointed its sharp end threateningly at the man, but a decent weapon it clearly was not. “I’m warning you—”

He did not finish because three more men appeared, dressed identically to the first.

Bill now had the look of a man who knew his life was over. His shoulders tensed and he pulled his phone from his pocket.

Theresa took a step back as well, her chest heaving, her expression now holding only terror. “Bill? What’s happening? Who are—”

“Run, Theresa, run!” he cried out as he launched himself at the first man.

But his opponent pulled something from his pocket, pointed it at Bill’s chest, and fired. Bill started shaking uncontrollably, his arms and legs flopping around like a fish dying on land. His balance gone, he dropped to the ground, but kept gyrating as the residual electrical current from the Taser worked fiercely through him.

Theresa had turned to run. Only now she was staring down the muzzle of a .45 semiauto held by one of the masked men; a suppressor can was attached, and that was all one needed to know about his intent. No Taser for her; she was apparently going to receive a far more permanent outcome on the wet streets of inclement New York.

She screamed, and threw her briefcase at him, at the same instant that he fired. The round tore right through the briefcase, entered and then exited out her hand, and then was re-embedded in her shoulder in the often freaky

trajectory of bullet versus bone. She fell to the ground face down, writhing and screaming in pain. The shooter stood over her and calmly pumped another round into the center of her back. She gasped, relaxed, and then became completely still. He was about to fire a third time just to make sure when the sounds of a siren cut through the gloom.

“Move,” shouted another masked man. “Now.”

They gathered up the incapacitated Bill, including his phone, and carried him to a windowless van idling at the end of the street. A minute later all was quiet except for the fall of the rain and the occasional crack of thunder while the storm expended its energy. Ironically, the siren that had caused the men’s fast departure had passed on to another emergency, leaving this one all by its lonesome, for now.

Theresa lay on the pavement, her blood continuing to spread.

Because her heart was still beating.

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CHAPTER

3

TRAVIS DEVINE DID NOT CARE for hospitals of any kind. He had been in too many of them fighting for his life. Both while in the Army as a result of combat and also as a civilian, from another form of combat that crept into his life more often than was good for him.

My job.

Devine had graduated from West Point and completed the arduous U.S. Army Ranger training at Fort Benning in Georgia, earning his Ranger "tab." He had later been assigned to the Seventy-Fifth Ranger Regiment, meaning he was Ranger "scrolled" as well.

So I'm Ranger tabbed and scrolled, a high achievement by any measure, and it means jackshit right now.

Devine thought this because while he had always intended to make the Army his career, he had left after about a decade in uniform, during which he had fought in the sands of the Middle East, been wounded more than once, and attained the rank of captain.

And then his military world and dreams had collided with an unforgiving dilemma, and he had been forced to leave the profession he loved.

Devine had then chosen to earn his MBA and go to work on Wall Street. He had not done so to reap riches one day. He had done it as penance for the way his Army career had ended. He was not blameless. He had guilt. He required punishment. Wall Street had been it. And it was a good decision because he had hated it.

And that was where things stood while he was working at a firm called Cowl and Comely in New York City. That was when Devine had become a suspect in the murder of a woman he had dated at the firm.

As Devine was embroiled in that, a retired two-star general named Emerson Campbell had arrived on the scene. And he knew the truth about the unseemly end of Devine's Army career. Campbell had given Devine a choice: work for him or go to Leavenworth Prison.

Some choice. But maybe I'll be back in uniform one day, Devine thought.

The beeps, hums, and whines of the various machines hooked up to the woman did nothing to make him feel better, but he was well aware that his discomfort paled in comparison to that of the unconscious woman. Her throat was pierced with an intubation tube, and med ports and IV lines were draped over her like a funeral shroud as she fought to stay alive. The grim vitals Devine was looking at on the monitor showed that unfortunately the woman was slowly losing that battle.

Next to Devine stood his boss, Emerson Campbell. The man ran the Office of Special Projects, or OSP, a small subagency within the gargantuan platform that was the Department of Homeland Security. Its core mission was to protect the national security of the United States. And that mission had taken Devine around the world. Because it was always best, the thinking went, particularly after the horrors of 9/11, to stop the bad guys before they reached American soil.

Sometimes Devine had found himself at loggerheads with other government security agencies, basically all the alphabet ones, when missions by each overlapped and quite often devolved into jurisdictional pissing contests. Devine didn't know much about this mission yet, but he could see such a quagmire cropping up. If it did, his action was simple: Keep going until someone with undisputed authority over Devine told him to stop.

Campbell, a gruff, tough vet built like a quartet of telephone poles welded together, had led men into battle and seen more than a few die. He now gazed down at the young, badly injured woman with deep empathy. The man had daughters older than her.

Two armed sentries were posted just outside the door to make sure that the men who had tried their best to murder the woman did not get a chance to complete the job.

"They don't think she'll make it," Campbell said quietly. "She was unconscious when they brought her in. The docs put her into a medically induced coma to give her a fighting chance of surviving. It's a miracle she's

even still alive. Nearly bled out before help got there. Apparently, the bullet to her back hit a metal clasp or button on her dress and then collided with a bone, and that diverted the round just enough to where it missed her heart. But even with that, and while they stopped the internal hemorrhaging, it might be too late. But whoever did this made a mistake by not making sure she was dead. That shows they're fallible."

"Fallible, but as yet unknown," said Devine.

"It's our job to make them known. And then hold them accountable."

"What do we know about her?" asked Devine.

"Theresa Lee, aged thirty-one. Investigative journalist, the last four years with a consortium of independent journalists arrayed around the globe. She's based here in New York, but travels extensively for her stories. Been doing this work since she graduated from Northwestern. Hit the ground running once she got her degree and never looked back. Covered lots of the big events of the day—wars, human and drug trafficking, political and corporate corruption. She was actually here in New York on 9/11. Just a little kid on vacation with her family from Wisconsin. Apparently, that's when she decided to become a journalist. You know, finding the truth and holding people accountable."

Devine already had every incentive to find who had done this. That incentive just got a little boost with that detail of the woman's backstory.

"Not a bad way to live your life," he said, thinking that perhaps he and Theresa Lee had that in common. And Devine felt another measure of solidarity with the critically injured woman.

He and his family had seen the smoke rising from Manhattan that day all the way from their home in Connecticut. The whole world had seen it, one way or another. If that had driven the little girl to grow up and subsequently risk her life to expose the truth, well, she was his kind of heroine for sure.

"I assume her family's been notified?"

"They have. Her parents still live in Wisconsin, but they were out of the country on a trip. They're on their way here."

"And our specific interest?" asked Devine.

As a nurse came in to check on Lee the men moved off and huddled in a corner of the private room.

Campbell said in a confidential voice, "CCTV caught some of what happened. Grainy because of the rain and the quality of the feed. But this

thing was clearly planned and executed. Strike team of four, with Lee apparently collateral damage. We believe the actual target was the man she was meeting with, William C. Walker Jr. They tased and took him."

"No witnesses?"

"The block they were on is in the midst of redevelopment and all the businesses shuttered. No one was on-site at the time. And the weather didn't help. She and Walker were apparently the only two there other than their attackers."

"What do we know about Walker?"

"He has ties by marriage to an enormously wealthy family in Australia. But we're involved because Walker was a top analyst at Five Eyes. That puts us squarely in the playing field because there is nothing that Five Eyes does that is *not* connected to our national security."

"Right."

Devine knew that Five Eyes was the fanciful name given to the Anglosphere alliance for intelligence collection and integration among the U.S. the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. It was mostly unknown to the public and it kept that blissfully unaware public far safer than they otherwise would be.

"You said *was* a top analyst?"

"He was part of a Five Eyes joint task force operating out of Australia for the last two decades. But he recently left to take a job with a private company engaged in the field of intelligence."

"Is he Australian?" said Devine.

"No, American. He moved to Australia after he got married and transitioned to the task force."

"If he was kidnapped, how come the FBI's not involved?"

"They are. But if this thing has international components that strike at homeland security? Well, that's our name and wheelhouse, Devine. If we don't get called up for that, what the hell *do* we get called up for?"

"Why were he and Lee meeting?"

"The CCTV footage we've spliced together from various cameras shows not an arranged meeting but what appears to be Lee suddenly running into Walker. From her reaction on the video she was initially pleased to see him, but then things changed after he spoke for a few minutes. She then walked off. He followed her, they argued, and then the strike team did their thing."

“No audio captured?”

“No. We were lucky to get what we did. I’ll send you the footage.”

“Any idea why anyone would want to snatch Walker?”

“Walker has vast institutional knowledge of Five Eyes and all intel collected there right up until he left to join the private outfit here in New York. A file will be sent to you so you can come up to speed on what we know so far.”

Devine glanced over at Lee. “Any chance she’ll be able to tell us anything?”

“From what I’ve been told it would take a miracle.”

“Well, miracles sometimes do happen.”

“But we can’t count on that.”

“You have her place-of-work details in the file I’m being sent?”

“Of course. I say that Walker was the presumed target, but we can take nothing for granted right now. The strike team was masked,” he added with a significant look at Devine.

“Meaning they didn’t have to shoot her because she couldn’t ID them. Just tase her like they did Walker.”

“Which might mean she’s not just collateral damage.” Campbell paused. “You have your work cut out for you.”

“I’ve never had an occasion working for you when it was otherwise,” replied Devine.

Campbell stepped outside the room to make a call, while Devine continued to look down at Theresa Lee, who might not reach the age of thirty-two unless it were days or even hours away. Nothing about this was fair. All he could do was try to make it a little less unfair.

The whines, hums, and beeps of machines that were likely foretelling the fast-approaching demise of a young woman who should have had at least fifty more years of life ahead of her followed him out of the room and down the hall. Each sound was like a funeral dirge to him.

This woman had risked her life to see the truth come out over the years. That alone deserved his respect. The fact that someone shot an unarmed woman with the intent to kill her?

Devine exited the building and went to work.

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CHAPTER

4

THE HOTEL ROOM WAS CHILLY, cramped, in a not-so-nice part of town, and with few amenities. Which was par for the course on a government per diem in an expensive city, even with the Non-Standard Area bump factored in.

Devine sat on his bed with his old, battered government-issued laptop in front of him. Having read every page of his briefing twice, Devine had become as familiar with Walker and Lee as one could with only digital data as his guide.

The real investigation would come from old-fashioned legwork. Asking questions, Devine seeing things for himself, dissecting the worlds of Bill Walker and Theresa Lee, and then exploring the overlap between those two worlds that must clearly exist.

He'd gone through the CCTV footage first at normal speed, then half speed, and finally frame by frame, like game film, looking for anything that might give him a clue. It actually raised more questions than it answered.

Devine rested his head against the bunched-up pillows and thought things through. Walker had been stationed as an American liaison and joint team analyst at the Australian HQ for Five Eyes, which was located in the capital city of Canberra. Walker had traveled widely with his job, and he had frequently "jumped the ditch" to Wellington, New Zealand, where that country's Five Eyes facility was located.

Then several months ago he had left his position with the American government and joined a private outfit based in Brussels, but which also maintained an office in New York.

After all those years, why jump to a different continent and time zone?

The file had also informed Devine that Walker was in the midst of a divorce.

New job and jettisoning a marriage at the same time? Most people would be overwhelmed by just one of those major life changes.

And then there was the matter of the family Walker had chosen to leave behind. His wife, Charlotte Woolwine, was the only child of billionaire Carlton Woolwine, a widower and second only to Rupert Murdoch in Australia in terms of influence. Although Devine had learned that the Woolwines had recently leapfrogged the Murdoch clan in terms of sheer wealth. Her mother, Martha Woolwine, had died more than two years ago. Interestingly, Martha Woolwine had died by homicide, a crime that had never been solved.

Who kills billionaires and gets away with it?

Devine's naturally suspicious mind probed whether there might be a connection between Walker's abduction and the woman's unsolved murder. But the timing and background of both events seemed to make that possibility remote.

Charlotte Woolwine had married Walker in her early twenties and had their three children in fairly rapid succession. Their son was in college in California, while the two younger daughters were at a private academy in Melbourne. Charlotte Woolwine resided mostly in Sydney in what Devine was sure were luxurious quarters.

For the present they couldn't rule out that Walker had been kidnapped because of the Woolwines' financial position, but something in Devine's gut didn't think that was it. And there had been no demands for money or any other communications from his captors.

Theresa Lee worked at the New York office of The Focus Is Liberty, an international news reporting service that specialized in investigative journalism. While it looked like she was not a target and had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time, Devine would have to find definitive proof either way.

Early the next morning, after a workout in the hotel gym and an hour-long jog down empty and slickened streets when the city was just beginning to awake for another busy day, Devine showered, changed, and grabbed some breakfast at a diner next to his hotel.

After chowing down, he took a Lyft over to the New York office of The Focus Is Liberty. It was located in Harlem on a quiet residential street where the real estate prices had not yet gone into the stratosphere but were

merely outrageously expensive. The narrow building was nondescript—and maybe that was the intent, he thought.

A brass plaque on the wall next to the door read simply TFIL.

The door was locked. He hit a button and a buzzer sounded. A voice came on; he produced his credentials to the overhead camera and told of his appointment with the director. The door clicked open to reveal a small foyer, with one desk that had been wedged into the space along with a yellowing, stalky plant in a cracked pot.

The twenty-something slender woman at the desk rose and extended a hand in greeting.

“Agent Devine, I’m Helen Clark. I’ll take you back to meet with Ms. Kendall. She’s the ED here.”

He shook the offered hand. “Thank you.”

As they walked down a narrow, carpeted hall Devine noted the newspapers framed on the walls. They represented one big global story after another, a number of which he had read about.

He pointed to the framed stories and said, “You folks really get around.”

“Full disclosure, I’ve only been here a year. I graduated from Brown and part of my job is manning the front desk, but I’ve been doing research on some of the stories we’re currently working on.”

“You have to start somewhere. Did you know Ms. Lee?”

The woman stumbled, almost bumping into the wall. She glanced up at the tall, broad shouldered former soldier who gazed keenly at her. “We were . . . friends. *Are* good friends,” she corrected, holding her head up and squaring her shoulders.

“Then I may want to talk to you after I speak with Ms. Kendall.”

“Whatever I can do to help, I will.”

“Thank you, Ms. Clark.”

They headed on.

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CHAPTER

5

LYNN KENDALL WAS PETITE, IN her fifties, with a bulldog expression and a no-nonsense manner to match, which Devine figured one needed to run a place like this. She motioned Devine to sit across from her desk before plopping back in her ergonomic chair that also had a thick foam seat cushion to protect the tortured backsides of the sedentary inclined, which included most people these days. But not Devine. While on a case he was usually past ten thousand steps by lunchtime.

The space was cluttered but maintained a sense of organization in its careful stacks and piles. Two identical computer screens were set on Kendall's desk, like rectangular eyeballs keeping vigilant watch.

To Devine, Kendall seemed like a woman in a hurry who had just hit an unexpected wall and didn't know quite what to do about it.

"I've heard from the hospital." She looked out the window and shook her head. "I guess the song's right—only the good die young."

"She's not dead yet," Devine pointed out.

Kendall turned back and drummed her fingers on her desk. "What do you need?"

"Any stories she was working on that might have led to this sort of attack?"

"I thought Bill Walker was the target."

"We can't assume that."

Kendall sat up and started tapping on the computer. A few moments later she shook her head. "Nothing that jumps out. She had finished an assignment that took her to the Middle East. But that story already ran and it wasn't that controversial."

He took out his phone and showed her part of the CCTV footage.

“You can see that their meeting doesn’t look like a coincidence, nor did it end as a friendly conversation. I take it you know Walker?”

“He’s been here several times to see Theresa.”

“And the nature of their relationship?”

“He saved her life.”

Devine wondered why that detail had not made its way into his brief. “How?”

“Theresa is a dedicated and experienced journalist. Intense, a risk-taker, idealistic, disciplined. Which made her perfect for this field.”

“Do I sense a *but* coming?” said Devine.

“But in her enthusiasm she rushed things sometimes. And on occasion she relied on people she shouldn’t have.”

“And Walker saving her life?” prompted Devine. He had a lot of ground to cover and time was never his friend.

“She had a source in Somalia on human trafficking. He got her in to see some people. Only she nearly ended up being trafficked herself. That’s what Bill saved her from.”

“How did that come about?”

“He’s apparently connected in the intel field somehow, which I’m sure you know and is the reason you’re working to find out what happened to him. He picked up some chatter. He drilled down to where he identified Theresa as a target. His contacts alerted the local authorities, who prevented a truly horrible scenario from happening to her.”

“When did this take place?”

“Over six months ago, I think. They became friends after that.”

“The CCTV footage does not show two people who are friendly.”

“Well, situations change, Agent Devine.”

“Do you know what *did* change?”

“No, only that Theresa could be mercurial.” She paused. “I’m just so worried about her.”

Devine asked her some additional questions, didn’t get much that was helpful in return, and ended by passing her a card. “Anything occurs to you, please contact me.”

She glanced at the card. “Do you think Bill is dead?”

“Doesn’t really matter what I think.” He rose. “I’ll make the rounds here, ask questions. Then swing back to you before I leave.”

“Just do all you can to find out what happened to Theresa.”

“So any hot stories cooking here?”

“Always. You see, some people just can’t help trying to screw other people.”

He left and walked back to the foyer to meet with Helen Clark.

He started off the conversation with a few general questions. Over time Devine had gotten better at conducting these sorts of interviews. You had to read the people being questioned and structure your queries accordingly.

And as he started asking questions, Devine swiftly concluded that Helen Clark was a hot mess.

“I really can’t believe this has happened,” she said, her voice breaking. “She was my mentor. I was learning so much. She was making a difference in the world with her reporting. And now . . . this?”

She put a hand over her eyes and quietly wept.

Devine spotted a box of tissues on her desk, snagged a couple, and handed them to her. She thanked him with a look and wiped her eyes and face. Assuming a firmer expression, she said, “What do you need to know?”

“When she was attacked she was having a confrontation with Bill Walker. Did you know him well?”

“No, I only knew him because he came here to visit Theresa on occasion.”

“Do you know what about?”

“Not really. It might have been work related. I know they went to dinner and lunch a few times.”

“Maybe he was a source for her?” said Devine, who was thinking if Walker was, the man had committed a serious breach of national security.

“I . . . I don’t have any knowledge of that,” she replied, looking anxious.

“Your impression of him?” asked Devine as he tapped in notes on his phone.

“He seemed like a nice guy. Calm, smart, friendly.”

“Did you know he’s married?”

“Yes, but Theresa told me recently that he was getting divorced.”

“She told you that?” he said sharply.

“Yes.” She paused and caught his meaning. “I don’t think Theresa was looking to catch him on the rebound or anything. He was quite a bit older than she was,” she added awkwardly.

“Sometimes that doesn’t matter with people who save other people.”

“Granted, but why is DHS so interested in all this?” she asked.

“Walker was important to the U.S. government. He has valuable institutional knowledge. Therefore, his abduction is important to the interests of national security.”

“That speech sounds prepared,” she retorted.

“But it’s also true,” he countered.

“I . . . I was going to visit Theresa today.” Clark paused. “She’s not going to make it, is she?” The woman looked like she might start crying again.

Devine leaned forward, and when he spoke his tone held frankness and warmth. “Speaking from personal experience, someone can be near death and still make it back. And even if they aren’t conscious, a part of them may still be able to hear things. So encourage her, tell her that people care about her.”

“Wait, did you—”

He handed her his card. “Anything else occurs to you, please contact me. Thanks.”

He talked to some other of Lee’s colleagues, before he walked back to Kendall’s office and asked to see Lee’s office.

“Not without a warrant, I’m afraid,” Kendall told him. “There are many confidential sources in there *and* on her computer, so I’ve had it locked up. By the way, NYPD has already been by and asked the same thing. They’re currently seeking a warrant, which we will probably end up fighting in court. I’m sure your folks will soon join that queue.”

“But they may need that information to help find who tried to kill her. Certainly you want that result?”

“I want many things in life, Agent Devine. But over the years I’ve realized that you never get everything you want.”

“Well, let’s hope this doesn’t turn out to be one of those times,” replied Devine.

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CHAPTER

6

ON FOOT DEVINE FOLLOWED THE path of Theresa Lee as outlined on the CCTV footage until he came to the building where Walker had stepped out to confront her. He stared at the brick building and then walked under the covered part from where Walker had emerged.

The man had somehow learned that Lee had left her office on the evening she was shot and was heading directly to a meeting with someone in another part of the city. No one at Lee's office knew who that was, or where the meeting was to take place or what the meeting was about. This path must have been on the route to her ultimate destination. So if Walker had been waiting for her, he would have had to have known, one, she had a meeting at a certain time; two, that she would walk to said meeting; and three, the route she would take to the meeting.

In order to do that, Walker would have had to have a great deal of intel on her, because Devine had also concluded that Walker had planned the encounter. And if he had done that, the man had to have a reason, a good one.

His reasoning was bolstered by the fact that the building he was looking at was closed and under renovation. Plywood boards covered the front entrance.

So he didn't come out of there and simply bump into the woman.

He continued on to where the attack had taken place. The NYPD's presence was still all over the area as a crime scene unit did their forensic harvesting. Two burly cops stood guard on the outside of the taped-off zone like two oaks providing shade. Devine noted that there were small cones set up, designating where evidence had been discovered; from their number the forensic trace haul so far was scant. On the footage Devine had seen that the

shooter had not bothered to collect his shell casings, which told Devine that he didn't care if the cops found them or not.

A gun to perform a ballistics match on them will never be found. Or so they hope. And given the lapse of time, they're probably right.

The van they had put Walker into was seen only in profile on the CCTV footage. No license plate or other helpful details had been captured on any other source. Since there were about a million white vans in the metro area, that was a dead end.

He walked over to one of the cops, flashed his creds, and asked to speak to the supervisor on-site. He signed the scene log, and was given stretch booties and nitrile gloves and some other protective gear to put on. Thus outfitted, he was then directed to a chubby man in his forties. He was dressed in a suit and was also wearing protective shields over it. The man had an air of professional detachment, after no doubt having done this forensic song and dance countless times. He did not look the better for the experience.

Devine introduced himself and the man said, "Detective Jake Pouncey, NYPD. What's your interest?" The man spoke with a bluntness that Devine could actually appreciate. Pouncey rubbed his gloved hands along the sides of his legs like he was trying to rub the crime scene right off his person.

Devine said just enough to appease Pouncey, who nodded. "They didn't have to shoot the woman. They could have tased her." He shot Devine a look, his arched eyebrows adding emphasis to the query he was about to make. "You have any reason why she might have been targeted, too?"

"Not yet," Devine said truthfully. "I've been by her place of work. I was told you guys are seeking a warrant to get into her electronics and office. I assume the feds are doing the same. Wonder who'll get there first?"

Pouncey looked put out and said, "Even if we do, you guys will snatch it away. And journalists are the worst. Never want to tell you a damn thing, but they'll move heaven and earth to get the dirt on everybody else."

"What do you have on Walker so far?"

"Guy reeks of national security involvement." He glanced at Devine. "Anything you can add?"

"Not without approval a few levels above my pay grade."

Pouncey appeared to deflate in front of him. "Well, if that changes?"

"Mind if I take some pictures?"

“Knock yourself out. Just watch where you’re stepping.” He shook his head again. “Didn’t have to shoot her. So it makes me wonder why they did.”

He cast Devine another hopeful look, but Devine was purposefully focused on taking his pics.

As he took his photos Devine noted that the street looked like a Hollywood backlot, all façade with nothing behind it. This case was not going to be resolved from this patch of asphalt, that was for certain.

When Devine was done he thanked Pouncey, gave him his card, got one of the detective’s in return, and asked for a favor. The detective agreed, in return for a professional-courtesy heads-up on what Devine found. After that Devine headed to his new point of inquiry—the secret world of Bill Walker, with his task of making it a bit less unknown.

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CHAPTER

7

THE APARTMENT BUILDING WAS IN ritzy Brooklyn, and looked relatively new to Devine. The upscale neighborhood, with glammy shopping and restaurants you could walk to, was not cheap, he reckoned, not that anything in Brooklyn or the entire New York area was. On his puny government paycheck Devine couldn't have even afforded a closet here. But then again Walker was married to a billionaire's daughter. He probably could have purchased the whole building in cash just with some of his prenup dollars.

The favor he'd asked Detective Pouncey was access to Walker's apartment, of which the NYPD now had custody. Pouncey had clearly made the call, since Devine was admitted past a still-suspicious security team. He then walked into the home of the abducted man.

It was two bedrooms, two and a half baths, and floor-to-ceiling windows with expansive views of the famous bridge; in addition, there was an ocean of gleaming parquet floors, white, empty walls, and a smallish kitchen as an afterthought.

The cop in charge told Devine that a joint NYPD and FBI forensics unit had already scrubbed the place once, but each was coming to do a follow-up later that day to vacuum up whatever else they might have missed.

"Couldn't really tell that anyone lived here," he noted to Devine. "Rack of Armani suits and Peter Millar stuff, and top-dollar shoes. Some packets of tuna, boxes of cereal, milk and coffee, towels and washcloths, toiletries, that's about it. Minimalism, I guess they call it. But with a price tag. How the other half lives, right?"

"More like the one-percenters; you know, inflation," replied Devine, drawing a laugh from the cop.

And Devine did indeed find that that was pretty much about it. No photos or knickknacks, not even a TV or a computer. Nothing work related, but he was not surprised by that. It wasn't like this place was a certified SCIF, or Sensitive Compartmented Information Facility, for classified docs, so Walker would definitely not be bringing work home, even with his new job in the private sector.

He took pictures of the meds he spied in the bathroom medicine cabinet. He googled them and learned that they were heavy-duty anti-nausea meds. When he searched the name of the prescribing Manhattan physician, Devine was surprised to learn she was an oncologist.

Did Walker have cancer?

He did a pretty thorough search but really knew nothing more about Walker than when he'd walked in the door, other than the man liked expensive clothes and had no eye for, or interest in, home decor.

And he might be very ill.

Those observations were unlikely to break the case wide open, but one never knew.

Devine traveled back to Manhattan and then to the New York office of the Brussels-based firm that Walker had recently joined. He stood outside the skyscraper and gazed up at a fifty-plus-story building that looked like a needle waving in the stiff wind coming off the water. It seemed like the structure became skinnier the higher it went; it was a wonder it was strong enough to hold people and furniture all that way up in the sky. Personally, Devine liked to remain a little closer to earth.

He cleared lobby security and took the elevator to the forty-first floor, which opened into the foyer of AIPC. Devine had learned that stood for Artificial Intelligence Protection Company.

Devine thought the Belgians really needed to work on making their corporate naming a lot snappier, but he supposed having "artificial intelligence" in your name was great for business right now. The world was clearly gaga over AI. It had become like a religion, or a cult. Or both. Although it didn't seem to Devine that all these tech gods really had a clue as to how to actually create another form of intelligence.

Or whether we should even do it.

The receptionist first made a call and then rose and tap-tapped over the gleaming ceramic tile floors in search of someone who could help with Devine's inquiry. She came back with a small, suited man with a round

belly, little hair, and an expressionless face that seemed more like a death mask. He introduced himself as Carl Peeters, the managing director of AIPC's New York office. He told Devine he was originally from Antwerp as they walked down the pristine hall to his corner office.

The expensive furnishings and finishes here could not have been in greater contrast to the plebian offices of Theresa Lee's world. Clearly business was better on this side of the ledger than it was for those trying to ferret out the truth using only "natural intelligence."

They sat in Peeters's opulent office and Devine admired the view out the window, where a battalion of other skyscrapers of varying heights, widths, and exteriors stared back across the ether. He continued to watch as a jet made its way to landing at probably LaGuardia.

"You are here about poor Bill" was Peeters's opening and unsurprising statement, but still Devine felt an air of disappointment.

Was I expecting more nuance or maybe a confession? He started to go through his questions. "I understand he started here a few months ago?"

"Yes, we were lucky to get him. His CV was most distinguished."

"And you've had no word from his abductors?"

Peeters spread his small hands. "Obviously not, or else we would have informed the authorities. And maybe the abductors would not contact us in any event. He worked for your country for many years. So perhaps it will be *you* that they contact."

The guy was clearly trying to distance himself and his firm from any connection to what had happened, which only served to deepen Devine's suspicions. "Can you walk me through what he did for you here?"

"And your clearances?"

"Top Secret/Sensitive Compartmented Information," replied Devine. He pulled out an official photo card showing these current clearances and held it up to Peeters, who nodded but looked apologetic nonetheless.

"Even with that I'm afraid there is not much I can tell you, Agent Devine. You see, Bill was just settling in here. What with HR and all the paperwork and updated background checks that must be done when transitioning from the government to the private sector, we had not really assigned him anything yet."

"So you think what happened to him is connected to his previous position?"

Peeters once more spread his hands. "Who knows for sure?"

“Educated guess?”

“It would only be a guess and not educated at all,” replied Peeters. “And thus I hesitate to offer one. It is not how I am . . . wired. In my work a fast answer is not so good if it later turns out to be wrong.”

“In my work, too. Had you known Walker before he joined your firm?”

“Oh, yes, our paths had crossed many times at industry events. I am also frequently in Australia and saw him down there a number of times. That is how I came to know of his abilities.”

“How did his joining your firm happen?”

“Relatively straightforward. We made an offer and he was amenable to coming to work for us.”

Devine doubted it was quite that simple, but he had no proof to the contrary. He filed that one away for later dissection. “Money couldn’t have done it. He was married to a billionairess.”

“The salary and benefits we offered were commensurate with someone of his level. I really know nothing of his personal finances.”

“He was that good?”

“We thought so, yes. People with his skill set are few and far between.”

“What exactly was his skill set?”

Peeters again looked sad, like a clown whose skit had failed to elicit even a smile. “I cannot really get into that.”

“Did you know his wife and her family?”

“The Woolwines? Everyone knows the Woolwines. And yet no one knows the Woolwines, if you understand my meaning.”

“Feel free to embellish.”

“I never feel that free. I like to stick to facts.”

“Okay, let’s get back to them. Did you know Theresa Lee?”

His eyes narrowed, Peeters said, “No, who is she?”

“He never mentioned her? She never came here?”

“To my knowledge, Bill never brought anyone here.”

Devine showed him the woman’s picture on his phone.

“Oh, yes, the woman that was shot. I saw that on the news.”

“But you didn’t connect it to Walker?” Devine said skeptically.

“I’m sorry, Agent Devine. I just returned yesterday from Europe. I have been out of the loop and have a bit of jet lag.”

“So how’s business?” Devine asked, looking around at the luxurious space.

“Booming,” Peeters said delightedly. “The world is changing so very fast that everyone is . . . *on edge*, I believe is the term. Thus, intelligence becomes even more valuable. Like gold.”

“I see *AI* is in your name. So you use that in your work?”

“Yes. It saves much time. It will be truly transformational.”

“So everyone keeps saying. But the rest of your name says *Protection*. So do you protect intelligence from being stolen by AI?”

Peeters merely shrugged. “As I say, business is booming.” He glanced at his watch. “Now, if that’s all? I have a meeting.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to get in the way of that.” Devine handed him a card and asked him to call if he remembered anything helpful.

He walked out knowing, if it was possible, even less than when he walked in.

Yet that seemed to be the dominant and frustrating theme of the case so far.

And, given how his suspicious mind worked, Devine was beginning to think it was all very much intentional.

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CHAPTER

8

AT THERESA LEE'S HOME, a studio apartment in a quaint four-story brick building in the Bronx, Devine ran into a wall, a human one. The burly NYPD officer stationed there with his broad back against Lee's apartment door—where yellow police tape had been strung up and crisscrossed like a spider's web—would not let him in, even when he gave the man Detective Pouncey's contact information. His federal creds didn't help matters, either. He was told to come back with something in writing from higher-ups at NYPD.

"And if they won't give that to me?"

The cop shrugged his meaty shoulders and said, "Don't know what to tell you. Above my pay grade."

"You and me both," replied Devine. "Well, can you tell me if they found anything in her apartment?"

The cop pointed to the unbroken tape. "They need a warrant to get inside and it ain't been issued yet. Why my butt is here making sure no one goes in there, including you, Mr. Fed."

"Help!"

Devine and the cop turned around to see a frantic-looking young woman running toward them. "You have to stop him!" she called out.

"What's wrong, ma'am?" the cop asked, his hand going to his service pistol.

"I'm a tenant in the building. I know Theresa Lee. I was just on my balcony and I saw a man climbing out of her bedroom window on the rear of the building. He was carrying something."

"Shit," said the cop, glancing at Lee's front door. "How the hell did he get in?"

Devine said, "What does he look like?"

She gave them a description.

Devine and the cop hustled outside and toward the back of the building. The cop called the woman's information in as Devine sprinted forward, looking in all directions for the man. He soon outpaced the cop, who was puffing along far behind him. That was when Devine spotted a man up ahead who fit the sketch given by the woman. He was in dark sweats and white running shoes, and he was moving fast as he ran through a small park.

Devine picked up his pace, hip-shifting around pedestrians in his way like a football player avoiding would-be tacklers as he hustled to the end zone. He finally got clear of everyone except the man.

"Stop, federal agent," he cried out, pulling his weapon and holding up his badge.

The man did not stop or turn around.

"Stop!" Devine called out again.

The man continued to run hard, his arms and legs pumping away.

Devine put his gun and badge away, veered to the right and then shot across the grass at top speed, hit the man at the waist, and lifted him off his feet in a textbook tackle.

They both landed hard and the man cried out in pain.

Then Devine saw the AirPods in his ears and also observed the phone hanging on a carrier on his waist. He could hear music coming from the Pods.

The man looked up at him, grimacing. "What the fuck!"

The cop reached them and pointed his gun at the man. Breathless, he said, "You're under arrest, dude. Keep your hands where I can see them."

But Devine was already looking back down the street.

He rose and took off at a dead run in the direction of Lee's building. The cop called after him. "Where the hell you going?"

Devine didn't bother to answer. He reached Lee's apartment building, raced up the stairs, and then stopped. The crime scene tape had been ripped down, the police lock broken off, and the door burst open.

He slipped out his gun and peered inside.

Devine called out, "Federal agent. Come out where I can see you, hands in the air. Do it now. The place is surrounded."

Of course no one came out, with hands up or otherwise. It took him thirty seconds to clear the tiny space. He holstered his weapon and walked

back out into the hall. An elderly woman was coming out of the apartment across the way, her twitchy, yappy Pekingese on a leash.

Devine showed her his badge and described the woman who had told them about the break-in to Lee's apartment.

"Does she live here?"

The woman slowly shook her head. "No, young man. Poor Theresa was by far the youngest person here. The only other tenants in the building are about the same age as me. Oh my, has something bad happened?" she added as she eyed the damaged door.

"Probably," said Devine. "Did you see or hear anything suspicious?"

"No, but I didn't have my hearing aids in until just now. And the TV was on, but I use closed captioning. It's so necessary, especially for those shows on BritBox. Wonderful actors but they are so darn hard to understand."

"Have a nice walk," said an immensely frustrated Devine.

She passed down the stairs with her dog while the cop came hustling up.

"I zip-tied the dude and called for backup to pick him up." He saw the broken door. "What the hell?" He looked at Devine. "Did you do that?"

"No!" barked Devine.

"Then who the fuck did?" bellowed the angry cop.

A beyond-pissed-off Devine couldn't bring himself to answer.

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CHAPTER

9

AN APB HAD BEEN PUT out on the woman and available CCTV footage scoured to see if she had been captured on it. So far, she had not, which was not surprising, since knowing where all the cameras were was 101 stuff. She was gone and so was that lead. And Devine only had himself to blame.

However, with the break-in, the NYPD had been able to fast-track approval of a search warrant for Lee's apartment.

Devine piggybacked on these efforts after Campbell had gotten authorization for him to do so. One of the techs who had gone over the apartment told Devine that it didn't appear that anything had been taken. Although it was impossible to be sure, she had added.

That roughly summed up the case so far, thought Devine: impossible to be sure of a damn thing.

Devine noted that Lee had been organized in all respects except for what appeared to be her home office, which occupied a wedge of the front room. That was cluttered and chaotic with stacks of books, newspapers, and story copy marked up. A laptop had been found and taken away for analysis. Her phone had been on her person when she'd been shot and the NYPD had that as well. They had promised to provide whatever pertinent data they found to Devine.

Devine fully expected Lynn Kendall to fight back against the authorities gaining access to the data on her laptop and phone. She would probably sue to keep them out of Lee's office at TFIL. It would be ironic if Lee's own employer was the fatal roadblock in finding out who had shot her.

What he hadn't found was a paper calendar or diary or other place she might have written down information on the meeting she was heading to when she'd been shot. That might be on her phone or computer calendar.

Wearing gloves and booties, Devine looked over the woman's cluttered desk once more and noted the pictures of what looked to be her parents and siblings. He'd learned that she'd grown up in the Midwest and had come east to build her career after college. Devine prayed that, against the long odds, she was able to recover and continue that career.

He turned to a small shelf behind the desk and his attention was at once riveted on a framed picture there. He picked it up in his gloved hands.

It was a photo of Bill Walker. He looked around at the techs who were in other parts of the small space before surreptitiously slipping the framed photo into his jacket pocket. This might cut against what he'd been told about there being nothing personal between Lee and Walker. Maybe the fact that he had saved her life had led to something of greater intimacy with the pair. And also maybe the reason for his filing for divorce.

He went to the front door and examined the police lock that had been broken off.

Whoever it was had moved fast while he had been fooled into chasing what had turned out to be an innocent jogger. He went through the probable steps there. The woman had slipped into the building and given Devine and the cop the description of an alleged burglar, knowing that the man she had identified had Air-Pods in and wouldn't hear an order to stop, and that he also would be running, which would only heighten Devine's suspicion.

She played both of us for fools, and we were not lacking in that department.

Devine calculated the time he and the cop had been away from Lee's building. Five minutes at most. Not a lot of time to search the place, *and* the woman had left Lee's laptop behind, which didn't make a lot of sense.

The answer to that must lie in a pretty simple direction, he concluded.

They knew what they were looking for and went right to it. In and out, clean and fast.

The only remaining questions were why, what, and who.

Easy-peasy.

When he got back to his hotel Devine sat on his bed and looked at the photo. From Walker's appearance it seemed to be a recent one. The man wore slacks and a polo shirt and was smiling into the camera. Devine doubted he was smiling now, wherever he was, and the odds of him being alive were not good. The background held what looked to be a lake and a distant mountain. When he took the picture out of the frame to see if there

was any writing on the back, he found something quite interesting between the photo and the frame's backing.

It was a handwritten letter addressed to Lee, and the contents demonstrated that their relationship was anything but professional colleagues. Walker had been quite flowery in his descriptions of his love and esteem for Lee. And even for her sexual proclivities. He had signed it, *Love, Bill*.

He slipped the letter into his pocket, left the hotel, and cabbed over to Lee's workplace. It was around six, and he caught Helen Clark coming out of the building. Her worn features screamed alarm as she saw him approach.

"Oh . . . my God. Is . . . is Theresa . . . ?"

He quickly interpreted her words. "No, she's still with us. I just have some more questions if you have the time."

"Oh, okay," she said, looking relieved.

"Coffee shop over there? My treat. Take the chill off."

They ordered their coffees and sat at a table near the window. Devine ran his gaze over Clark and noted that she looked even younger than she was. But her fresh-faced, youthful appearance, he knew, had been blighted by the attack on her friend. Misery didn't necessarily love company; it created its own isolation borne directly out of an all-consuming grief that made you believe no one else in the world was suffering as much as you were.

"Did you find out anything?" she asked.

In answer he handed her the letter he'd found behind the photo.

She read through it and looked up in amazement. "Theresa never mentioned any of this to me."

He took the letter back. "Did you ever actually see Walker at the office? Kendall mentioned that he had come by."

"Yes, a few times."

"As you know, he was getting a divorce. This letter suggests maybe Lee was next in line for the guy?"

But Devine was also thinking that Walker might have cancer. So would he have been embarking on a new relationship with Lee? But then again, people survived cancer all the time. And Walker had taken the new job, too. Would he have done that if he was terminal? Probably not.

“I didn’t think Theresa had time for a relationship,” she said—a bit wistfully, thought Devine. “She was always on a plane somewhere. I always thought she’d meet a cute pilot or flight attendant and have a fling.” She paused and looked embarrassed by her comment. “I didn’t mean—”

He cut in, “But if they were having a *fling*, the video footage I saw indicated that it was over and there were hard feelings on *both* sides, but especially hers.”

“Do you think that has something to do with what happened to her?”

“No, I don’t. If he dumped her or she dumped him, then one of them harming the other *would* make sense. But not a bunch of masked guys coming in and shooting her and tasing and taking him.”

Clark sipped her coffee and slowly nodded her head in agreement. “Then I wonder what *did* happen.”

“Your boss said that Theresa had turned in a story on the Middle East, but it already ran. And that she wasn’t working on anything else big right now. Does that comport with your understanding?”

Clark looked a little nervous now, which Devine was quick to pick up on. It was always that way. Online or over the phone people could fool you. But lying in person was really difficult to get away with, from numerous physiological flashpoints.

“Ms. Clark?”

She started and said, “Please call me Helen.”

“Okay, *Helen*, does that jibe with what you knew about Theresa’s current workload?”

“She . . . Theresa was always working on something. But as I said, she always kept things, both personal and professional, close to the vest.”

“Okay, but did she tell you *anything*?”

Clark looked even more uncomfortable. Sensing this, Devine said, “I know you don’t want to break any confidences, and that speaks well of you, but I really want to find out who hurt your friend. And I know you want that, too.”

She glanced up at him, her expression fixed in a scowl. “I’m young but I’m not a kid, Agent Devine. So don’t try to play stupid guilt trips with me, okay?”

Unfazed by her retort, Devine said, “Then let me be more direct. Do you have any information that might help me find out who could have done this?”

Her scowl faded and she collapsed back in her chair. “Theresa did mention that she had a tip on something that might turn out to be big.”

“Did she provide any more details than that?”

“She said it had to do with national security.”

“For who? This country? Another country?”

“She didn’t say.”

“Anything else?”

“Just that she had found a contact and was going to work it.”

“But you don’t have a name?”

“She would never reveal her sources,” replied Clark.

“But might she have been going to meet the contact when she was shot?”

Clark looked even more uncomfortable now. “I . . . I’m not sure. Possibly.”

“We haven’t been able to access her digital records or her office yet, where she might keep her paper calendar. And none was found at her apartment. But if you know anything?”

“I’d tell you if I knew.”

Devine studied her for a long moment, not wholly convinced of the truth in her words, but having no real proof to the contrary. She looked away as he did so, which did not make him feel any better about her truthfulness.

He broke the silence. “And nothing on Walker?”

“Nothing other than what I already told you.”

Devine thanked her and left Clark at the table staring down at the remains of her coffee.

As he was walking down the street, his phone buzzed. It was Emerson Campbell, and he was about to drop an Abrams tank right on Devine’s head.

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CHAPTER

10

THEY JUST PULLED WALKER'S BODY out of Sydney Harbour," said Campbell.

"Okay," said Devine evenly. "They got him down there fast."

"Private wings make it a lot easier."

"Private wings also narrows it down some."

"We haven't confirmed that yet. But it's certainly a distinct possibility. A commercial flight would have been a logistical nightmare, for a prisoner or a corpse."

"Cause and time of death?" asked Devine.

"Don't know. Him being in the water might complicate matters."

"Right. Briny water and human flesh do not mesh well for the pathologists."

"But they have protocols and models for that. We should get something relatively firm from the Aussies."

"Am I heading to Sydney, then?"

"Yes. The fact that Walker's body ended up in a foreign country does not change the equation. The CIA can't operate on American soil, but I know from back channels that they are very interested in the Walker matter. Now, the FBI can operate abroad under certain legal and political frameworks. And the State Department obviously lives in that space."

"So why isn't one of them leading this up now?" asked Devine, and reasonably so, he thought. He was not looking to get pitched off this mission for a number of reasons, including the fact that he had gotten snookered by the woman at Lee's apartment. But if he was going to be butting heads with sister agencies in Australia, he wanted to do so prepared.

"OSP has been designated as the tip of the spear of this sucker, so we're the Marines, going in first."

“And why is that? The FBI and the CIA sure as hell do not willingly sideline themselves on stuff like this.”

“It’s . . . delicate. And the decisions at several levels above me want to go in quiet and lean, but strong. That’s why they picked us, and why I picked you.”

Devine considered this. “And I’m sure it has nothing to do with covering their asses if things go sideways on what might turn out to be a clusterfuck. Then we take the blame and they swoop in to save the day.”

“I am impressed with how fast you’ve learned how this shitty game is played, Devine.”

“I only wish I didn’t have to.”

“Not the world we operate in. Now, I made the calls, so they’ll be expecting you. You’ll have to work with possibly both the locals and the federal police. And keep in mind that Walker was married to Charlotte Woolwine. You’ll likely have to engage with the Woolwine family. Cover every base.”

“Spending time with billionaires. Sounds like fun,” Devine said dryly.

“They are important people both in Australia and the rest of the world.”

“And if they had Walker killed for some as yet unknown reason?”

“Then they have to be held accountable. But we’re not there yet.”

“When do I leave?”

“You’ll fly to LAX late tonight. Then tomorrow night you take the regular Qantas flight to Sydney. You lose a day in the air, and get there crack of dawn on the following day, so the investigation will already be well underway. You’ll have to play catch-up.”

“Right.”

“It’s a long flight from LA. I’ll see if I can spring for business class on Qantas.”

“We’ve both ridden in the bellies of C17s and C130s, sir. As long as it takes off and lands without blowing up it’s fine.”

“I’ll send you a brief on everything we know thus far. Your plane tickets and hotel info will be emailed to you.”

Campbell clicked off, and Devine continued on to his hotel to pack.

Walker ending up dead in Australia didn’t really advance the investigation as much as it did change the focus.

The Woolwine family is from Australia. So is this a not-so-subtle sign that what happened to Walker is connected to them and not his professional

life? That would be a relief for our national security, but that would also still mean there are murderers out there. And Walker's former professional life was also in Australia, so maybe it's still connected.

Later, as he finished packing, his phone rang. When he looked at the number he wasn't sure he was seeing correctly. He knew who was calling, but the person also did not routinely contact him.

"Claire? What's up?"

Claire, Devine's older sister, and a CFO at one of the world's largest corporations, said, "It's Dad."

Devine felt his skin start to tingle. "What about him? Is he okay?"

"No. He's in the hospital. They think it was a stroke."

"A stroke! What the hell happened?"

"I don't have details. Danny's flying in to oversee his care."

Devine's brother, Dan, was eight years older than he was, while Claire was nine years Devine's senior. For a long time now Devine had considered his birth a mistake. Dan Devine was a neurosurgeon at the Mayo Clinic.

"And Mom?"

"At the hospital, of course. Where are you?"

Devine checked his watch. "I'm in New York, but I have a redeye to LA tonight."

"Can you change your plans? I'm in Thailand at a business conference, but I'm taking the corporate jet back." She told him what hospital their father had been taken to.

"I'll see what I can do, Claire."

It was like he was speaking with a stranger rather than his sister.

"He *is* your father, Travis. And you're right next to where he is while I'm on the other side of the world."

Well, he hasn't been much of a father to me, has he, sis? thought Devine.

Roger Devine had hated the fact that his youngest son had gone into the military. When Devine had graduated from the Army's prestigious Ranger School, his father had asked him what national park he was going to be assigned to and signed the email, "Proud Father of Ranger Smokey the Bear."

When he'd been wounded in combat there had not been a word from his father, though his mother had been in constant contact. And his siblings had sent him letters and emails of support and congratulations over the years.

And there had been visits, so that Devine had gotten to meet his nieces and nephews, but only when those visits were convenient for his siblings. But Devine knew they were incredibly busy with demanding careers and young families. He only had the demanding career as an excuse. The family thing had never happened for Travis Devine. The only woman he had fallen in love with had been murdered. The other women he'd had in his life, well, none of them had worked out for various reasons, mostly involving him and what he did for a living.

"Let me make a call, Claire."

"What is it that you do now? I know you're no longer on Wall Street."

"State Department," he said.

"What does that mean?"

"It means the State Department."

He clicked off and phoned Campbell to let him know the situation.

"Okay, Devine, go do what you need to do, but get to LA in time to make that Qantas flight tomorrow night."

"Yes sir."

"And I hope things turn out okay for your father," added Campbell.

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CHAPTER

11

THE HOSPITAL WAS IN CONNECTICUT, and driving was the fastest way to get there. Two hours later, Devine was walking into the building. He inquired at the front desk and took the elevator up to one of the wards, although it wasn't the ICU, which puzzled Devine. He assumed with a stroke that his father would be receiving critical care.

He strode down the hall and saw his mother walking down the hall toward him.

Reneé Devine was tall, and fit, he knew, because she put in the effort, and always had. Her auburn hair had retained its color, probably by artificial means, Devine thought. He hadn't seen his mother in more than a year. Their last meeting had been at a lunch near her home. His father, apparently, had either been busy or had declined to join. The conversation had stayed within the guardrails of two acquaintances, rather than mother and son. Then she had left to go home to her upscale life in Stamford, and Devine had gone on with his life, none the wiser on how his mother or father truly felt about him.

Well, no, that's not true. They'd rather I'd not have been born because that upset their perfectly constructed apple cart.

When his mother spotted him, she looked surprised but also happy to see him.

They exchanged a hug and she said, "Thank you for coming, Travis."

"Of course. How is he?"

"He's resting," she said quietly.

"Claire said it was a stroke. Why isn't he in the ICU? He should be getting the highest level of care."

"I don't know . . . They're still running tests." She looked unsure and, of course, worried.

“Are they certain he had a stroke?”

“Not yet, no. That’s why they’re running tests.” She paused. “Where did you come in from?”

“I was in New York when Claire called. I got here as fast as I could when she told me about Dad.”

If he didn’t know better he thought he had caught a glint of moisture in his mother’s right eye.

“Well, I’m sure your father will appreciate you being here.”

Devine didn’t actually believe that, and by the look of her neither did his mother.

“So what brought this on? Has he been showing any symptoms?”

“He’s been under a lot of stress lately.”

“What sort of stress?”

His father was a highly successful orthodontist, and his mother had worked at the practice for years, though she didn’t now. Devine had thus grown up in upper-middle-class comfort.

“The usual stress that comes with life, Travis,” his mother said sharply. “He has a lot on his plate.”

He noted that she was dressed to the nines, which was her usual way. As a child in elementary school, Devine had cringed in the corner as his mother had come to his school for some parent-student function looking like she was attending some high-dollar event, while the other moms were in sweats or jeans, their hair in scrunchies.

“I know he was planning to retire soon. Maybe he should speed up the process. Take things slower. Have fun.”

“He was planning to. Then . . . this happened.”

“Can I . . . see him?”

She gazed at him for a few beats and then shook her head as though to rouse herself from whatever mental funk she had fallen into. “Certainly. Of course.”

As they walked along Devine said, “Claire said Danny was flying in.”

“I didn’t know that. He . . . Danny is far too busy for that.”

“It’s his *father*,” replied Devine. “I’m sure he’ll want to be here to oversee Dad’s care.”

“I know that! But . . . I have . . . I have to call him.” She pointed up ahead. “Your father is in Room 211, the first on the left just up there.”

She stepped away while taking her phone out.

Devine walked over to the doorway of his father's private room and looked in.

Roger Devine was lying in a bed with the privacy curtain only partially closed. He seemed to be asleep, as his mother had intimated.

His father had lost a lot more hair since Devine had seen him last. And he had put on weight. His face and neck were flabby, and his gut poked the covers up. His color also wasn't good, a grayish putty. Devine wondered what sort of stress a nearly retired and wealthy orthodontist and longtime empty nester who played golf every weekend would have.

Devine walked in, and for the second time in a short period he eyed whirring, beeping monitors showing vitals.

At least his father's numbers were much better than Theresa Lee's.

His O_2 was mid-nineties, but his pulse and blood pressure were both jacked up. He might be on some meds for the stroke, if that's what it was; those might be affecting him.

As he looked down at his father, many memories floated back to Devine from his childhood all the way through West Point. His dad had been a fan of his while he had been in high school, probably because he had been an exceptional athlete, starring on the football, wrestling, and track teams. His dad had gotten to brag to the other fathers about his sports stud of a son. Claire and Dan had been academic standouts at the same school, but both had gotten their undergraduate degrees before Devine had even started high school. While a sound student, Devine had not been the academic star that his brother and sister were, and his father had called him a dumb jock more than once. Devine had tried to laugh off the criticism, but as a teenager it had stung him more than he cared to admit.

Maybe it still does.

Then the military had come into Devine's life, and an enormous rift had opened up between father and son, a rift that continued until this day.

Devine wasn't sure why his father had been so against him joining the Army. Even his mother had not been able to explain it. All Devine could glean was that his father thought his son could and should have aimed higher. He thought this, in part, because after he'd left the military and gotten his MBA and gone to work on Wall Street, his father had sent him an email that had read, in part, "Finally, you're getting your head out of your ass. Now go make me proud."

But then Devine had abruptly left Wall Street to join Campbell at DHS. And when his father had learned that he had ended his lucrative finance career, he had sent him another email.

“Great. Your head is back in your ass. You reap what you sow. Shoulda stayed a Smokey the Bear.”

“What the hell are you doing here?”

Devine refocused on his father, who was now awake and glaring at his youngest son. “Claire called.”

“Why?”

“Because you had a stroke and she wanted me to know.”

“They haven’t confirmed it was a stroke,” snapped his father. “I have none of the symptoms. No paralysis, no slurred speech, as I’m sure you can *hear*. I am in medicine myself. I’m not an idiot when it comes to health care, like most people.”

Devine, as usual, ignored his father’s haranguing and said, “So why did Claire—”

“How the hell do I know?” Roger interjected. But behind his father’s bluster Devine could tell that the man was . . . scared and unsure of what was going on with this health scare.

He sat down in a chair next to the bed. “Mom said you’d been under stress?”

“I’m fine. It’s . . . nothing. Nothing to you. I mean, it’s not like you’ve been around lately. So what the hell do you care?”

Devine felt his temper start to rise, but then he shoved it back down. His father was sick, in the hospital and frightened. He got that. He understood where the man’s anger was coming from. It was a lot to deal with, for anyone.

“I *do* care, Dad. That’s why I’m here.”

Roger looked at him. “You’re not on Wall Street anymore. I followed the case. They cleared you of that girl’s death.”

“That’s because I didn’t kill her.”

“I knew that, Travis. You wouldn’t hurt anyone unless you were in combat and the other person was trying to hurt you.”

“Thanks.”

“The firm where you were working, Cowl and . . . ?”

“Comely.”

“It went under. Did you have anything to do with that?”

Devine stared back at the man.

His father sat up. “What exactly are you involved in, son?”

“I work for the government, Dad, that’s all I can really say.”

“But . . . but not the Army?”

“No, I’m not Smokey the Bear anymore,” he said tersely.

Now Devine saw something on his father’s features he couldn’t remember seeing before.

Guilt. And maybe . . . *remorse*.

“Your mother . . . she said that was a terrible thing for me to say.”

“But you still said it, so . . . ”

Roger looked away, but then turned back to his youngest son. “You got shot up over there. In that stupid-ass fucking war. Another stupid-ass fucking war we never should have been in.”

“I was wounded, yes.”

His father said tremulously, “Was it bad?”

“Bad enough.”

“Danny told me you almost died.”

“I guess Danny would know. I mean, he took the time to find out.”

Roger looked away from him and stared at the ceiling. “Stupid fucking war. Never should have been over there. Just like that other stupid fucking war.”

Now Devine was curious. “What other—”

“Never mind!” his father snapped.

“I had no choice, Dad. I was in uniform. I did my duty.”

“I’m . . . I’m not saying you didn’t. You . . . you did what you had to do. I understand that, son, I really do.”

Devine was once more curious, since his father had never served in the military.

His father looked at him. “I’m . . . I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Thank you. So what stress are you under?” said Devine, who no longer wanted to talk about the war or his part therein.

“The usual. We’re getting older. Your mother in particular—”

“She looks fine, fit as a fiddle,” interrupted Devine.

“Yes, on the *surface* she does.”

Devine felt a cold dread knotting in his gut. “Wait is . . . is she sick too?”

Roger looked worriedly at him. “She . . . sometimes forgets things.”

Devine relaxed. “Forgets things? We all forget things.”

“Like where she lives? Or my middle name?”

“Wait, she forgets that? I just spoke to her. She was—”

“It rarely happens, Travis, I mean, now. But what about next month, or next year? She’s not even seventy, but I know people with dementia who are younger.”

“She doesn’t have dementia, Dad.”

“Are you a specialist?” his father snapped.

“No, of course not. But has she been tested?”

“She refuses to go. She doesn’t think there’s a problem. But I have one little hiccup and I’m in here.”

“What was the little hiccup exactly?”

“I . . . I don’t want to talk about it.”

“And that’s what’s stressing you? Mom maybe developing dementia?”

“We’ve been married well over forty years. I was hoping we’d have another couple of decades or so to . . . be together.”

Devine sat back and took this in. He felt empathy for his father. His own health concerns were one thing, but he seemed far more upset about his wife’s perceived deterioration.

“If she’s having issues, the earlier the diagnosis, the better they can manage it. If she won’t listen to you, have Danny talk to her. She respects him and his medical opinion.”

“I’ve asked Danny to step in. He won’t.”

“Why?”

“Why the hell do you think, Travis?”

“I don’t know. Tell me.”

“He, unlike you, is a momma’s boy. He refuses to see her as anything other than thirty years old, beautiful, vivacious, and sharp as a tack.”

“Claire, then.”

“Mother-daughter. She won’t listen to Claire.”

Devine shook his head. “There must be someone.”

Roger turned on his side to look at his son. “Can you talk to her?”

Devine was floored. “Me? She won’t listen to me.”

“Why do you think that?”

“I don’t think she even wanted to have me.”

“How in the living hell can you say that?” barked Roger.

“Are you upsetting your father?”

Devine turned to see his mother hurrying into the room.

“Not that I’m aware of,” replied Devine, just about the time his father exclaimed, “Yes, he is. What else has he ever done but *upset* me, Reneé?”

“You’re not helping matters, Travis,” scolded his mother.

Devine put his hands up in surrender. “Okay, glad you’re both doing well. Dad, hope it’s not a stroke. See you around sometime.”

He walked off and didn’t stop, even as his mother called out, “Wait, Travis. W-wait!”

Devine didn’t wait. He kept marching like the good soldier he had once been.

Outside the hospital he bumped into a tall man who looked remarkably like Devine.

Dan Devine said, “Travis, what are you doing here?”

“Claire called, said Dad had a stroke. I came to see him. But he says it’s not a stroke.”

“You mean he’s awake and alert?”

“More than alert. I can always tell Dad is in a good mood when he’s yelling at me.”

Dan Devine looked over his younger brother’s broad shoulders at the hospital behind him. “I jumped on a plane and flew here as fast as I could. I canceled a bunch of surgeries. I thought he was at death’s door.”

“Who called Claire?”

“I assume Mom did.”

“Well, maybe she thought it was worse than it was. Good luck, Danny, I think you’re going to need it. But he always liked you better, so there is that.”

His brother looked surprised. “Wait, you’re not staying?”

“Nothing for me to do here, and I’ve got a job to do.”

“You were on Wall Street the last I remember. Which I never understood. I thought you’d be in the military for the duration. You were great at that.”

“Yeah, well, life throws you some unhittable curves. And I’m no longer on Wall Street. Now, I guess you could call me a fixer.”

“A fixer? For who? Or what?”

“Uncle Sam. How’re the kids?”

“Fine. They’d like to see more of their uncle, though.”

“I’ll see if I can make that happen.” He paused. “Look, Dad told me of his worries about Mom.”

Dan took a step back. “You mean the . . . dementia?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sure she doesn’t have dementia.”

“Dad said she forgot her address and also his middle name.”

Dan now didn’t look as confident. “I . . . look, let me focus on Dad for now. Mom can keep. I’m sure it’s nothing. You know how strong she is.”

Devine eyed his older brother keenly.

Momma’s boy?

“Let me know how Dad’s doing.”

Devine walked off, leaving his puzzled and troubled brother staring after him.

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CHAPTER

12

AT 10 A.M. THE NEXT morning Devine trudged off the plane in LA and headed to the exits along with about a million other passengers, none of whom appeared to be happy about anything. However, Devine went out on a limb and figured he was the only one destined to fly on to Australia to investigate the death of a corpse dropped into Sydney Harbour.

He traveled light enough, even with a long-haul trip ahead, to never have to bother with baggage claim, which he'd always deemed an unforgivable reason to stay inside an airport terminal one minute longer than was absolutely necessary.

He was expert in converting bathroom sinks and shower rods and hair dryers into an efficient laundry. And if he needed something he could always buy it. He didn't like to be weighed down. His work did enough weighing down of its own on him. Sometimes he thought he worked out as much as he did so his body could support the weight of the shit that his "occupation" routinely pressed down upon him. It was the same in the Army. But there you worked out so you could at least perform at an acceptable level, and if you still got killed you'd fill out the uniform in your flag-draped coffin just fine.

He had texted both his brother and sister. Claire had not gotten back to him. She might still be traveling to the States.

Dan Devine had texted him to say that he was evaluating everything about his father's condition, and would get back to him with an update as soon as he could.

His mother had, shockingly, texted him demanding to know why he had walked out.

Devine had not bothered to text her back, because what would he say?

But his conversation with his father had astonished him. He had actually appeared humbled and . . . understanding. And his concern for his wife, Devine could tell, was genuine.

Why couldn't we have had a talk like that a decade ago?

He didn't know what to do about his mother. If she was showing signs of dementia, the sooner she was evaluated the better. And his father wanted him to talk to her. But then he'd exploded when Devine had plainly stated that he didn't think his mother wanted to actually have a third child. Of course, his mother had walked in right at that moment, so none of those matters could be further discussed.

Devine knew he shouldn't have just stalked off like that with no explanation, but his temper had gotten the better of him.

You don't pick your family, you just choose how you're going to deal with the one you have at any given moment in time.

He knew there were a lot of families with far worse dynamics than his, but right now it sure didn't feel that way.

He was near the exit and was planning to grab a bus to the airport's rideshare pickup spot and then head to his day room at a local hotel before heading back to the airport for the Qantas flight that night.

He never made it.

This was because a six-foot-tall, slim man in a dark, fitted suit stepped in front of him. Two burly men in off-the-rack suits and cheap shoes were just behind him, looking serious and unfriendly as burly men in cheap suits and cheaper shoes often did.

"Agent Devine?" said the man.

Devine looked him up and down before settling his gaze over the man's two grim companions for a few moments.

"Who's asking?" said Devine, who thought it might be the FBI. They just had that unctuous look of superiority about them.

But they would have already badged me, right?

The man took a card from his jacket pocket and handed it across. "Dennis Mueller. I work for the Woolwine family. They are absolutely shocked and devastated at what has happened."

Devine processed this. "I'm sure. But what do you want with me?"

"I understand that you're flying out to Sydney tonight."

"And how are you aware of my itinerary?" Devine asked.

“We were made aware of it,” Mueller replied vaguely. “Look, we have one of the Woolwine jets on standby. We would like to invite you to fly to Sydney with us.”

“I have a seat on the Qantas 12 flight going out tonight.”

“Nothing against Qantas, but I can assure you that even their first class will not compare with the comfort on the Woolwines’ brand new Gulfstream G800. It’s the ultimate in luxury air travel.”

Devine’s lips twitched because the man sounded like an ad for the plane manufacturer, but then he thought of Lee dying in the hospital and Walker’s corpse in the harbor.

Nothing about any of this is funny.

“And why would you want to fly me down there on the Woolwines’ bird?”

Mueller glanced at the two men with him. “As I said, this has been a terrible shock to the Woolwines. They want to find out what happened to Bill as expeditiously as possible. We thought the family might be able to provide some relevant information for your investigation. And the sooner you understand that, perhaps the sooner this matter can be resolved.”

“Well, I’m all for resolution. So what can *you* tell me about Bill Walker?”

Mueller looked around at the masses of people moving all around them.

“This is hardly the time or place. But we’ll have a lot of time on the plane.”

“Give me a sec,” said Devine.

He moved away and phoned Campbell. The man answered on the second ring and Devine told him the situation.

“Hang tight, Devine. This is above my pay grade, too.”

Devine stood there keeping one eye on the three men who were staring over at him like Devine’s decision would be life or death.

Campbell came back on. “Okay, you are to play nice, for now. So ride with them and get whatever you can. Then you can hit the ground running when you get to Sydney.”

“Roger that, sir.”

Devine walked back over to Mueller. “How soon can we leave?”

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CHAPTER

13

A FEW HOURS LATER THE GULFSTREAM jet with a large *W* on its tail quickly rose into the air. Its twin Rolls-Royce turbofan engines wailing, the plane made a turn to the south, and accelerated. They would level off at forty-six thousand feet and begin the long flight over the sprawling Pacific.

As he looked around the Gulfstream's lavish interior, Devine wondered if Bill Walker had made the trip to Australia in something like this, either living or dead.

The plane had various conversation areas, wide, comfortable, lie-flat seats, a conference table, two large-screen TVs, a bedroom in the rear, two bathrooms, fore and aft, and a small office area off the bedroom. Just your typical billionaire sky ride, he concluded. And there was no hot tub or even a piano. It probably didn't even cost a hundred mill. Part of Devine jokingly felt disappointed.

Right as they hit their cruising altitude, the door to the rear bedroom opened and out popped a petite woman in her early forties, with long, blond hair, a fit-looking body, elegant features, and penetrating eyes that still managed to hold a sheen of puffiness. She wore a white warmup suit that looked costly, and platform navy blue tennis shoes that were probably just as expensive as the warm-up suit.

"Agent Devine, this is Charlotte Woolwine," announced Mueller.

He looked in surprise at Mueller. "I wasn't aware—"

"Yes, well, this is more efficient, isn't it?" interjected Mueller with the air of a man who had just pulled the trigger on a setup.

Woolwine ran her gaze over Devine that, to his eye, was akin to her sizing up a potential date at a bar. She instructed Mueller and the two sides of beef to retreat to the rear of the plane presumably so she could talk to Devine in private.

They instantly obeyed, Devine noted, like the good little foot soldiers they no doubt were.

The young flight attendant, who had been hustling about in the small galley, also scurried off to the cockpit and closed the door behind her.

How well trained everyone is, thought Devine. *And now it's apparently my turn to hear from her majesty.*

Woolwine motioned to a small, glossy burlwood table with luxurious cream-colored leather seats facing each other. They sat, and she once more ran her gaze over him. He found her observations embellished but perhaps routine for an heiress. And presumably a grieving one, but maybe not, what with the pending divorce that was now suddenly moot. But he also sensed in her hooded eyes and crouched posture that the woman was indeed hurting.

"I'm very sorry for your loss, Ms. Woolwine. I can only imagine how much of a shock this has been for you."

She rubbed her nose with a handkerchief she had clutched in her hand. "Thank you. Are you the only one they're sending?" Her accent wasn't strictly Aussie, he thought. It was a mixture, but the overall impression was one of cultured sophistication.

"For the moment, yes."

"I thought you Yanks always did things in big numbers. I envisioned a hundred agents invading Australia to investigate Bill's death."

"We've had to cut our budgets," said Devine. "Can't keep spending what you don't have."

"Well, you blokes do a better job of that than anyone else."

She glanced out the window. He noted that she was pressing her hands against the tabletop with enough pressure to make them tremble. When she lifted them off, the polished surface retained a perfect set of her ten fingers and two palmprints. If she had left those at a crime scene, the woman would already be under arrest and on her way to prison.

He wondered if she was a nervous flyer, although the flight had been ultrasmooth from wheels up. But then Devine thought she actually might be anxious with him being on board, although he had to imagine it had been at her request that Mueller had conveyed the offer of a free ride on her private jet.

And let's see how free the ride turns out to be, thought Devine. "So, you wanted to talk about Bill Walker?" he said as his cautious opening.

“Yes, my *husband*, but we were getting divorced,” she said, glancing away.

“So I understand. And he’d also moved to America.”

“Lots of changes for Bill. I guess I was one of them.”

“So the divorce was his idea?”

She eyed him shrewdly. “Did you hear otherwise?”

“I never really heard definitively one way or another. Until very recently, I had never heard of your husband. Or you.”

She pressed a shiny button on the table and a few moments later the flight attendant popped like a rousted quail from the cockpit.

“The usual, Katie,” said Woolwine. She glanced at Devine. “Drink?”

“Water’s fine.”

Woolwine said with a strain of derisiveness, “Still on duty?”

“Story of my life.”

“Not my sort of job, then,” she replied. “I like my cocktails, especially now.”

Katie brought them their drinks and disappeared once more into the cockpit.

Woolwine drank some of her G and T with two wedges of lime, and then set the glass down precisely on the monogrammed napkin Katie had placed there.

Devine studied the heavily stylized *W* for a moment, just like the one on the tail of the jet they were on. For some reason it made him think of his parents. They used monogrammed stationery for their correspondence and cloth napkins for dinner parties.

Or they did. Not sure of that now.

“Had you at least heard of my father?” she asked.

Devine actually had heard of Carlton Woolwine while working on Wall Street. Woolwine had long been in the top fifty on the *Forbes* Billionaires List. However, several years ago he had leapt to the top twenty after scoring some lucrative victories in the world of AI and crypto, risky bets that had paid off handsomely. He had his hands in many other global business pies, and he owned a good chunk of Australia’s natural resources. His reputation was one of unequaled work ethic and preparation. And more than a bit of ruthlessness. You would have to come loaded for bear to get out alive when your business dealings crossed with Carlton Woolwine’s.

“Yes. And I’ve learned more about you and your family since I was assigned to this case.”

“Second only to the Murdochs in name recognition, at least in Australia,” she said. On seeing his quizzical look she added, “My father can’t stand it, having never finished second to anyone. Leaves a bitter taste, you see.”

“But your family blew past the Murdochs when it comes to wealth. That seems to be the real scorecard in your world.”

“Not that we could ever spend what we already had. Maybe the world shouldn’t have billionaires.”

“Unusual talk, coming from a billionairess.”

“I never wanted to work in the family business. I wanted to be a mother and have kids, which I did. But I was pretty much forced to work with my father.”

“Forced?”

“I’m being hyperbolic. However, I am the only heir and there are certain expectations,” she explained.

“What do you do with the company?”

“Nothing too glamorous. As an EVP and daughter of the king, I fly around, have meetings, tell people what to do, and then they do it. If mistakes are made, my father lets me know it. And then I try to do better.”

“And the risky bets that tripled your family’s net worth? Your idea or your father’s?”

“Clearly my father’s. I knew nothing about AI or crypto and couldn’t have cared less. But he convinced me that these things, for better or worse, will change the world. Now we’re heavily invested in both. My father has vision, I’ll give him that. That side of the business is literally booming. We can barely keep up with the demands, in fact.”

“Do you work with the AI and crypto side?”

“I mostly work in the divisions that operate on autopilot and make me look good. Thus, when I step into the role of CEO when my father either retires or—more likely, knowing him—drops dead at his desk, the markets will not be rattled.” She stopped abruptly and then surged forward. “But I refuse to work twenty-four seven like most of the other executives are required to do. I still am a mother, if no longer a wife. I see those duties as my main role in life. And I always will.”

She looked away and rubbed at her eyes. “I nearly became a socialist at university. Maybe I still am one, at least partly or deep down in a spot I can’t reach anymore. But, as I said, I am the sole heir. I will inherit the business and with it responsibility for the livelihoods of over two hundred thousand souls.” He thought he could see her tremble as she finished with this startling factoid.

“Did your mother work in the business?”

Her look became wistful, thought Devine. “My mother was an artist and intensely philanthropic. She had no interest in the moneymaking business. She desired to use the Woolwine fortune to make the world a better place, perhaps to make up for the damage that the corporate world does to the planet and its people. I hope to do the same on a larger scale when I’m calling the shots.”

“How did your father feel about your husband?”

“I’m not sure he felt anything about Bill. He couldn’t help my father. He couldn’t hinder my father. So Bill became a nonentity to him.”

“Well, he was your husband’s father-in-law. He has grandkids through him.”

“But there’s a blood tie with the grandchildren. And my father is also a chauvinist though he tries to hide it. He probably sees my son as a worthier CEO than I ever will be.”

“Does your son want that?”

“He’s not even twenty. He doesn’t know what he wants. But that world can be . . . seductive.”

“So your father’s not particularly upset with what happened to your husband, then?”

“I’m sure he’s sad . . . for me.”

“And you?”

“I’ve cried. I’ll no doubt cry some more.”

“I take it you loved him?”

“Past tense and wrong, Agent Devine. I *love* Bill. I will always love him, dead or not. And now, if you’ll excuse me, I feel another wave of overpowering grief just about to hit me, so our discussion will have to wait for a future time. Now, sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride to the loveliest country on earth.”

She took her drink and hurried back to her bedroom, leaving Devine all by his lonesome at nearly nine miles up in the sky.

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CHAPTER

14

DEVINE LATER HAD ONE OF the best meals of his life, meticulously served by Katie, who was full of smiles and friendly chitchat, all delivered in a beautiful Aussie accent. But when Devine tried to steer the conversation toward the Woolwine clan she hurried off to go find a spoon or a cup and didn't come back. She next served Mueller and the two-member muscle squad. And then Katie vanished into her hidey-hole in the shiny metal tube they were all in.

A couple hours after Katie vanished, Mueller joined Devine at his table.

"I understand that Mrs. Woolwine is under the weather," said Mueller.

Devine, in keeping with Campbell's instructions, decided to play nice. "It's understandable. She loves her husband and he's no longer alive."

"Yes."

He eyed Mueller, who also wouldn't meet his gaze. There was a lot of that going on in this case, mused Devine, and he needed to make some headway. "You know the reason for the breakup?"

Mueller shook his head and added no words. Devine was pretty sure he was lying, but then a lot of that also seemed to be going on in this case.

"What can you tell me about the rest of the family?"

"There's only Carlton. Martha Woolwine, his wife and Charlotte's mother, died over two years ago."

"Right. A homicide. She was shot while at her estate near Canberra."

"You looked into that?"

"Of course I did."

"It was terrible," said Mueller.

"And still unsolved."

"Unfortunately, yes."

"Any suspects?" asked Devine.

“Not that I’m aware of.”

Devine decided to push a bit. “How does a *billionaire* get murdered on her own property and the killer gets away? I assume she had security.”

“No one thought she was at risk on the estate.”

“Well, they clearly got that wrong. Do they know why she was killed?”

“No, that was never discovered, either.”

Devine sat back, and decided on a different tack. “How did the Woolwines meet?”

“Mr. Woolwine didn’t go to university. He’d made his first hundred million by the time most people are graduating from college. Mrs. Woolwine went to a private academy in Europe and then on to university. The story I’ve heard is that he required an art consultant for a collection he wanted to start and he found her that way. He was quite a bit older than she was, but that didn’t appear to matter.”

Devine could think of a few billion reasons for that. “Charlotte mentioned that her mother was an artist.”

“Yes, and a fine one. Mrs. Woolwine later became deeply involved in philanthropy. Over the years they’ve funded many good works around the world. Helped a lot of people.”

“Most billionaires just seem to want to make more money, not give any of it away except in small doses with big headlines attached.”

“That was not how Mrs. Woolwine lived her life.”

“And they had Charlotte? No other kids?”

“Why is that relevant?”

“This early in a case, I’m just trying to understand as much as I can about everyone. My experience shows that’s how you get to a resolution faster.”

Mueller grudgingly said, “My understanding is that there were some serious complications with the pregnancy, and Mrs. Woolwine’s doctors advised against more children.”

“Did Charlotte go to university in Australia?”

“No. She was sent off to a private boarding school in Europe when she was a teenager.”

“Do you know where?”

“It was in Zurich. The Institut Le Harpyie. Funny how things stick with you. It was actually the same place her mother had gone. Then she went on to university in Prague.”

“Little dicey having a billionaire’s daughter running around alone like that.”

“She had security. And nothing happened to her.”

“She mentioned that she’s involved in the family business?”

“That’s correct.”

“What can you tell me about her career there?”

“Why is that necessary?”

“Again, I’m just trying to form pictures of all the players, and presumably you invited me on this trip so I could learn things. And with Charlotte unavailable?”

Mueller sighed. “She started out in natural resources and then migrated to finance. I believe she’s now involved in the hardware and software business for the data centers Woolwine Enterprises builds and leases around the world. Mr. Woolwine took the plunge into the AI business a number of years ago, before anyone really saw it as a big deal.”

“I understand he’s into crypto as well?”

“Yes, the mining part of it.”

“Charlotte said she almost became a socialist when she was at university.”

“We’re all socialists when we’re at university, Agent Devine. Then we enter the real world and have to think and act differently. But I do know that Charlotte intends to emulate her mother and give away a large portion of her fortune.”

“Looks like her mother had great influence over her.”

“I think they were very much alike.” Mueller checked his watch. “Look, I’m sorry to cut this short, but it’s getting late and I need to catch up on some work before getting a few hours’ sleep. Have a good rest.”

He left Devine, who immediately got on his phone, logged in to the Wi-Fi, and looked up the exact circumstances of Martha Woolwine’s murder.

She had died at her equestrian estate near Canberra. She’d been out to see her house manager at the woman’s cottage on the property, about a half mile from the main house. Martha Woolwine had taken a golf cart out there, spoken with the manager, and then left. Her body had been found slumped over in the golf cart. The house manager, a woman named Emily Roylott, had given information to the police about a man she had seen leaving the area about that time. He had passed by Roylott’s cottage, presumably after

killing Woolwine. No motive had ever turned up. While Roylott had gotten a good look at him, the man had never been found.

Carlton Woolwine had offered a $1,000,000 reward for information leading to the killer. The reward had never been collected, which told Devine a lot. Most important, that whoever had done the deed had had a lot of help disappearing.

Devine put his phone away, then scooted over to another chair that had been turned into a lie-flat bed that was nicer than the one he usually slept on. Katie had already provided bedding and pillows, PJs, and a sleep mask, and it was lights out for Devine for the next eight and a half hours on the trip to down under.

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CHAPTER

15

DEVINE AWOKE, STRETCHED, HIT THE main lavatory, showered, changed into fresh clothes, and was then served a breakfast that was on par with the dinner. The second pilot crew was currently completing the last leg to Sydney while the other pair were in their beds for the duration.

After breakfast he spoke with Mueller some more, but it didn't yield much. He asked about Charlotte Woolwine and was told she had never left her private cabin; her breakfast had been served in there. Devine was frustrated, since the whole point of the trip on Woolwine wings was to gain info to further his investigation.

He told Mueller this in blunt terms, to which the man replied, "One can't control grief, Agent Devine. I'm sure Ms. Woolwine will be available to speak again."

"She needs to be," said Devine, thinking of the comatose Theresa Lee back in New York. "There aren't many left who can."

An hour later they were wheels down and smoothly hit the tarmac a little ahead of their estimated arrival time.

It was May, which meant it was late fall in Sydney, and the cooler temps hit Devine as soon as the cabin door opened. The highs over the next week were forecast to be in the mid-sixties and lows in the mid-fifties with rain in spots.

Agents from Australia's Border Force came directly to the jet to clear them through passport control and customs.

As Devine and the others stepped off the jet, twin Maybach sedans and a burgundy Range Rover were waiting. The two-man security team climbed into the Rover while Mueller rode with Devine in one of the Maybachs. Charlotte Woolwine had a Maybach all to herself other than the chauffeur and an armed security guard who rode shotgun. She got in without a glance

or word to any of them. He noted that she was in the same warmup suit and shoes, unless she had fresh duplicates on board. And she might. Maybe triplicates.

On the drive, Mueller filled in Devine on the local investigation so far. “The NSW is leading the matter.”

“New South Wales Police Force,” said Devine, who had read up on them during the flight. “Do they have a time and cause of death?”

“Not to my knowledge. They may not have performed the autopsy yet.”

“I would have thought with the Woolwine influence, Walker’s postmortem would go to the head of the line.”

“I’m sure it *will* be expedited,” said Mueller crisply. “The AFP, or Australian Federal Police, and the Border Force will also probably make an appearance. AFP doesn’t investigate homicides as a matter of course, but because of Bill’s work background, there are national security interests at stake. The Border Force will be involved because he was clearly brought into this country in some way that avoided official channels.”

“I’ll need to see the body and be brought up-to-date on the investigation.”

“I’ll take you there later this morning and introduce you around.”

“And do you play an official role in all this?” asked Devine, who did not like this offer from Mueller in the least.

“I work for the Woolwines. That is my only role. Once you get handed off to the police, then you’re on your own.” He paused. “But we would appreciate being kept in the loop on things,” he added, giving Devine a significant glance.

Devine didn’t bother replying to this. He didn’t intend to keep the Woolwines or their “representative” in the loop on anything. “I understand they were getting divorced and that he’d moved back to America.”

“Yes, that is correct,” conceded Mueller.

“What can you tell me about their relationship? Good, bad?”

“Can I ask why?”

“My job is to find out who killed Bill Walker and why,” replied Devine.

“You can’t believe his wife had anything to do with that! You saw how grief-stricken she was.”

“I don’t believe or disbelieve anything at this point. But a majority of the time the spouse is the murderer. And murderers often make great actors.”

“Well, this is in the minority, then.”

“So, nothing you can tell me?”

“They fell in love, married, had three wonderful children, and then . . . ” He shrugged.

“I understand it was Walker who initiated the divorce.”

“Who told you that?”

“Is that right or not?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“I thought you worked for them.”

“I do. But I don’t analyze or offer opinions about them,” shot back Mueller.

“Well, you just offered up that his wife couldn’t have been involved in her husband’s murder,” pointed out Devine. “I would call that a pretty big opinion.”

“That’s different,” said Mueller plaintively.

No, it’s really not different at all, thought Devine, but he decided not to continue the debate. “I guess father and daughter were devastated by Martha Woolwine’s murder.”

Mueller looked genuinely saddened. “Mrs. Woolwine was a wonderful person. She could have simply played the role of a billionaire’s elegant and sophisticated wife. But instead, she traveled to neglected places around the world using their fortune to do good.”

“So her case has really gone cold?”

“Apparently, although I believe Mr. Woolwine has his own people working on it.”

“Good to hear. And I can find the NSW cops on my own.”

“If you prefer.”

“I do,” said Devine.

“We’re just trying to assist.”

“Sometimes the best manner in which to do that is to stay out of the way, particularly in a case like this.”

Mueller dropped Devine off at a small hotel near the Harbour Bridge.

As he checked in, Devine knew all this was connected to either Walker’s professional life or his personal one. And right now it was even money in Devine’s estimation of which one would win out.

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CHAPTER

16

THE WOMAN WAITING FOR HIM in an office at NSW Police Headquarters was in her mid-thirties, around five seven with strawberry blond hair, and looked like she worked out pretty much every day. Her name, she told Devine, was Anais Jones. She was a DS, or detective sergeant, with the NSW Police Force. Her badge carried the NSW crest and simply read DETECTIVE. Jones was dressed in civilian clothes, black slacks and jacket, white blouse, comfortable shoes. He noted the subcompact Glock 17 riding on a belt clip, along with a pair of sturdy cuffs. Her demeanor was coolly professional, but Devine sensed that the woman probably had another side to her; he just didn't know what it might be.

"The police officer who brought me here had a colored backing plate on his creds," said Devine.

She nodded. "We refer to them as *warrant cards*. Yes—light blue, constable; dark blue, sergeant; red for inspector; green for a super. I was in uniform for four years before starting the process to become a detective. But becoming a police officer isn't easy. You have to earn a University Certificate in Work Force Essentials, which takes a month at Charles Sturt University. Then comes seventy-three weeks of training, including forty-two weeks online."

"Doesn't take nearly that long in America," noted Devine.

"The detective odyssey starts with earning the required benchmark score, and then facing the bull ring."

"The bull ring?" interjected Devine.

"An oral exam overseen by a panel of high-ranking officers. Then you have more hoops to jump through that take up to eighteen months to complete."

"Then you're set at detective until retirement?"

“No. Most detectives rotate back to uniform to further their careers, promotions, that sort of thing. Some PhDs are easier to earn than a detective’s warrant card.”

“Impressive,” said Devine, and he meant it. He also didn’t take her remarks to be humble bragging. She seemed to be intimating: *I earned the right to be here*. He surmised that, unfortunately, her gender might have had something to do with that attitude.

After a short walk they were standing outside a hospital. The remains of Bill Walker were in the hospital’s mortuary, in a special postmortem room, she had informed him.

“I oversee a five-person investigative team on this, Agent Devine. And we have uniforms on the ground as well, of course.”

Devine nodded. “I also understand your federal police and border guys may be involved?”

She looked at him curiously. “And where did you hear that?”

“A little bird told me.”

“That sounds like a movie line.”

“Pretty sure that’s where I got it.”

She didn’t crack a smile. “They will be involved to a certain extent. I’m with the Sydney Homicide Squad; we have primary jurisdiction. The Marine Area Command, or MAC, pulled Walker’s body out of the water, which is why they’re involved. Walker entered the country through other than normal channels, which is why Border Force is interested. The AFP is in the loop principally because of the potential national security implications. And of course the folks from FETSC are involved.” She added, “Forensic Evidence and Technical Services Command.”

“And here I thought we had the monopoly on acronym agencies, but you guys are giving us a run for our money.”

This did prompt a smile from her. Then she glanced at the hospital. “You ready?”

“Lead the way.”

A few minutes later they entered a room that was quite ordinary looking, except for the body under the sheet on the metal table in the center of the space.

“The autopsy has been completed,” said Jones.

“And the findings?”

“I’ll send the report to your cell phone.” He gave her the number and she sent it off.

“This will not be pleasant,” she cautioned. “There are sharks and lots of spinning boat props in Sydney Harbour.”

She lifted the sheet and they both looked down at Walker’s body.

His right arm and the bottom part of his left leg were mostly gone. And his face was, well, no longer there.

She gazed at Devine, who showed no signs of discomfort. “I take it you’ve seen dead bodies before?”

“Not many in water, but a lot in the desert. The only difference is there is more of Walker left than the ones I’m used to. IEDs,” he added.

She hiked her eyebrows at this remark.

“With the face not being there and all, I take it you identified him through his prints?”

“And dental records and known birthmarks just to make absolutely certain, since salt water can do a number on adequate finger ridges, which are necessary for a clean print ID. We usually have a family member also ID the remains. But that would have been . . . ”

“Far more politically fraught than useful?” Devine finished for her.

“Quite astute of you.”

“No question he was dead before he went into the water?” asked Devine.

“None. There was minimal water in his lungs.” She then pointed to the back of his head. “And two contact gunshot wounds there and there. The bullets exited through the front of his head. That was partly the cause of the damage there. Sharks and maybe a boat propeller or two did the rest.”

“Large-caliber gun, then. And the placement meant someone was making sure of no miraculous recovery.” Devine thought of Theresa Lee lying in a hospital bed with two rounds also in her.

“We’ve also advised Sergeant Drury of this.”

“Who’s he?”

“AFP point man on this.”

“You work with him before?”

“Yes.” She said no more, but her expression told Devine that her experience with Drury might not have been all that pleasant.

“You like the AFP?” he asked.

“They have their good and bad.”

“What’s the good?” he asked.

“Their cases cover a lot of different areas and go across the country.”

“And the bad?”

“The pay is not the best, and sometimes the men there can be . . . difficult,” she answered bluntly. She glanced at him. “But, then again, men can be difficult anywhere.”

“I hope not to add to that . . . challenge for you.”

“I share in that hope, Agent Devine.”

“You can just call me Travis.”

“And I’m Anais.”

“Never knew an Anais before.”

Her expression brightened. “My mother’s family is French, and it’s a popular name there and in Switzerland. There’s a name from the Bible that is close to it which means ‘favored by God.’”

“Not a bad thing, if you can get it.”

“But not a certain thing, either,” she replied.

Devine looked back at the body. “He had to come here by private jet, don’t you think? There’s no way they would transport him commercially.”

“We and Border Force are checking into that. But the records are not always in order, up-to-date, or accurate.”

“The Woolwines have a private jet.”

“The family actually has *three* of them.”

“I guess you don’t want billionaires twiddling their thumbs on the runway.”

“Your first time to Australia?”

“Yep. Your accent seems to indicate that you’re a native.”

“I was born in Queensland, and my parents moved to Sydney when I was little. Joined the police force right out of university. My father was an officer in Queensland and then at the police here. He retired a few years ago. I was a senior sergeant when I made the jump to detective. Been with NSW Police for well over a decade.”

“In your blood, then.”

“Yes. And you?”

“United States Army, also for about a decade. Mustered out as a captain. Then I did a stint on Wall Street and now DHS.”

“Wall Street? Wasn’t that an unusual career detour?”

“Practically unheard of.”

She waited for him to add to this statement but Devine did not.

“Uniform didn’t suit you?” she finally said.

“Suited me just fine.”

“Then what happened?”

“Life happened.”

“You like working for DHS?” she asked after a couple beats of silence.

“So far,” he replied. “Who found Walker and where?”

“A ferry had docked at a stop when the body came to the surface. More than a few passengers, uh, tossed their cookies, I think you Yanks say.”

“So why bring him back to Australia only to kill him?” asked Devine.

“If we knew that, we would probably know all.”

“Was there any sighting of Walker in Australia before his body turned up?”

“None. And, as I alluded to, there’s no record of him going through passport control either,” noted Jones. “Which means he entered the country improperly.”

“Doubt he had a choice. Would evading official channels be difficult?”

“Ordinarily yes, but not impossible with the right resources.”

Devine said, “People with private wings normally have the right resources.”

“Agreed,” said Jones.

“Any trace on the body to help us?”

“Not that we have found so far. But Forensics will look again. I don’t hold out much hope. Water destroys pretty much everything. But we might get lucky.”

“Belongings?” asked Devine.

“Just the clothes he had on. Nothing else.”

“I found out that he was on anti-nausea meds prescribed by an *oncologist*.”

“It was a little more than that, actually.”

“What do you mean?” asked Devine.

“I mean they murdered a dying man. Bill Walker was terminal.”

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CHAPTER

17

DEVINE SAT IN A SEAT on the bow of an eleven-meter rigid hull inflatable boat, or RHIB, with a brisk, chilly wind in his face as the vessel raced across choppy Sydney Harbour. He glanced back at the Opera House as it quickly receded into the distance. He'd read that it had been partially inspired by seashells and it looked it. And that fact helped him not one iota in his mission.

Devine zipped up the front of his jacket as the wind continued to buffet him. There were dozens of commercial ferries and private power boats and more than a few sailboats whizzing over the water. Whoever was piloting a craft out here had to be paying attention, he knew. The harbor was enormous, and he wondered how many bodies had been dumped into it over the centuries. And whether what was left of Bill Walker would be enough to get him to the truth. He doubted it.

After about ten minutes the boat slowed and came to a stop near a small dock with a glass-enclosed space for passengers waiting for the ferry.

Devine read the sign. "Darling Point?"

He turned to Anais Jones, who sat next to him, the wind whipping her hair around her shoulders.

"This is the Darling Point Wharf. It's a ferry stop, like I mentioned before. Behind it is a very upscale neighborhood, multimillion-dollar properties abound. As I also said, Walker's body surfaced right as the ferry was picking up passengers from here. We're having an analysis done on winds and currents prevailing at the time to try to determine where the body went in before it reached this spot. Should have the results soon."

"How long do they think he was in the water?" asked Devine as he surveyed the area, taking in the moored boats, the moving watercraft, and

the shoreline that was dotted with multistory expensive homes and beautiful, tiered gardens.

“Based on all the applicable forensics, bacterial load, body bloat, maceration, and other technical issues I’d much rather not think about, at least twenty-four hours up to thirty-six.”

“How long was he dead in total?”

“*That* timeline gets messy, but the pathologist thinks he went into the harbor within an hour of death.”

“So they must have taken him right from New York to Sydney.”

“Agreed.”

“You sure he didn’t go into the water right here?”

“The damage to the body demonstrated he traveled some distance. Besides, if he had gone into the water here, he wouldn’t have remained here. The current would have carried him away.”

Devine nodded. “But despite what the pathologist said, they might have killed him en route to Australia. Easier to get a dead body into a country than a live prisoner who might create a ruckus or attempt to escape.”

“I had already considered that possibility, Travis. But if the pathologist is right, he was alive when he got here. And they could have sedated Walker to prevent any *problems*.”

“By the way, has Sergeant Drury shown up yet in the investigation?”

She shrugged. “I’m not his babysitter.”

“But I would imagine this has a pretty high priority, what with the connection to the Woolwines and all.”

“*Every* case is important,” she retorted.

The boat docked, and Devine and Jones got off while the pilot waited on board.

Jones pointed out the spot where Walker’s body had appeared. After studying this Devine then gazed over the harbor.

“Pretty place.”

“Lots of tourists come to Sydney and then want to stay. But then again, most people can’t afford to live here. I make a good wage, but I still live way out of town as do most police officers.”

Devine turned to look at her. “So they bring him to the harbor, dead or alive, and dump him, and the currents bring him here after the sharks and props do their business on his corpse. He gets discovered, you do the post, looks like a pro hit, and it all started in New York City.”

“I think it started *before* New York City,” replied Jones.

“You’re actually right about that,” agreed Devine. “Someone sent out a hit team on him in New York. But the reason they did it had to come earlier.”

“He was part of Five Eyes, we know that. Then he returned to the States and went private. What can you add?”

“I talked to his new company. They said he was still filling out the paperwork and such and really hadn’t done anything for them to warrant someone wanting to kill him.”

“Do you believe them?” asked Jones.

“I don’t believe anyone, not even myself sometimes.”

She smiled. “Most men I know are so sure of themselves. They never make mistakes.”

“People who think that way, I’ve found, make more mistakes than most.”

“What does Walker’s new firm do? Why would they want him?”

“It’s apparently a secret, but we’re doing some digging. But I am surprised Walker took a new job when he knew he was dying.”

“It’s also surprising that he initiated divorce proceedings when he knew he was terminal.”

He looked at her. “Do you know for sure that he did?”

“Walker filed for divorce months ago here in Sydney where they were married.”

“Reasons?”

“The record is sealed. Other than the fact of the filing, nothing else can be released.”

“But he initiated it?”

“Yes.”

“I wonder if his wife knew he had cancer. I didn’t have an opportunity to ask her about it on the flight down.”

“So how was the flight on the Woolwine jet?”

“I’m afraid I’m spoiled for life. Not even first class will cut it.”

She smiled. “Lucky you.”

“I was ordered to fly down with them in the hope that I would learn something important. That did not turn out to be the case. But whether she knew her husband was terminally ill will be one of the questions we’ll have to put to her.”

He gazed around. “Since you’re still checking to see where he went into the drink, I take it nobody saw where they might have put Walker’s body into the water?”

“Well, no one has come forward so far.”

Devine looked behind him, at the property adjacent to the ferry stop. “What’s that place?”

“McKell Park,” explained Jones. “Public gardens with Canonbury Cottage as the centerpiece. You can book it for events, weddings, parties, and such. I’ve actually been there for a friend’s baby shower.”

“So anyone can get in there at any time?”

“It officially opens at seven a.m. and closes at seven thirty in the evening. But, again, this is *not* where the body went into the water,” pointed out Jones.

“What kind of cancer did Walker have?”

“The pathologist thought it had started in the colon, but it had metastasized—liver, bone, lymph nodes. He told us that based on what he saw during the autopsy Walker only had about six months left, a year at the very most, with a lot of very aggressive treatments.”

“I’ll have my folks check with his oncologist in the States to get more details.”

“Thanks.” She looked around. “A long fall for the man. Married to a billionaire. Then cancer and his body ending up over there.” She glanced at the water.

“Now all we have to figure out is the why of it all.”

On the boat ride back Jones got a call.

“Well, well, speak of the devil. Sergeant Drury wants to meet with us.”

“Where and when?”

“Circular Quay, in fifteen minutes. At a coffee shop. The boat will take us directly there.”

He studied her. “Something wrong?” he asked.

“We’ll have to see, won’t we?” she replied cryptically.

“Meaning?”

“Meaning the AFP almost never goes near a homicide. And while I said they were involved because of potential national security issues, that was mostly the company line coming from me. I’ve seen many ‘national security cases’ they wouldn’t even take a sniff of. Which makes me wonder why this is different.”

“You have a theory?”
“Oh yes, it’s called the Woolwine Syndrome. Epidemic in these parts.”
“Good thing I got all my shots before I came, then,” replied Devine.
That line actually got a chuckle from DS Jones.

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CHAPTER

18

SERGEANT LEWIS DRURY WAS IN his fifties, barely Jones's height, wiry and a buck fifty in weight, with a bald head, a thin graying mustache, and a sharp chin. Devine noted the badge and insignia on the man's uniform. An emu and a kangaroo were depicted on either side of the badge's shield. Devine didn't recognize the objects at the crown of the badge that seemed to mirror each other. When he asked about them Drury said gruffly, "They're platypuses, the official emblem of the AFP."

Devine looked at him in confusion, mixed with a level of amusement that he was trying awfully hard to keep off his face. "*Duckbill* platypuses?"

Drury said stiffly, "*Platypuses* are unique to Australia. And they are capable of great stealth and adaptability, and their venom is an impressive defensive aptitude. They are also some of the most tenacious creatures on earth." He added firmly, "And so are we."

"Well, lucky for us then," said Devine, giving Jones a side-eye. But she was looking out at the water with an expression of mild disgust.

As they drank their coffees at an outdoor café on Circular Quay, the ferries, large and small, came and went at frequent intervals from their slips. Like planes at an airport, their schedules were set forth on electronic marquees at each gate entrance.

When they'd earlier boarded the police boat from one of the slips in Circular Quay, Devine had noted the tap-on and tap-off system for the ferries, using one's phone instead of cash. Jones had told him that she never even took her credit card out to pay for anything. Her phone was her money.

"Good thing my Apple Pay is up-to-date," Devine had quipped.

Now a light rain had begun to fall. Devine snuggled into his windbreaker and sipped his coffee as he watched a large Disney ocean liner

being deftly guided to the Quay's main dock by two sturdy tugboats connected to the bigger ship by stout ropes. The image of David and Goliath came to his mind.

Sort of like me and this case.

Drury said, "Lovely time of year to be in Sydney, Agent Devine. Not too hot, not too cold. Despite this little bit of inclemency you picked the timing of your murder well."

"Well, I wouldn't put it quite that way."

"So, any questions for the AFP?" said Drury. "It's my great, good fortune to be the liaison officer with the NSW Police and the Americans. Nevertheless, I do like to do my job properly."

The man's clearly sarcastic tone and matching word choices made Devine glance at Jones again; she still only had eyes for the water.

"Yeah, really looking forward to working with you, too," said Devine with what he hoped were heaps of sarcasm right back.

Two can play that shit, international relations or not.

Drury looked at Jones. "Your and my lads get along pretty well for the most part. One big happy family, really. Right, DS?"

Devine looked at Jones, and the woman just continued to stare off, as though she had not heard a word Drury had said.

Unperturbed, Drury continued. "Anything further on where he was put into the water, and when?"

Still not looking at him Jones said, "Working on it, *mate*."

Drury smiled and nodded. "Tides, currents, and wind are a tricky business hereabouts, although I believe they have a formula they use based on the conditions. I'm sure the good folks at MAC will have something to go on soon enough. And with a location to focus on, we can start making some inroads. CCTV and all that." He paused and took a sip of his coffee. "I understand you flew down on one of the Woolwines' jets, Agent Devine. With Charlotte Woolwine herself on board."

"How did you know that?"

"It's my job to know that. And did she tell you anything useful?" asked Drury.

"That she loved her husband."

"Even though they were getting divorced?" interjected Jones.

"Love sometimes doesn't come into play," said Drury, with a quick glance at Jones. "He filed for divorce but that's all we know."

“Because the record has been sealed,” said Jones.

Drury said, “Of course it has. It’s the *Woolwines*. They’ve been mostly successful keeping it out of the news, but tongues will wag in a vacuum. Now, many husbands are killed by their wives and vice versa. Although if she did it, Charlotte Woolwine wouldn’t have dirtied her own hands. She’d have hired someone.”

“Like the team that abducted him in New York?” said Devine.

“Perhaps.”

“And flew Walker down here to kill him?”

“I’m just speculating, but if the wife wanted one last confrontation?” said Drury.

“We flew out of LAX two nights ago. Would the timing have worked for her to be in Australia when her husband got here?”

“You’re assuming I’ve looked into that,” said Drury.

“Well, I just assumed you would know *that*, too.”

Drury shrugged. “It *was* doable, actually. Private jets are amazing things, aren’t they, especially for long trips. You don’t have to lodge with us riffraff, so to speak.”

“Is she a suspect, then, in your eyes?” asked Jones, who looked surprised by his comments. “Because it’s far too early for us to conclude that. We’re just beginning our investigation.”

“She’s not a suspect. Yet. And for the Woolwines every duck must be in a row, or else we’ll be looking for other work, Jones. We’re mere cogs in a big wheel and expendable under such circumstances.”

Devine glanced at Jones. From the woman’s expression it seemed to him that she had heard this little speech before from Drury or other AFP personnel.

“Do you have any reason to suspect her other than she’s his spouse and has a private jet and the means to hire people to do her dirty work?” said Devine.

“Well, what you just said are pretty strong grounds to at least look in her direction.”

“And the motive?” said Jones.

“Perhaps Charlotte Woolwine didn’t want the divorce. And maybe she decided to make sure he couldn’t go through with it. I mean, leaving the Woolwines? Just isn’t done.” He turned to Jones. “Have you officially questioned her yet?”

“We’re compiling our list of interviews and she’s certainly on it.”

Drury smiled and turned back to Devine. “Delicate business. You can’t just go barging in on the likes of the Woolwines. The attorneys they have on retainer are far better than the chaps we have on salary. As I just alluded to before, you make a mistake by acting too soon, you’re not going to get a second shot.”

“Their rep, Dennis Mueller, said they were eager to help with the investigation.”

Drury chuckled. “I’m sure he did. And I’d like to sell you the Harbour Bridge. Interested?”

“Have you dealt with the Woolwines before?” asked Devine.

Drury again eyed Jones. “They turn up in unexpected places from time to time. Not their doing, of course. They have so much wealth that criminals can’t resist trying to take some of it away. And on the business side only the Woolworths Group employs more Australians than the Woolwines. That gets you the PM’s ear anytime you want.”

“Which makes it surprising that Martha Woolwine’s murder was never solved,” said Devine.

Jones and Drury exchanged a brief glance. Jones said, “Not my jurisdiction. That was the lads from the capital territorial police in Canberra, which is actually an arm of the AFP.” She looked inquiringly at Drury.

His cocksure manner vanishing, he said, “That investigation is still ongoing and I can’t comment on it.”

“Of course you can’t,” said Jones. “More *i*’s to dot and *t*’s to cross, I’m sure. But if you chaps need help, we’re always standing by.”

“I highly doubt that will happen!” exclaimed Drury.

Devine noted that the woman had finally gotten under the man’s skin.

And apparently Jones was not done.

“Don’t be too sure about that. This case looks complex, and you know as well as I do that you AFP boys rarely get your dainty hands dirty with ‘mere’ homicides.”

Devine had to hold back a laugh.

Jones and Drury did a little steely-eyed dance before Devine said, “Have you looked into Walker’s work at Five Eyes? That’s top of our list and the reason I’m here.”

Drury slowly drew his gaze from Jones. “As you can imagine, that’s also a can of worms. All hush-hush, classified, and ‘if we tell you we have

to kill you' sort of bullshit." He smiled ruefully. "I hate spies. I really do."

Jones said, "I've filed the paperwork to get us access to all of that."

"Paper means nothing to those blokes, Jones. When are you going to learn that, silly girl."

Devine shot Jones a look. She did not look surprised by the man's demeaning words.

"Official channels still have to be gone through," replied Jones. "Otherwise, we're getting nowhere fast. And while what you said about Charlotte Woolwine makes perfect sense, it's not the only possibility to explain what happened to Walker. And we have to run them all down."

Instead of replying to her Drury turned to Devine. "What do you think, Agent Devine? Nice to get another *man's* opinion on things."

When Devine once more glanced at Jones he was somewhat surprised that the sheer power of her gaze had not burned a hole right through Drury's head.

"Well, we had an incident where a woman stole something from Lee's apartment. That could be important."

Jones said, "Theresa Lee? The woman who was shot when Walker was abducted?"

"Right. Lee's a journalist working for an independent news agency. They handle big stories involving heavy hitters who have the wherewithal to strike back. Hard."

"We understand that she's still alive," said Jones.

"I don't think we can count on her waking up and telling us anything useful."

"You still haven't told me what you think," Drury pointed out.

"My first day on the job down here, Sergeant Drury. I'm keeping an open mind and still assembling facts. I've got a long way to go before I can reach even preliminary conclusions. It *could* be purely domestic, but if so they didn't have to try to kill Lee. If it has something to do with Walker's former career, they didn't have to kill her, either. But it might be something that involves Lee as well, which might explain why they shot her."

"So maybe not a coincidence that she was with Walker when the abductors caught up to him, then?" noted Jones thoughtfully.

"I have people back in New York checking into that angle."

Drury said, "Damn press is already all over this. Bloody pests. We'll have to interview the Woolwines on the sly so they and we won't be

flooded with media."

"But is the AFP ready to do that yet?" asked Jones. "From what you just said about ducks in a row I wouldn't have thought—"

He interrupted. "Exactly, you haven't *thought*. Look, Jones, you need to up your game on this. This isn't the usual petty shit at the NSW Police. It's the big time."

She held out her warrant card. "I'm a detective sergeant in the Homicide Squad of the Sydney City PAC. My job *is* the fucking big time."

"It's a case with global, not *local* ramifications," said Drury, as though he hadn't even heard her fiery response. "Finesse and a thoughtful approach are called for. Tactics and strategy." Drury took a sip of his coffee and stared out at the harbor. "You blokes are basically a good lot, DS Jones. Apologies if I ruffled your feathers. But we *are* the federal police. And we have to see the big picture." He looked over at Devine. "Don't take this the wrong way, but you seem pretty junior to have been sent out on something like this."

"I'm older than I look."

"Heard you were in the U.S. Army."

"And where did you hear that?"

"You Yanks aren't the only ones with sources."

Devine said, "I mustered out as a captain after about ten years."

Drury nodded. "That's pretty unusual, isn't it? My son's in the army here. He's staying for the whole ride and the nice bit of pension attached."

"Individualism, it's what makes the world go round and round," replied Devine. "At least *my* world. I never thought being led around by the nose was the best use of my time. Vanilla in, some stupid shit out. Maybe you think differently."

His focus was on Drury, so he didn't see Jones smile appreciatively at his retort.

"Deployed to the Middle East, I suppose," said Drury in a snarky tone.

"Yep."

"You Yanks are always getting into trouble. And then pulling everyone else along for the ride."

"Feel free to take our place as the world's policeman."

He was growing tired of this pissing contest but didn't see an off-ramp yet.

Drury drained his coffee and stood. “Well, I must be going. Idle hands. And I’ve got a full plate of cases.”

“Does that mean you’re not going to be working *this* case?” Devine asked.

Drury gave him a look that was difficult to interpret. “No, Agent Devine, I don’t mean that at all.” He glanced at Jones. “I plan to work this case very hard. And just hope that *others* don’t fuck it up before *I* get to the truth.”

He walked off, his swagger matching his personality stride for stride.

Devine looked at Jones. “I can understand your lack of enthusiasm about working with him.”

“I’ve encountered a couple dozen Sergeant Drurys in my career. Their beef is they don’t think women should be doing this job.”

“Some of my best colleagues in the Army and my job now have been women.”

“Well, I hope I can join those ranks.”

Devine’s phone buzzed and he looked down at the screen and frowned. “I have to take this,” he told Jones as he got up and walked off.

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CHAPTER

19

"DANNY, HOW IS HE?" DEVINE said into the phone. He was actually feeling more anxious than he thought he would.

"Stable, alert, and eating. All excellent signs."

"Then why do you sound so worried?"

"Because I haven't figured out what's wrong with him yet."

"I thought you would have contacted me before now."

"There was nothing to report. I've been scrambling to try to make sense of what's going on. The medical team here is okay, but not at the level I would prefer."

"Not everyone gets to go to the Mayo Clinic."

"I understand that, Travis. So are you in New York?"

"No, Australia."

"Australia! Doing what?"

"Working. So tell me what you're holding back."

"Why do you think I'm holding something back?"

"We may be far apart in age, but we're still brothers, Danny. And you're too brilliant a doctor not to have some opinions by now."

He could hear his brother sigh. "The chief problem is thrombocytopenia."

"English, big brother."

"It means his platelets are alarmingly low. We've given him multiple transfusions to get them back up, but they immediately go back down. That's very worrisome."

"Life-threateningly worrisome?"

"You can't survive for long with platelets that low. The blood is unable to clot. You can have brain bleeds, internal hemorrhaging. Even a slight injury can be fatal. And if he actually *has* a stroke? He's dead. And we can't

just keep giving him transfusions. If we can't figure that out and get it back up to normal, bad things are going to happen. I just wish I knew what had brought this on. He didn't have anything really wrong with him, at least for his age."

"When I saw him . . . "

"What? Did he say anything?" exclaimed Dan.

"Just that he was stressed about Mom and the dementia thing."

"Look, there's no proof of that."

"He thinks there is, and stress can do bad things to you. And she needs to get tested. That'll be proof. You're a doc, you know that."

"Look, I . . . my hands are full with Dad's issues. I . . . don't have the bandwidth to confront Mom over this."

Okay, you really are a momma's boy. "If you won't talk to her, get Claire to do it. Mom respects the hell out of her."

"She respects you, too, Travis."

Devine ignored this. "How is Mom?"

"Worried as hell, but trying hard not to show it."

"And Claire's status?" asked Devine.

"She's scheduled to land in New Haven in about an hour. She had a helluva time getting back. The corporate jet had a mechanical malfunction, and two commercial flights she was scheduled to be on were canceled due to weather. Anyway, she'll be here soon."

Devine said, "Look, be straight with me. What do you think is going on with Dad? They said a stroke initially, but what you just said doesn't jibe with that."

"He clearly did not have a full-fledged stroke, but he might have suffered a ministroke, or TIA. An MRI was done and will reveal if something like that occurred. Depending on what the MRI shows, surgery may be needed to address any problem. Because once you have a TIA another potentially far more devastating stroke is very likely to happen within a fairly short period of time."

"And the platelets?"

"It presents totally differently. And if he did have a TIA, whatever was going on with the platelets should have resolved but hasn't. I'm having a full blood workup done, along with a battery of other tests."

"But won't taking blood from him cause him to bleed out?"

“We’ll give him an anticoagulant to prevent that, but there is some risk. However, we can’t keep flying blind. I hope to know more soon. But it might turn out to be idiopathic.”

“But if you don’t know what caused it, you can’t treat it.”

“We’re not there yet. And I’ll do all I can to make sure he beats whatever he’s up against.”

“Make sure you do. Dad told me he wants him and Mom to have some great golden years together. They both deserve it.”

Devine clicked off and stared down at his phone. And his trembling hand.

He drew a deep breath and his hand grew steady.

Come on, Dad, you can beat this. Do it for Mom. And maybe . . . do it for me.

He rejoined Jones.

“Everything okay?” she said.

“Yeah, fine. Look, Drury sounded like he wanted to nail the Woolwines to the wall. Does that make sense to you?”

“Taking on a family like that comes with both personal and professional risks. So you have to calculate those risks and rewards. And then do whatever you can to lower the risks and increase the potential reward.” She fell silent and stared at him, apparently waiting for Devine to catch on to what she was intimating.

He said, “So he lets us free in the field. We mess up, no blowback on the AFP, and we take the heat. But we get the goods, he and the feds swoop in, and Drury uses that to get his next promotion.”

She smiled. “You Yanks are fast learners. But maybe you have to play the same game in the States.”

“We do. And I’m surprised you’ve been so candid with a complete stranger like me.”

“After a while the misogyny wears you down to the point where you just don’t care who knows what.”

He nodded slowly, taking this in. “I miss being in uniform, I really do, but I can’t say I miss the bullshit that went along with it.”

“Thank you for *your* candidness,” she replied.

“So while we wait for the MAC guys to figure where Walker went into the harbor, what next?”

“Walker’s position at Five Eyes? I’ve got us an appointment with his former superior in Sydney in an hour.”

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CHAPTER

20

THEY DROVE IN JONES'S DAPPER, unmarked VW Passat.

"Nice ride," noted Devine.

"Inconspicuous is the benchmark. But you should see what the highway patrol drives. BMW X5s and Chrysler 300s with nuclear reactors under the hood."

"Thanks for driving. Not sure I can get used to being on the other side of the road."

"The roundabouts are the most confusing parts when it comes to that. Lots of Americans and Europeans go the wrong way on them. I'm sure I'd be hopeless in the States."

As he looked around at the small interior, she noted his expression and said, "I know, Americans like driving tanks. But our streets and car parks are not set up for that."

"Well, I'm sure you get much better gas mileage."

"And we're transitioning to a far more hybrid and electric fleet. But we lack an abundance of charging stations, and you don't want to be driving across the Outback and run out of juice. But here in Sydney, it works okay."

"We were heading to a more green future and then we weren't. The fossil fuel guys are tenacious, flush with cash, and politicians have sticky fingers."

"Yeah, profit over planet," Jones said dryly. "You Yanks lead the world in that. We're going solar very fast. But then again, we export a ton of coal and gas."

"Nobody's perfect. So we're heading to Five Eyes HQ?"

"No. Five Eyes' central office is in Canberra."

"I heard its choice as the capital was the result of a pissing contest between Sydney and Melbourne."

She drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. “Both cities wanted to be the center of government. When that didn’t work out, they argued that the capital had to be roughly equidistant between the two goliaths. Melbourne got the short stick on that. It’s seven hours from there to Canberra by car, while Sydney’s only about three. And Melbourne also got its knickers in a twist when Sydney wanted the tennis tournament moved there. But then that didn’t happen. Publicly they refer to it as a friendly rivalry, but privately? I’ve seen the knives come out. My colleagues in Victoria can get a bit competitive.”

“So where are we headed then?”

“Two different places, actually. First up is ASD, the Australian Signals Directorate. It has offices here and in Melbourne and Canberra. It’s where the collection of intel, cybersecurity, and information ops takes place. In addition to Five Eyes, Walker also worked there as part of a joint task force.”

“And the other?”

“FIORC. Really, don’t you just love the acronyms? It stands for Five Eyes Intelligence Oversight and Review Council. And there’s a third office housing the Five Eyes Law Enforcement Group.”

“FELEG. Sort of like phlegm.”

She smiled. “Quick study, you are. They focus on serious crime and national security, so I could see them getting involved depending on what our investigation turns up.”

“Lot of cooks in the kitchen.”

“We have a good relationship with FELEG, although there’s always some territorial stuff going on. And in a case like this, involving the Woolwine family, things could go sideways fast. I’m not sure they want to be anywhere near this case, quite frankly. And if Walker’s job is the reason he was taken and killed? They might have a conflict because we’d be investigating *them*.”

Ten minutes later they were sitting in an office facing a man who stared sadly back at them. He was Cletus Barnes, Walker’s immediate superior when he had worked there.

“Awful, how tragic,” said Barnes mournfully. “He will be much missed.”

“And it’s our job to find out who killed him,” said Jones.

Barnes turned to Devine. “And he was an American, so I presume that’s why you’re here, Agent Devine?”

“And also because he was kidnapped on American soil. What can you tell us about what Walker was working on here before he left?”

“You think his death had to do with *that*?” said Barnes, looking dubious.

“Right now we don’t know that it doesn’t, so we have to follow up that lead.”

“I reviewed your security clearances, and they are at the highest levels,” began Barnes.

Devine thought there might be a *but* coming from the man, and he was not going to be disappointed.

“But the things Bill was working on here were so . . . critical to *both* our nations’ security that I hesitate disclosing any of it to you. I’m very sorry.”

“We can get a court to order you to do so,” pointed out Jones.

“Of course, and it looks like it will have to come to that. I have superiors to answer to, just like you, DS Jones. But be forewarned, search warrants in our arena are very rarely granted.”

“Okay, what can you tell us that won’t compromise national security?” asked Devine. “Anything that you know of in Walker’s personal life that could have led to this?”

Barnes again looked doubtful. “I am aware of the manner in which he was abducted and the shooting of the woman with him. However, I can’t imagine Bill had anything going on in his personal life that would have led to such . . . extreme measures.”

“The Woolwines?” said Devine. “There was a divorce ongoing.”

“I know nothing about that.”

“But Walker filed for divorce while still working here,” said Jones. “He never spoke about it with you or anyone else?” There was deep skepticism in her tone.

“We did not have that sort of relationship. And Bill, like any good analyst, kept things close to the vest. Certainly his personal life was not something that we discussed.”

Jones and Devine exchanged a look. “Is there anything you could tell us that might prove helpful?” asked Devine.

“Absolutely nothing that I can think of,” said Barnes.

“And how long did you work with Walker?” he asked.

“I was the first person from Five Eyes that Bill met here. So over twenty years.”

“And over all that time you never went out for dinner, lunch, a drink? Never met his wife, the Woolwines? Nothing?”

Barnes bristled a bit. “Again, it was not that sort of working relationship. We did not fraternize outside of the job.”

“So is that pretty much the case throughout your office?”

“I can only speak for myself.”

Devine rose. “Well, we’ll be back with that court order as soon as possible.”

“And the attorneys here will deal with that. I hope you don’t expect to get any assistance fast, Agent Devine. This might take years, if it ever gets approved.”

Devine felt his temper rising as he slowly looked the man up and down. “Well, where I come from, with a statement like that, Mr. Barnes, you would go right to the top of *my* suspect list.”

Barnes visibly reacted with bulging eyes and a hurt look. “Well, good thing we’re not in your country, then.”

“Oh, I don’t think our countries are so different in that regard.”

He walked out and Jones, glancing once at the startled Barnes, hurried after him.

Out in the hall she said, “Do you think taking that aggressive tack was wise?”

“Remains to be seen. Sometimes making people uncomfortable is a good thing.”

“Five Eyes and Barnes’s shop are very important institutions here.”

“Doesn’t give them the right to obstruct an investigation.”

“I’m sure he was just parroting the company line about—”

“What he was saying, Anais, is ‘fuck you’ to us both with respect to any help from them on this case. And do you really think over two decades the men never exchanged any personal information? If so, you guys do things very differently. And I thought Aussies were a friendly lot.”

“We are. But now Barnes will run to his superiors and tell them that you threatened him.”

“Did you hear me threaten him?” Devine stopped and looked at her. “Did you?”

“Not in so many words, no.”

“Let me be as clear as I can be. My job is to find out who killed Bill Walker and will most likely end up killing Theresa Lee. And if that has any national security implications for my country—”

“That’s my job, too,” she retorted.

“Good. Glad we have that straight.”

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CHAPTER

21

REPRESENTATIVES FROM THE OTHER TWO agencies went one better than Cletus Barnes and simply refused to meet with them. They were turned away at the door with little explanation other than variations of the "It's classified, see you in court" sort of thing.

When they got back to Jones's car, Devine sent off a text to Campbell telling him of this. Campbell texted right back.

I'll see what I can do. In the meantime find other fronts to push forward on.

"Your boss?" asked Jones.

He nodded. "He said to push on where we can. Any ideas on that?"

"The Woolwines?"

"I thought the groundwork needed to be laid for that."

"Drury said that, not me. And you already had one interview with Charlotte Woolwine, with an understanding that a follow-up would occur. So let's hang our hat on that and see where it gets us. And this is a homicide investigation. Interviewing the spouse is a gimme."

Devine pulled out the card that Dennis Mueller had left him. "I'm game if you are," he said.

"The first twenty-four hours are critical to solving any crime. We're already well past that with no leads. We need to shake things up. So make the call."

Devine phoned Mueller, and twenty minutes later they were headed to the home that Charlotte Woolwine had lived in with Bill Walker.

As they pulled down the street the house was on, Devine looked around. "Wait, isn't this the Darling Point community where the body turned up?"

"Yes. Charlotte Woolwine has lived here for years."

"Bit of a coincidence his body ending up here," said Devine.

"You don't believe in coincidences?" replied Jones.

“No, you?”

“Not really, no. But, again, the body didn’t go into the water here.”

She stopped the Passat at an imposing double wooden gate and pressed a button on the call box.

Five minutes later they were escorted into a large room that Devine could only describe as looking like a space in a modernish cathedral. It was exquisitely furnished and decorated, and the artwork on the walls looked to be museum level. The floors were slick marble, with impressive and no doubt costly rugs laid over them. The views of the harbor were not possible to attain for less than the eight figures this place undoubtedly was worth, and just the built-in cabinetry looked like it cost more than Devine would ever earn in his entire life. All in all, it was pretty much like any run-of-the-mill billionaire’s humble abode.

Charlotte Woolwine walked in a couple of minutes later. They rose from their plush chairs to greet her. She wore faded jeans and a white sweater that were definitely not in keeping with the price range of her home. But when you had all the money in the world, you could do what you wanted, not what people expected you to do.

Devine introduced her to Jones.

“What do you have to report?” Woolwine asked them.

Jones glanced at Devine, who said, “We’re not here to report anything, Ms. Woolwine. We’re here to ask some questions about your husband. You and I didn’t get a chance to finish our discussion on the flight down. You said we could continue it later, and when Mueller set up this meeting I thought that was your understanding as well. And DS Jones is with the NSW Police. It’s standard procedure to talk to the spouse in matters like this.”

By Devine’s estimation, Woolwine’s expression went from surprise to anger to cagey in less than two seconds.

“What sort of questions? Should my solicitor be here?”

“That’s entirely up to you, ma’am,” Jones interjected politely. “But you are not a suspect or person of interest or anything like that. We’re just trying to gain some more insight into your husband in the hopes that that might provide a lead in our investigation.”

“What about the men who attacked Bill in New York? And brought him here? Have you found them?”

“No ma’am, we have not.”

Devine said, “But if we could determine the reason for the attack and abduction, that would be of great help. We’re trying to find out if it’s tied to his past or current work, or something of a more personal nature.”

Woolwine exclaimed, “Well, the theory that he was kidnapped in order to be ransomed bloody well went out the window when his body was found, didn’t it?”

“That would appear to be the case,” conceded Devine.

“Then if they didn’t want the Woolwine money, I can’t think of anything *personal* in Bill’s life that would have led to this . . . horror.”

“Did he have any enemies of which you’re aware?” said Devine.

“No, but I really had nothing to do with his work life. It was all confidential. He made that very clear.”

“Aside from his work life, then?” amended Devine.

“Do you mean enemies in his personal life?” She shook her head and said quite firmly, “No, everyone loved Bill.”

“You said your father was pretty much indifferent about him,” Devine reminded her.

“Indifference is hardly a motive for murder.”

“So nothing you can think of? When the divorce was filed and became public, did anyone threaten him? Become angry with him?”

“You mean in *my* family?”

“I mean anyone.”

“Perhaps I should stop answering your questions at this point.”

“We really are just trying to find possible leads,” noted Jones.

“Well, you won’t find them in the Woolwine family. This obviously has to do with his current job. Or his former job. Why don’t you start looking in those places?”

A phone buzzed. Woolwine drew it from her pocket and answered it. “Yes?”

After listening, she snapped, “Look, I just lost my husband. So cancel my meetings and my business trips and do not contact me until I give the go-ahead. No, I don’t give a shit who that will inconvenience. You worry about *my* inconvenience as well as the fact that I’m fucking grieving!”

She clicked off and threw the phone across the room, where it bounced off a wall and lay there like a dead bug.

Woolwine looked at them sternly and then her features calmed. “Apparently a spouse being murdered isn’t dire enough to cancel

‘business.’ ”

“I can’t believe the pressure you’re under,” said Jones. “And I’m sure your children are devastated, too.”

Her lips now trembling, Woolwine said, “I went to see the girls at their school. I thought of bringing them here but decided it was better to leave them where they were. Familiar surroundings. Routines. They’ll come here for the funeral, of course. My son is at university in California. I’ve spoken to him several times and we also FaceTimed. He is devastated. They all are. Bill was a wonderful father. The kids doted on him. My son wanted to come home right away, but I told him to stay put until we get this figured out.”

“That was a smart decision. And I’m assuming they have security,” said Jones.

“Security that I have had tripled,” replied Woolwine firmly.

Jones said, “Your husband’s work, as you know, was classified. And getting any information about it is not easy.”

“You’re the police. Make them talk. Now, is there anything else?”

“Did you know Theresa Lee?” asked Devine.

There was just a moment’s hesitation, just a flinch really of the ramrod-straight pillar of stone that represented Charlotte Woolwine at this moment.

“No. Who is she?”

“She was the woman who was shot when your husband was taken,” replied Devine. “It’s been all over the news. I would have thought—”

Woolwine broke in, “Yes, yes, I just didn’t remember her name.”

“So you didn’t know her?”

“No, and Bill never mentioned her.”

She crossed her arms and legs and sat back, staring at them defiantly. “But, as I said, he almost never talked about his work with me,” she added.

“So you think Lee was a *work* associate?” said Devine.

“I don’t think anything, I don’t know if she was a colleague or a . . . ”

“Personal friend?” supplied Devine.

“Correct,” she said in a distracted voice. She looked at her index finger and started to pick at the chipped nail. “Anything else?”

“Would your father be able to help us?” asked Devine.

“He never really knew much about Bill.”

“You were married for twenty years and have three children together,” noted Jones.

“So?” said Woolwine, again defiantly. “In my family that does not necessarily trigger intimacy.”

“Is your father in Sydney?” asked Devine.

“I believe Dad is in China on some deal or other. Where there are more billions to be made, my father will be smack in the middle of all the action.”

“But he knows of your husband’s death?” said Jones.

“I told him, so yes, he does.”

“And his reaction?” asked Devine.

“It’s hard to see reactions in texts or emails, Agent Devine. As I told you before, I’m sure my father is sad for me. Since Bill was divorcing me, I think my father probably just wrote him off as no longer being a part of my life.”

“But Bill Walker was the father of his three grandchildren,” said Jones.

She glanced sharply at Devine. “As I alluded to before, blood will out. And I was getting full custody of my minor children, so they would still be in my father’s life. With Bill’s career it wouldn’t have worked otherwise.” She rose. “Well, I guess we’re done here. And any future inquiries can be organized through my solicitors,” she added.

Devine said quickly, “Any thoughts on your mother’s death?”

Woolwine froze before settling back down on the couch. “What in the world does that have to do with anything?”

“It’s still unsolved,” said Jones, who shot Devine a curious glance.

“I’m well aware of that, DS Jones, thank you very much,” snapped Woolwine.

“One murder is sometimes connected to another,” noted Devine.

“My mother died over two years ago,” she exclaimed.

“There still might be a connection.”

“I think that is a total waste of time. And I, for one, do not have any time to waste. Perhaps you should follow my example and focus on who killed my husband.”

On that, Charlotte Woolwine rose and left the room.

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CHAPTER

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ON THE DRIVE BACK TO the city center, Jones said, “Why did you bring up Martha Woolwine’s murder? You did the same with Drury.”

Devine said, “Just wanted to see her reaction. What else can you tell me about it?”

“One strange case, but not my jurisdiction, as I said before. She went to see her house manager at the latter’s cottage on the Woolwines’ Canberra estate. She was shot on the way back to the main house.”

“Long-range, close-up, or contact wound?”

“Not contact, but not long-range. Six feet or less.”

“So she saw the shooter?”

“The kill shot was fired into her chest, so presumably she was facing him.”

“The manager?”

“I believe her name was Emily . . . Roy-Roylott, yeah, that’s right. She’d been with the Woolwines for years. She gave a description of the likely shooter even though she didn’t know at the time that her employer had been killed.”

“Any motive come up?”

“None that I was made aware of. But again, that’s out of my field of purview.”

“Was Drury on the case?” asked Devine.

“I wasn’t privy to any of that. Carlton Woolwine posted a huge reward for information.”

“Yeah, a million bucks and no takers.”

She looked at him. “You really think it’s connected to what happened to Walker?”

“I don’t know the answer to that, which means I have to think about it. Don’t you?”

“I’m not aware that Martha Woolwine had anything to do with Walker’s world.”

“Neither am I. All I’m saying is maybe we need to look closer.”

She dropped Devine off at his hotel. The room was small but had an abundance of light. If he leaned to the right he could just make out the Harbour Bridge and the smokestacks of the Disney cruise ship docked there. In his narrow line of vision he could also see masses of people either boarding or departing from the vessel.

The jet lag was really starting to hit Devine. It was almost 6 p.m. in Sydney now, but his internal clock was telling him it was actually 4 a.m. He took a quick but refreshing nap and then went down to a restaurant at Circular Quay for dinner. He sat at an outdoor table overlooking the harbor as the ferries came and went with regular frequency. The tourists and locals walked along shopping at the various outlets, while probably contemplating their own dinner arrangements at the assortment of restaurants here, and possibly at a nearby collection of shops and eateries that Devine had learned was called The Rocks.

It was chilly, and Devine ordered coffee. He looked over the menu while processing all that he had learned that day, which, granted, wasn’t all that much.

Bill Walker had been murdered, of that there was no doubt. Two contact wounds to the back of the head left no other possible conclusion. His body had been dumped into the harbor. The corpse was so badly disfigured that the man’s prints, and, really, his dental records had been the primary identifiers.

Walker’s new employer had nothing to tell them. His old employer and their associated agencies would tell them nothing. There was a woman who had scammed Devine and a New York policeman so she could get into Theresa Lee’s apartment and remove something. Lee’s boss could tell them nothing helpful, other than the fact that Bill Walker had saved Lee’s life at some point.

So why were they arguing in the CCTV footage? And why was Walker waiting to confront her?

Devine took out his iPhone and made some notes.

First, what had Walker been doing on that day before he met up with Lee?

Second, where was Lee going when she had been confronted by Walker? He knew it was a meeting, but he had no idea with whom.

Third, thinking of the letter he'd found behind the photo, Devine typed: What was the exact nature of their relationship?

Fourth, had Charlotte Woolwine lied about not knowing who Lee was? Devine was pretty sure she had.

Fifth, how, according to his daughter, could Carlton Woolwine truly know nothing about his son-in-law and not really care that he was dead?

Sixth, did Martha Woolwine's murder connect to all this somehow?

Last, why bring Bill Walker all the way down here just to kill him and then dump his body into the harbor?

As he stared at the list he'd made, Devine was sure his jottings were missing at least a half dozen other critical questions he hadn't yet even thought of. This was the most bizarre case of his experience, where he didn't seem to be able to gain any traction anywhere, in large measure because no one would talk to him, or when they did, much of it was not true.

He texted his list off to Campbell and then ordered surf and turf. He ate every morsel, had a second cup of coffee, and headed out into the mist that had sprouted up around the water.

As he pulled his coat closer around him, Devine passed over a plaque set in the walkway that memorialized Mark Twain's visit to Australia well over 120 years before. Like many American schoolchildren, *Huckleberry Finn* had been a seminal read for Devine growing up. He imagined Australia had changed much since Twain's visit. But in some ways not so much: Some people were still hurting other people.

His phone buzzed. It was Jones.

"Where are you?" she asked.

He told her and she said, "Perfect. Take the ferry from Circular Quay to Watsons Bay. I'll meet you there."

"What's up?"

"I've had people under surveillance and I think it might just pay off. But you need to hurry."

"Should I grab an Uber instead?"

"No, right now a ferry is faster. Now double-time it, Yank."

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CHAPTER

23

DEVINE QUICKLY FOUND THE FERRY for Watsons Bay. It was a big, double-decker watercraft. Luckily the ferry was leaving in two minutes.

He chose the outside top deck because the rain had ceased. The ferry wasn't crowded and the air was crisp as he stood by the railing. The boat cut sharply across the relatively smooth waters of the harbor, and before long they were pulling up to Watsons Bay. He tapped off with his phone and saw Jones waiting for him at the exit.

"Who do you have under surveillance?" he asked.

"Two people you've met, and what do you know, they seem to be heading to the same place. Follow me."

Watsons Bay, Devine quickly found, was part old fishing village and part thriving vibe for dining and shopping. Many people were out and about, which was good if you were tailing someone, or, in this case, more than one. He noted the towering sea cliffs and inhaled the bracing air.

Jones was reading texts on her phone and turned left down one street and then right down another.

She stopped near the entrance to a small boutique hotel restaurant with an outdoor beer garden and turned to Devine. "Okay, here comes the tricky part. The people are in the beer garden, meeting. My folks tell me there's an observation spot just off the lobby where we can grab a decent sight line."

She pulled two caps with rugby team logos from her bag and handed one to Devine. "On with the *elaborate* disguise, and let's see what we see."

They entered the hotel, which was quaint and historic. She led him to a seating area that had some potted plants around it. They sat side by side facing the outdoor beer garden, which had numerous tables, of which half were occupied.

Devine jerked when he saw Dennis Mueller . . . and Sergeant Lewis Drury. They were huddled at one of the tables off in a corner of the garden. Drury was no longer in uniform, and Mueller was dressed more casually than he had been before.

Drury was speaking animatedly while Mueller looked to be mostly listening and nodding.

Jones enlarged her phone screen to get a close-up of the men. She took some pictures, and they continued to watch both men closely. Devine had learned a bit about lip reading from his tours in the Middle East after he had become more familiar with the languages spoken there. He thought he could see Drury say the word *troublesome*, to which Mueller nodded enthusiastically. Then Mueller said what looked to be the word *conflict*. That could, of course, mean two vastly different things.

As they continued to watch, a slender, petite woman in a long beige cashmere coat with a scarf wrapped around her head joined Mueller and Drury. She had on sunglasses though it was dark.

The two men immediately turned their attention to her. As she half lowered her sunglasses, a shocked Devine could see that it was Charlotte Woolwine.

This is getting interesting. And confusing. And possibly corrupt.

He looked over at Jones and whispered, “Shit.”

She nodded, but kept her eyes on the trio.

A waitress hurried over and took Woolwine’s order. A minute later the woman returned with what looked to be a cup of either tea or coffee.

With the three of them hunched and huddled, Devine didn’t have the opportunity to read more lips. But he, along with Jones, did take photos of all three, which might come in useful later. At the very least it might be a conversation starter when they confronted one or more of them about this clandestine get-together.

As the three started to get up, Jones grabbed Devine’s arm, and they left their seats and hid down a hallway.

She said, “I have eyes on them, so we don’t have to follow.”

“I read some lips,” said Devine and told her the words he’d captured.

She said, “I know the AFP pushes the envelope sometimes, but not like this.”

“So the AFP is in bed with the Woolwines?” said Devine.

“Not sure about the AFP as a whole, but certainly Drury appears to be.”

“Did you suspect? Is that why you had them under surveillance?”

“I did some digging and found something interesting.”

“What?”

“Drury was in the Army before joining the AFP. Guess who he served with?”

“Mueller?”

She nodded. “That alone should have disqualified him from participating in this case. I made a few discreet calls to people at the AFP whom I trust. They told me Drury might have angled for this case. That made me curious. So I put eyes on both and it paid off. Though I never suspected that Charlotte Woolwine would join them.”

“What do we do with this?”

“We keep it in our back pocket because I’m betting it will come in handy down the road. Come on, I can give you a lift to the ferry. It’s your fastest way back.”

After Devine returned to his hotel he looked at his watch and calculated the time difference.

He might be up by now.

Campbell picked up on the second ring and listened as Devine explained what he had just witnessed.

“Send me the photos,” Campbell told him, and Devine did so.

After looking over them Campbell said, “Let me think on this and check in with some folks. Until then, you watch your back. The Aussies are our allies and I’ve always found them good people to work with. But right now, trust nobody, not even Jones.”

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CHAPTER

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DEVINE GOT UP THE NEXT morning and hit the bare-bones hotel gym. After an hour killing himself there and with the sweat wicking off him, he went for a run across the Harbour Bridge, and finished off by sprinting up and down a steep flight of steps, of which one could find hundreds in this city.

His mind worked better with the endorphins flowing. And while he ran, Devine went over every detail of the case so far. While there was much that was undecipherable, he was making some progress.

He stood in front of the Museum of Contemporary Art and surveyed the harbor. It truly was breathtaking in both its natural splendor and the human-made add-ons, the Opera House and bridge being the two most prominent examples of the latter.

He finished cooling down, walked back to his room, showered, changed, and then looked at his phone. He had at least a half dozen text messages from Anais Jones.

He texted her back. What's up?

He immediately received a text back: Carlton Woolwine is in town and wants to meet.

Devine texted back asking when and where.

Her reply was immediate. I'll pick you up in thirty minutes.

Devine had a quick breakfast in the hotel restaurant and took a to-go cup of coffee.

He was waiting out front when Jones pulled up in her Passat. He got in and off they went.

"So where are we meeting him?"

"At one of his homes outside of the city," replied Jones.

"*One* of his homes?"

“He has several. But we’re going to his main one. He just finished it. I understand that it’s rather large.”

“Okay. So how does he pick which one to go to on any given day?”

She looked at him with an amused expression. “What’s it to you?”

“Just wondering how the really rich live. I hear it’s different from how we do.”

“Yeah, we read *The Great Gatsby* in school down here, too, mate.”

“How long a drive?”

“We’re not actually going by car.”

“How then?”

“The really rich don’t travel like you and me, either,” she said with an enigmatic smile.

Five minutes later Jones pulled up to an office building and parked. They rode the elevator all the way to the top. They got off, and Jones showed her warrant card to a uniformed security guard waiting there.

They were escorted outside to a helipad where a chopper was parked.

It was a premium Sikorsky model that Devine knew probably cost well north of ten mill all decked out, which this one clearly was. There was a large *W* done in fancy script on the side, just like the Gulfstream he’d flown in on and on the building they were now on top of.

Billionaires apparently liked to initial their toys.

They climbed aboard, and Devine looked around the spacious cabin like a kid at a Fortnite convention. “Wow, this is something.”

“You’ve never ridden in a chopper before?” asked Jones as she buckled her harness.

“I’ve been in lots of *Army* choppers, but the seats weren’t leather and they didn’t have snacks and sparkling water in a fridge like this one does. I counted it a plus if it had doors and only a few bullet holes.”

“You Americans are funny,” she replied.

“But the thing is nobody ever seems to laugh.”

“Oh we do, Travis, just not how you want us to.”

The pilot amped the engines, they lifted off, and were soon soaring over Sydney. Devine looked out the window at the sprawling and impressive cityscape below. However, the harbor and the adjacent ocean made it seem quite small by comparison, like Jupiter hovering next to Mercury.

They banked to the left and gained lift. The pilot pushed the throttle forward and the Sikorsky surged ahead, plowing through the broad, clear

sky at an impressive pace.

“It would have been at least two hours driving in traffic,” Jones pointed out. “This saves us a lot of time.”

“Nice to have billionaire friends who offer free rides,” said Devine, a remark that drew a quizzical look from Jones.

“He’s not my friend. I’ve never even met him. And *you* accepted a ride on a Woolwine jet to get to Australia.”

“Yes I did,” conceded Devine. *And now I regret ever doing that, orders or not.*

They landed on a helipad on the rear grounds of an estate that, to Devine’s eye, surpassed anything one might find in even the storied real estate markets of LA, Silicon Valley, Miami, or Palm Beach.

“Jesus,” exclaimed Jones. “You could see this place from outer space.”

“Maybe that’s the point. Showing off to alien life.”

As they exited the chopper, a man, crouching under the wash of the blades, approached. It was Dennis Mueller dressed in a beige suit and yellow tie.

“This way,” he said, pointing to a gold-colored golf cart that appeared more like a Ferrari, at least to Devine.

They rode in it to a place that looked like a fantastical commercial building it was so enormous; modern in design, it had multiple sections, flashy wings, and connected pods. There were huge walls of windows, metal surrounds, cantilevered sections, and gigantic and complex roofs topped by what seemed to be acres of solar panels. The colossal grounds sported four pools connected by rock waterfalls and streams, a sculpture garden, a bocci ball court, a half dozen clay tennis courts, and ample and luxurious seating areas for Woolwine’s closest sycophants, of which Devine assumed there were legions.

“Jesus,” exclaimed Jones again as she took it all in.

“Little fixer-upper?” Devine was sitting next to Mueller, who was driving the cart. “And does it come with a map, guide, or both?”

Mueller didn’t even bother faking a smile. “Took six years to build. A hundred and forty thousand square feet. Twenty bedrooms and thirty baths. All at the very highest levels of luxury. *Architectural Digest* has been trying to get in to do a spread ever since it was finished. But Mr. Woolwine values his privacy. It cost three hundred million all in all. There was an army of workers here, thousands at many points.”

“And how many people live here?” asked Devine.

Mueller looked at him. “Just Mr. Woolwine, but there’s fifteen members of staff who have their own quarters in a designated section of the main house or in some of the pods. And he does entertain frequently.”

“Right,” said Devine curtly. “Never want to be caught without enough bathrooms or footmen.”

Mueller added firmly, “The whole estate is green. Solar, geothermal, and battery with whole property backup generators. Mr. Woolwine is very conscious of the climate challenges.”

“Generators that run off fossil fuel?” said Devine.

“Well, yes, but Mr. Woolwine is looking to upgrade to a personal mini–nuclear reactor package in the near future when the technology gets fully rolled out and perfected.”

“Of course he is.”

“Mr. Woolwine is just back from Beijing. He and President Xi are old friends.”

“And why are we here?” asked Devine, who was quickly growing tired of the Woolwines and their personal mouthpiece.

Mueller glanced at Jones, who was in the rear seat of the cart. “But we spoke, DS Jones, and I thought—”

“Yes we did,” interrupted Jones. “Which is why we’re here.”

“Great,” said Devine. “I love being surprised during a murder investigation.”

He turned and gave Jones a glare that was worthy of a drill sergeant. She recoiled like he’d slapped her.

“Just to be clear, Mr. Woolwine wants to be apprised of the situation,” said Mueller.

Devine shot Jones another look. “Is this standard operating procedure down here? Giving reports to people who might be possible suspects?”

“Possible suspect!” exclaimed Mueller. “You can’t be serious. This is Carlton Woolwine we’re talking about.”

“I don’t give a flying fuck if it’s Mother Teresa,” barked Devine. “I’m not reporting anything to him. But I will question him in connection with the ongoing investigation.”

“Mr. Woolwine will not be questioned by anyone,” said Mueller.

“Then turn the cart around and I’ll fly back where I came from,” replied Devine. “Or better yet, take an Uber.”

Jones interjected in a calm tone, “Let’s just meet with him and see where it goes.”

“If it goes to giving him a heads-up on our investigation, that is a bridge too far for me.”

“Is this how you treat important, wealthy people in America?” said Mueller. “I understand that you worship your rich people far more than we do ours.”

“I treat everyone the same regardless of the size of their bank account. So if we’re going to see the man those are my ground rules, take ’em or leave ’em. Your choice.”

Mueller glanced again at Jones, who said, “That’s the way it’s going to be, Mr. Mueller, take it or leave it.”

“But you said—”

“I said we would meet with Mr. Woolwine. I made no promises or assurances about what form that meeting would take. I assumed my colleague here would have understood that, but apparently not.” She finished by giving Devine an even darker glare than he had given her.

Mueller drove them on to the galactic mother ship.

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CHAPTER

25

CARLTON WOOLWINE LOOKED MUCH LIKE his daughter, Devine thought. He was not tall or physically imposing, but the man had a presence about him that was undeniable, like a small chunk of polished diamond that realized it was impressive without even trying.

Woolwine was dressed casually: khakis, polo shirt, and loafers with no socks. His thinning gray hair was askew, like he had just woken up. And if he had just returned from China the man might be a bit tired, even though time zone–wise Sydney was only two hours ahead of Beijing. But it was a long flight, private wings or not.

Woolwine took off his glasses and wiped them on a handkerchief pulled from his pocket. Then he motioned Devine and Jones to take seats in the cathedral-size living space they had been escorted into by Mueller. Floor-to-ceiling windows looked out upon lovely landscapes. In the distance Devine could see what he knew were the Blue Mountains from a guidebook he'd purchased earlier. The blue aura came from the misty oil secreted by the eucalyptus forests that abounded there, when combined with dust, vapor, and sunlight. Devine actually wouldn't have minded going for a hike there, but he didn't see any tourist time in his future.

Mueller went over to his boss and spoke into the man's ear. Woolwine finally nodded and said something back, and Mueller left the room.

The centibillionaire eyed Devine and Jones curiously.

"Let me see, Agent Devine with America's Department of Homeland Security and DS Jones with our very own NSW Police?"

"Correct, Mr. Woolwine," said Jones.

"Forgive my somewhat casual and weary appearance, but the fact is I just got in from China and I'm not as young as I used to be. Long flights really take it out of me now." He yawned and stretched, then settled his

gaze on Devine. “But you flew even longer, Agent Devine. To look into my son-in-law’s death.”

“Yes, I did.”

“It’s very disturbing, you understand. My daughter is in total shock.”

“We spoke with her,” said Devine.

“So I’ve been told. On your flight here and also at her home in Darling Point.”

Devine didn’t quite know how to take this statement so he merely said, “Right.”

“I was just told by Dennis that I will not be getting an update on the case, but rather you want to question me regarding Bill’s death.”

“We’ve been talking to everyone who knew him,” replied Devine.

“It’s standard procedure, Mr. Woolwine,” added Jones.

“Yet murder doesn’t seem standard at all, does it?”

“I hope it never does,” said Devine.

“So what do you want to know?”

“Did Walker have any enemies that you knew of?”

“No. But I really didn’t know Bill all that well. At least his working life. It was all hush-hush, as those folks say.”

“Have you seen the video of his abduction?” asked Jones.

“I have, along with apparently everyone else in the world. I’d really rather that hadn’t happened,” he added in a scolding tone.

“We feel the same,” said Devine. “But it was online before we could do anything about it.”

“And the woman who was shot? How is she?”

“Still in a coma and not expected to live,” said Devine.

Woolwine shook his head. “That is very unfortunate.”

It was an odd word choice, thought Devine.

“So nothing going on in Mr. Walker’s life that might have led to this that you’re aware of?” asked Jones.

“No. Bill kept himself to himself. If this was connected to either his personal or professional life, I’m the wrong person to ask.”

Devine said, “There’s always the possibility that he was targeted not because of his line of work or something personal, but because of his connection to your family. And if that’s the case, this is a local police matter and I can go home.”

“Then I would have expected to have received a ransom notice, if that thing still happens. Instead, they fished poor Bill’s body out of Sydney Harbour. So I don’t see how a *connection* to the Woolwines makes sense.”

“It doesn’t always involve a financial goal,” pointed out Devine.

Woolwine said, “Explain that.”

“It could be retaliation against your family for some perceived injury.”

Woolwine looked incredulous. “What, killing Bill because they don’t like how I run my businesses? Forgive me, but that sounds patently absurd.”

“But it’s still a lead we need to run down,” persisted Devine. “Your wealth and public persona *do* make you a potential target, however misguided. And killing your son-in-law could be a method they chose.”

Woolwine scoffed, “I’m not a mafia kingpin, Agent Devine. My businesses are mostly boring, if quite profitable.”

Jones said, “However, although I didn’t work on it, one of your subsidiaries was involved with the *Russians*. And it didn’t end well.”

Woolwine looked at Jones for longer than really seemed necessary. “It’s true that they firebombed some of my tobacconist shops. We got the police involved and people went to prison. Your folks and the police in Victoria worked on the case.”

“Yes. And after they were arrested there were threats made, correct?”

“Yes, but they never acted on them.”

“Maybe until now.”

“I can’t believe that is the case.”

Jones shook her head. “I don’t have that luxury. I need to *prove* it is, or not.”

Devine said, “Have you had any other communications with the Russians other than the threats they made?”

“No. Nothing. I consider the matter over with.”

“Can you tell us what the dispute was about?” asked Devine.

“I’m sure DS Jones knows all about it.”

“In your words would be preferable,” said Devine.

Woolwine sighed and sat back against the plush couch cushion. Devine could see that this meeting was clearly not going the way Woolwine wanted, and the man, also very clearly, was not used to that happening.

“One of my companies runs the largest chain of tobacconist shops in NSW and Victoria. The Russians wanted my company to sell illicit tobacco, and vapes, which are illegal in this country except under certain prescribed

purposes, like aiding in quitting the use of nicotine. My representatives, of course, refused. Then the Russians tried to persuade me."

"How did they do that?" asked Devine.

"They were not subtle. They showed up at my company's headquarters with bags of money and announced that they wanted half of my tobacconist business. We told them no. They persisted, upped the offer, all cash, probably all laundered from illegal businesses. They asked to meet with me personally. My people politely told them to fuck off. The next thing, I wake up to five of my stores going up in smoke, then another five. The police did an investigation, made a slew of arrests, and the legal system convicted them all. They're now in prison here."

Jones said, "But we never could find who was behind it. We just got the street crews who did the actual arson work."

"If they really wanted to hurt me, they would have gone after me, my daughter, or my grandchildren. But they all have heavy security. But going after Bill? In America? It makes no sense."

Devine said, "But Walker didn't have heavy security. So he was a far softer target." He thought he saw a shade of doubt creep over the man's features.

"I still don't believe there's any connection. Have you asked Bill's former and current employers these sorts of questions?" demanded Woolwine.

Jones said, "On a scale of one to ten, with ten being super cooperative, they're at a minus two."

"Well, I don't know what to tell you, Jones. I would think the police would be able to push some people to open up."

"We are pursuing those avenues," said Jones.

"When is the funeral?" asked Devine.

"I have no idea," said Woolwine. "My daughter is handling that. They were getting divorced, but as of his death, they were still married."

"I understand Walker filed for divorce."

"If you say so."

Devine eyed him curiously. "You didn't know?"

"I do not meddle in my daughter's personal affairs. I have come to learn that they were divorcing. If my daughter wants me to know more, she'll tell me so."

"So you had no idea about problems in the marriage?"

“The first I knew of any *issues* was when Bill abruptly moved to America.”

“Quite the hands-off parent,” said Devine.

Woolwine smiled but it never reached his eyes. “Not that it’s any of your business, her late mother and I were always there for Charlotte when she needed us. But she made it her business not to need us very much.”

Devine thought of the relationship with his own parents and nodded. “I can understand that. She struck me as being very much in control of things.”

“Well, she wasn’t in control of her husband.”

“Why do you say that?” interjected Jones.

Woolwine’s expression became rigid. “Because he wouldn’t have initiated the damn divorce if she had been.”

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CHAPTER

26

WHY THE HELL DIDN'T YOU tell me about the Russians and Woolwine's tobacco shop business?" demanded Devine after the chopper had dropped them off.

"I just thought of it being possibly connected when you started asking him about any problems with his businesses," she shot back.

He glanced away, sufficiently put in his place. "Okay, sorry. I didn't mean to come off as being accusatory."

"But now we can work it together," said Jones. "The Russians were actually damn clever about it," she added.

"How so?"

"With a number of the shops they used drones to deliver the devices that started the fires. Some right down the chimney or through an open second-floor window."

"That *is* clever," conceded Devine.

They got back to her Passat and she drove them off.

Devine said, "And married over twenty years to his daughter with grandkids, and Woolwine knows jack about his son-in-law? That does not pass the smell test, does it?"

"Well, the Woolwines are not your typical family," Jones replied. "Carlton Woolwine has demands on his time that are probably beyond belief. And it's entirely plausible that Walker never talked about his work. It's not like he was a plumber. Everything he did *was* top secret."

"Come on. Even rich people know *some* things about their extended families, regardless of what they do for a living."

"So you think he and his daughter are lying?" said Jones.

"I'm saying we need to corroborate what they told us. And not take it at face value."

“I take *nothing* at face value. Look, let’s get one thing straight. Just because I try to be polite does not mean I’m a pushover or a groveler, Travis. I get it that you’re a balls-out sort of personality. I prefer to work around the edges.”

“I didn’t mean to imply otherwise. If I did, I’m sorry. Now, let’s talk about the meeting we saw with Drury, Mueller, and Charlotte Woolwine.”

“In addition to your lip reading, my folks were able to capture some audio. Charlotte was heard saying, ‘This is not how it should be playing out.’ And Drury replied that he would take care of it. Mueller didn’t say much at all.”

“ ‘Not how it should be playing out,’ and Drury said he would take care of it? Looks like you’ve got a rat in your investigation.”

“Knowing how crafty Sergeant Drury is, he would not expose himself like that without good reason. I’ll have to dig further to know for sure.”

“You’re taking a risk with this, Anais.”

“Everything I’ve done with my professional life has been a risk. Policing is still a man’s game in my country. I’ve beaten that game just by being here and surviving for as long as I have. And the tobacconist shop business? I can tell you that it was actually a lot worse than Woolwine let on. They nearly killed Charlotte and one of her kids with a car bomb. Luckily, they found the device before it detonated.”

“I guess that was in all the papers?”

“No, almost nothing. I only know because I’m with the police. And I suspect it was because Woolwine pulled some strings that it never hit the media.”

“Why would he do that?”

“I did some research at the time. Before Russia invaded Crimea, Woolwine had other business with the Russians, very lucrative business having to do with oil and gas.”

“As of last week America has sanctions on Moscow. That means pretty much no American company can do business there without risk of steep penalties. And most of our allies have restrictions and sanctions on them too.”

“We do as well. But Woolwine probably has hundreds of shell companies. Who’s to say one or more of them aren’t still doing business with Moscow?”

“So he didn’t want to make a big splash with the Russian squabble over the tobacconist shops because it might mess up the other, far bigger business he does with them?”

“That reason alone would be worth billions to the man.”

“How much money does he need?” asked Devine.

“I don’t think there’s a limit on wealth building for any billionaire on earth. They all want to be the richest because they’re just little boys who never grew up.”

“Question is, would he allow his son-in-law’s murder to go unsolved to maintain those business relationships with Moscow, or not bring more retaliation his way?”

“What do you think?” asked Jones.

“I think regardless of the answer, Anais, this case just got a helluva lot more complicated.”

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CHAPTER

27

EMERSON CAMPBELL LOOKED at the list of queries Devine had sent him, studying each one with care before moving on to the next one. If Devine had not been assigned to head up the investigation in Australia, he would have been doing this.

Campbell was using the same skill set he had developed when poring over battle plans and bringing together his past combat experience and his coursework at war colleges, which included the close analysis of historical battles. The latter was instructive and still relevant because despite the advancements in training and weapons, soldiers in combat today often reacted similarly to soldiers in combat from a millennia ago. When bullets were flying and bombs were dropping, humans, no matter how well trained, did not always follow the battle plans. Generals from Napoleon to Lee to Rommel to Westmoreland had learned that lesson, often the hard way.

He folded up the list of questions and continued walking on to his destination: Bill Walker's condo.

There was still a police officer guarding the front door, but when the intimidating-looking Campbell showed him his fed creds, the local cop stepped to the side, fast.

Campbell began a methodical search. The FBI had already performed this task, but that meant little to him. Sister agencies were not always that good about sharing what they found, and on this case the Bureau had shared absolutely nothing.

Normally, a man of his professional stature would have deployed a team to do this. But Campbell had decided to undertake it himself. He wanted no slipups, and if there were, they were his responsibility. He had never passed the buck in his life, and he had spoken out even when it would have been better for his military career path to remain silent. And those principles had

indeed cost him shots at additional stars on his broad shoulders. He could lie to himself and say it didn't matter. But it did matter. Yet he also slept better at night for having done what he thought was the right thing.

Like Devine had previously found, Campbell judged Walker's new digs to be on the minimalist side. He looked on his phone at the copy of the letter Walker had written to Lee and that Devine had found in the woman's apartment. It was intimate, familiar, with sexual overtones. It spoke of a relationship that had been ongoing for a while. They had done a comparison to other samples of Walker's writing, and an expert had deemed it to be undoubtedly in the man's hand.

But what Campbell was not finding were reciprocal letters from Lee. They were still in the process of gaining access to Walker's electronics and cloud accounts, and to Lee's. Hopefully, they would reveal more of their relationship. A relationship that, from the brief encounter captured on the CCTV feed, had gone rapidly south.

In Walker's bathroom Campbell checked out the medicine cabinet. Devine had told him about the medications in here and Walker's terminal cancer condition having also been revealed at his autopsy. Death by cancer was by no means pleasant. But being shot in the head and dumped in the water was far worse. You weren't at peace. You weren't surrounded by friends and family. You were the opposite of both of those things.

As he put one of the bottles of meds back he wondered if that was the reason for the altercation between Walker and Lee. Had she not known he was dying? Campbell's people had talked to Walker's oncologist back in Maryland. She said Walker's physician in Australia had made a definitive diagnosis on him over a year before. However, Walker's letter to Lee, which had been dated well after his diagnosis, had made no mention of his condition. Had he told her during the confrontation captured on the CCTV? That might have shocked Lee, angered her, even. The theory was certainly plausible.

He left the condo and continued on to Walker's last place of work. He knew Devine had been pretty much stonewalled there. Campbell was hoping he could do better. And he had something that might just help him with that hope.

Managing Director Carl Peeters once more came out to meet an official representative of the U.S. government with a friendly smile and a hand held out in greeting.

Campbell shook that hand firmly, and they walked back to the man's office.

"As I told your associate, I'm afraid I do not have any useful information to convey to you," volunteered Peeters as they settled into chairs.

"Well, sometimes one knows something, only they don't know they know it."

Peeters smiled once more, but it was merely a gesture with nothing behind it. "I'm afraid your point eludes me."

"Well, then let me see if I can make it clearer for you, Mr. Peeters. Walker had worked here in the office on the day he was abducted, correct?"

"Yes, I suppose that is right. I was not here. I was in Europe, but others here at the office confirmed that he was here that day."

"And then he left the office?"

"Obviously, otherwise what happened to him would not have happened to him."

"Where was he going?"

"When he left the office?"

"Obviously," Campbell replied curtly.

"I have no idea. He was not required to have his movements preapproved by us," added Peeters with an attempt at a smile and a chuckle, neither of which came off as anything but nerves.

"And you still claim to know nothing about his personal life? Or his relationship with Theresa Lee, the woman who was shot when Walker was abducted?"

"I *claim* it because it happens to be the truth."

"I understand that you knew Walker before you hired him to work here."

"I did. I told your associate that our paths had crossed and that I knew he was an exceptional talent. And I hired him when he became available."

Campbell decided to fire his big guns to see how Peeters would react. "When you hired him, did you also know that he had terminal cancer and had only months left to live?"

Peeters's features became stonelike. Then, with a start, he came back into focus. "I did not know that."

"It would have impacted your decision to hire him, correct?"

“I don’t think I can comment on health-related matters when it comes to employment. My HR person would not like it.” He didn’t even attempt a smile this time.

Campbell said with the tone and brisk manner of an attorney during cross-examination, “Would it be fair to say that you hired Walker with the intent that he would be working for you longer than six months?”

Campbell watched patiently as Peeters turned this question over in his mind, no doubt probing it for any potential downside or liability if he were to answer it.

“Yes, that would be fair to say,” he finally replied.

“You don’t require a physical or anything like that from prospective employees?”

“We are not a sports team, sir.”

Now Campbell pounced. “But you *are* in the intelligence business, are you not? And the state of health of your employees, both mental and physical, would be matters of importance, wouldn’t they? A terminal illness could subject someone to undertake rash acts, or allow them to be manipulated or blackmailed, especially if they didn’t want the truth of their illness to come out, or needed financial assistance either for themselves or their loved ones. In the federal government we assess those risks thoroughly before taking people on, or allowing them security clearances. And you would have the same required level of due diligence, would you not? And if you did not perform them, you would be in breach of any contracts with the federal government you may have, correct?”

“I . . . I think I will have to look into the matter a bit more deeply to answer your questions . . . s-satisfactorily,” stammered a now clearly rattled Peeters.

“And while you’re doing that, think about this: Someone killed Walker. If it’s tied to his professional side, that professional side now resides with *you*.”

“Meaning what?” said a now-alarmed Peeters.

“Meaning I hope you have good security.”

Peeters fiddled with his phone. “I . . . that is to say we do have some security here.”

“Well, it didn’t protect Walker, did it?”

“We cannot have every employee followed all the time,” protested Peeters.

“Speaking of, do you know where Walker was going on the day he was abducted?”

“No. He . . . he had taken some time off.”

“He just started working here and he was already taking time off?”

“No, I mean he . . . he said he had an important errand to run.”

“Anything else he might have said?”

“No, not that I can recall.”

“You were perhaps going to tell me something else?” prompted Campbell.

“W-why do you say that?”

“Just a gut feeling. I’m usually right. So just get it off your chest. You’ll feel better.”

Peeters stared at him for a moment before glancing down at his hands. “Bill . . . that is to say, we hired him because he had a specialty in one field of intelligence that our clients find . . . relevant and of value.”

“And what is that field? And please don’t tell me artificial intelligence, because that is all anyone ever talks about anymore and, frankly, I much prefer *natural* intelligence.”

“No, no, not at all. Indeed, the exact opposite of that, despite AI being in our name.”

“So what specialty did Walker have?”

“Rumint.”

“Rumor intelligence? Okay, that would not have been my first guess.”

“It’s fallen out of favor in our high-tech world, although some of the best places to find it are online. And rumors, especially fear rumors, when replicated enough, can take on a life of their own. And from that can come concrete action that actually verifies the rumor.”

“Not so much verifies, but simply becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy based on lunacy.”

Peeters said, “But that does not discount the veracity of paying attention to such feelings. Sometimes, pipe dreams, fear rumors, wedge-driving talk, which are the typical categories looked at for rumint, are manifestations of what people are actually believing. Clearly your country would have been better positioned in the Middle East wars if you had had ears on the ground listening to the people in those regions.”

“I knew they weren’t going to welcome us with open arms,” said Campbell. “And all I needed to know that was common sense and a good

dose of reading history. But tell me more about Walker's abilities with respect to rumint."

"He had built an elaborate network of rumor, innuendo, mis- and disinformation campaign collectors in various strategic locations around the world. Bill was also an extraordinarily gifted coder, and he had devised an AI-driven software program that could continually scrape such intel off thousands of online sites, both on the regular and, more importantly, the dark web. While at Five Eyes his work was instrumental in foreseeing and then preventing a number of what could have been international incidents of serious magnitude."

"So he was also going to use that for your company's benefit?"

"Well, we *hoped* he would build up a similar capability here. You have to understand that the platform he created while with Five Eyes belongs to them, since it was constructed while he was their employee. It's not something you can just pick up and take with you."

"But he still knew how to put together the software platform. And are you saying he would never make contact with his network of informants again? Difficult to enforce."

"As you say, but a moot point, since he is no longer with us."

"Might he have been working on something here that might have led to his death?"

"As I told your associate, he was really just getting the paperwork signed."

"Something he might have talked about, then? If not with you, then a colleague here?"

"It is possible. I can make some inquiries."

"The sooner the better, Mr. Peeters. For all of us."

Campbell walked out having made some progress. And based on what Peeters had earlier told Devine, and what Peeters had just said to Campbell, he now knew the man had lied to both of them.

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CHAPTER

28

I KNOW THIS IS VERY DIFFICULT for you, Ms. Clark," said Campbell, as he sat across from the woman at The Focus Is Liberty.

Helen Clark reached for a tissue from a holder on her desk. "I spoke with the hospital. They said her condition hasn't changed."

"Well, that means she's still fighting, hanging in there."

"I guess so," she replied, her look still one of hopelessness.

"So, the day she was shot, she was going somewhere? Do you know where?"

Clark sat up and looked more engaged. "She had a meeting with someone she was interviewing for a story she was working on. I told Agent Devine that, too."

"Do you know who that was?"

"No. If I did I would have told him."

"Then how do you know she was meeting the person?"

"She told me."

"And what was the story?"

"As I told Agent Devine, I don't know. Theresa never revealed details like that, at least at this early stage."

"Then you know nothing about the story she was working on?"

"Theresa always kept things tight until the story was done and she submitted it. Other writers here run ideas up the line, but not Theresa. It was just her way."

"So, she never teamed with anyone here to work on a story?"

"No, sometimes she did."

"If she did work with someone, who would it be? You?"

"No, I'm still more of a get-the-coffee, grunt-work sort of newbie. If Theresa was collaborating she would use Ron Kittery."

“And is Kittery in today?”

“Yes, he is. Down the hall, second door on the left. But I doubt he knows anything.”

“Well, it’s why we ask the questions. Thank you.”

A minute later, having introduced himself to Kittery, Campbell sat down and studied the other man. It was his habit upon meeting anyone, from a three-star or a senator to a stranger on the street. Kittery was around forty, tall, with a trim beard, an athlete’s wiry body, and a pair of intense blue eyes magnified behind rimless specs.

His office was cluttered and while a laptop was perched on his desk, there were mounds of papers and open books scattered everywhere over the large surface. The old-school warrior Campbell, who had never read an ebook in his life, had to appreciate that.

Kittery did not look upset or nervous or sad. He just looked . . . *curious*, was the word that came to Campbell’s mind. An ideal trait for a journalist, he thought.

“You’re looking into the attack on Theresa?” Kittery said.

“I am, yes.”

“Horrible. We’ve both worked in dangerous situations around the world. But to just be shot on a street here in New York? I mean, shit. I . . . just can’t believe it. She’s a really good person. And one helluva journalist.”

“I was told that you would sometimes work with her on stories.”

“We collaborated, yes. Did some great stuff together, actually. We always had each other’s backs.”

“Anything recently?”

“No. We were currently working on separate stories.”

“Anything you can think of that would explain this tragedy?”

“I don’t believe so.”

“You said you were each working on different stories. Any ideas on what she was doing in that regard?”

Kittery closed his eyes for a moment. When he reopened them he aimed them at a spot on the ceiling.

“There once was a woman from Ukraine.” Kittery shifted his gaze to a puzzled Campbell.

“And?” said Campbell patiently, though he was feeling the opposite.

“And Theresa was interested in her for some reason.”

“Is the woman in Ukraine?”

“I have no idea.”

“Why was Theresa interested in her?”

“Probably because the woman had something of value regarding a story.”

“Any inkling as to what that might have been?”

“None, unfortunately.”

“What about Bill Walker?”

“What about him?”

“They were seeing each other.”

“What, you mean romantically?” scoffed Kittery, as the blue eyes swelled even more intensely behind the glass fronts.

“Yes.”

“I wouldn’t have thought he was Theresa’s type. And wasn’t he married?”

“In the process of being divorced, but that’s obviously meaningless now.”

Kittery shook his head. “Well, that’s a surprise.”

“Would she have necessarily told you if she was seeing someone?”

“Doubtful she would have told her own mother. Theresa was a great secret keeper. It’s one feature that made her a top-notch journalist. Sources knew she would go the last mile to protect them.”

“Might she have been working with Walker on something? He was in the intel field. And the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine would have been a key element of his work.”

“I have no idea if it had anything to do with the war.”

“How did you learn about the woman from Ukraine, then? Do you know her name?”

“I think I do, yes.”

“How? From what you just said, I doubt Lee would have let that slip.”

“She didn’t let anything slip. The fact is I went into her office to drop off some copy that I was working on and wanted her to take a look at. She wasn’t there, but on her desk was a file with the name.” He paused for a few moments, evidently marshaling his memory. “Petrykha Kryvoshapka, yes that’s it.” He spelled it out for Campbell, who wrote it down in his notebook.

“Theresa had written it out in Cyrillic but I was able to translate it. I spent quite a few years over there before I came to work here. The Russians

and Ukrainians both use a Cyrillic alphabet, but slightly different versions. Each has letters the other doesn't use, for example. And this name was clearly written in Ukrainian Cyrillic. Now that doesn't mean she lives in Ukraine, or was from there originally. She could have been born in Russia, or Belarus, or a number of other countries in the region. Or elsewhere for that matter. The world is a small place and people are all mixed together these days."

"So no way to ID her then?"

"Out of curiosity, I googled the name and just got a hodgepodge of basically nothing. There might be more references in Theresa's office."

"We applied for a search warrant for her office and electronics, but it hasn't been granted yet. Your boss is making it difficult," Campbell said.

Kittery shrugged. "The Fourth Estate must keep its confidences."

Campbell asked a few more questions and then rose to leave.

"So they were really seeing each other?" said Kittery.

"We found a letter that links them romantically."

"Wow, go figure."

"Any reason they *wouldn't* be seeing each other?"

"I just didn't think Theresa was into guys. But maybe she just meant me, when I asked her out."

"What did she say exactly, when you asked her out? Do you remember?"

"Oh, you bet I do: 'I'm into women, Ron, sorry.' "

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CHAPTER

29

THE NEXT MORNING DEVINE ROSE early, did his normal workout at the hotel gym, and performed his cardio-challenging run around the harbor. After his shower he checked his emails, and chief among them was a long one from Campbell, reporting all he had learned in New York talking to various people in Walker's and Lee's lives.

Devine read through it three more times, gaining additional insight with each pass.

Petrykha Kryvoshapka?

He googled it and found, like Ron Kittery had reported to Campbell, only a few entries that led him nowhere.

Next, he focused on the fact that Peeters had lied to Campbell. Peeters had told Devine when he'd interviewed him that he had just gotten back into town from Europe, *after* Walker had been abducted. But Peeters had informed Campbell that Walker had told him he was running an errand the day that he'd been abducted. And earlier in their conversation he'd told Campbell that Walker had taken the day off, which made no sense if Walker had told him he was merely running an errand.

A simple and innocuous slip of the tongue, an event misremembered, or trying to keep lies consistent but failing?

Devine couldn't afford to assume anything right now, but his boss had clearly rattled the Belgian.

And how did Lee's statement to Ron Kittery about being gay jibe with the letter from Walker he'd found hidden behind the picture in Lee's apartment? If she was gay, had she undertaken a relationship with Walker to gain some advantage? Maybe in a story she was reporting on?

And yet she had been the one visibly upset with him on the CCTV, when one would think the reverse would be true if Walker had discovered

Lee was leading him on simply to use him.

It was not a problem he was going to solve in the next few minutes. He got dressed, walked to a nearby restaurant on the harbor for breakfast, and pulled out his laptop. He brought up news stories about the bombing of the tobacconist shops. Luckily no one had been killed, but several people had been injured. But though Jones had told him of the attempt on the lives of the Woolwine family, he could find no stories about that at all, as she had alluded to.

Quite the clout the family had to keep something like that out of the news cycle.

He looked at the faces of some of the men on the screen who had been arrested. They all presented as tough, lethal, and devoid of any humanity. Just like some of the people Devine had fought against in wartime.

And in peacetime.

He suddenly wondered what people would say about *his* countenance, his demeanor.

Would I appear to be a soulless killing machine if my picture was in the paper like that?

The men had been given lengthy jail sentences. But these were clearly just the street execution crew, not the heavyweights behind them. According to Jones, none of them had gone to prison or even been identified. Which meant they were still out there somewhere, perhaps plotting against Carlton Woolwine. Maybe they had already struck a blow against him by killing his son-in-law. Those folks would have private jets at their disposal. And bringing Walker back here to kill him and dump his body so it would land symbolically right on Charlotte Woolwine's front porch? That might represent a strong warning.

A minute later he got a text from Jones.

GOT INFO ON WHERE BODY WENT IN. BASED ON CURRENTS THAT NIGHT, TIDE CHARTS, ETC. ESTIMATE HE WENT INTO THE WATER IN VICINITY OF GOAT ISLAND. I CAN PICK YOU UP IN A BOAT AND TAKE YOU THERE.

Devine texted her back with his location. Thirty minutes later she showed up at one of the Circular Quay piers in a small RIHB, with the markings of the MAC and a uniformed man at the helm. Devine climbed aboard, and they set off into a stiff wind and churning seas.

“Might get a wee bit wet,” said Jones, as the helmsman niftily piloted the small craft around large ferries, privately owned bowriders, cabin cruisers, and smaller watercraft.

“Won’t be the first time,” said Devine.

“It’s actually not that far, just past the bridge.”

They were soon there. The helmsman slipped the throttle into neutral, and the RIHB halted about fifty feet from land.

The island was not very large, Devine could see. “Tell me about it.”

“It’s got quite the history. Its Aboriginal name is Me-mel, which means ‘eye.’ It was a gathering place for Aboriginal clans. Then it was a convict stockade when the Brits used to send us their prisoners. It’s subsequently been utilized as a police and fire station, an explosives store, and a shipyard. Now it’s part of the national park system. You can go on guided tours that leave from Circular Quay. I’ve also heard there are official steps underway to return ownership of the island to the Aboriginals.”

“Any CCTV there?”

“We checked. Nothing helpful.”

“Did Walker’s body go into the water from land or a boat?”

“No way to know for sure. If by land all signs of it will surely have vanished by now. My vote would be by boat. Why take a body by boat to an island and then get rid of it from shore? Lots of vessels are out here at night, but it wouldn’t be hard to dump a body. And when he probably went into the water it was cloudy with barely any moonlight. Nobody would’ve seen anything except channel markers and boat running lights.”

“And then the body begins its journey, gets chewed on by sharks and boat props and other stuff, and comes to the end of the ride near Charlotte Woolwine’s home.”

“I know what you said before, Travis, but that had to have been a coincidence.”

“Not if the people who did it were looking at the same conditions you guys did to work back to where the body went in.”

“I don’t know if the science is that exact to make it to a certain location; there are simply too many variables.”

“I read about the shop bombings. Like you said, the bigwigs are still out there. They could be behind Walker’s murder.”

“Yes, but we haven’t definitively proven that yet,” pointed out Jones. “A long way from it, in fact.”

He looked over the harbor. “Want to head back? I could use another cup of coffee, and we need to come up with a new plan of attack. And I’ve got some things to tell you about our investigation in New York.”

“Would that plan of attack cover Drury, Charlotte Woolwine, and Dennis Mueller holding a clandestine conference?” Jones asked.

“That was going to be on my agenda.”

“I might have some things to add to that agenda.”

Jones gave the order, and the boat headed back to Circular Quay.

As they passed the Sydney Opera House and he saw hundreds of tourists walking around and taking photos, Devine briefly wondered what it would be like to travel simply for fun, instead of murder.

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CHAPTER

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WHILE THEY SAT AT AN outdoor table, Devine took a few minutes to fill Jones in on what Campbell had discovered in New York.

"There was a love letter from Walker to Lee, but Lee might be gay?" she commented. "Any way to confirm that?"

"After he spoke with Kittery my boss circled back to Helen Clark. He told her what Kittery had said, and she told him that Lee *was* gay. That was why she had been so surprised when I showed her the letter."

"Why didn't she tell *you* Lee was gay, then?"

"She said she was so confused by the letter when I showed it to her. She thought she must have been wrong about Lee's sexual identity until she was told what Kittery had said."

"Okay. And the Ukrainian woman, Petrykha Kryvoshapka? I didn't see that one coming."

Devine said, "But that's tied to Lee. We don't know if it's connected to Walker."

"Right, and Walker's boss, Carl Peeters, might have lied to your boss?"

"Peeters was pretty clear when I spoke to him that he was out of the country when all this went down, and yet he told my boss Walker had gone to run an errand? And Peeters was definitely holding things back when I talked to him. But that might just be the territory he works in, where you never tell the whole truth if you can help it."

Jones sipped her coffee. "So let's assume for argument's sake that Lee is gay and the letter from Walker that you found was bogus. Maybe they were covering up their working relationship by faking a romantic one."

"But all I found was the letter and it was hidden behind a photo. And there was nothing like that at Walker's place. And everyone I talked to was surprised to learn they might be in a relationship. So not much faking going

on to cover up something else. But Walker apparently did save her life once. Maybe that ignited things romantically."

"How exactly did that go down?"

Devine told her what Lee's boss had revealed about the reporter almost being a victim of human trafficking. "I can find out more," he said as he quickly typed and sent off a text to Campbell about that.

Jones sat back looking pensive. "I guess one question we haven't really addressed is: Why did Walker want to divorce Charlotte Woolwine? I mean, he had a pretty sweet life. Three kids, private jet, mansions to live in. The 'world is your oyster' kind of thing. And his wife apparently loved him. I mean, it all sounds . . . perfect."

She sounded so unguardedly wistful that Devine looked at her empty ring finger. But he chose not to think anything more about it, because it was none of his business, and his ring finger was empty, too.

"I also wonder if she knew he had terminal cancer," said Jones.

"Maybe."

"You'd think that a terminal diagnosis would bring a couple closer together." She grew quiet and glanced over at the enormous Disney ocean liner docked at the wharf. "I've always wanted to go to Disney World," she said.

He looked at her, a little surprised. "You didn't strike me as the type."

"Looks can be deceiving," she said. "And we need balance in our lives, right? I mean, I can't spend every waking moment on homicides, can I? Can you?"

"Balance is good," he said quietly. "You ever been to the States?"

"On my bucket list. I *have* been to Disney World in Tokyo. What's the one like in Florida?"

"I went when I was a kid. All I really remember is my father complaining that Disney was trying to bankrupt him. So make sure your credit card limit is really high."

Jones smiled. "Will do. Thanks."

"So what about dealing with Drury's meeting with Mueller and Woolwine? You said the two served in the military together. Shouldn't Drury have disclosed that he knew Mueller?"

"The AFP might have okayed it, for all I know. But that wouldn't have happened at the NSW Police. Mueller could turn out to be a suspect. You have conflict rules for a reason."

“Could the AFP have assigned him the case *because* of his connection to Mueller?”

“What, you mean higher-ups dropped him into this to cover the Woolwines’ asses?”

“Is that out of the question?”

She didn’t answer right away. “The Woolwines have a lot of friends in high places. The thing is, Travis, even if I do confront Drury or make noises, he could just claim he was interviewing them as part of the investigation just like we did.”

“But the things he said, ‘I’ll take care of it’?”

“He said, she said. And even with the audio I have no real proof of context. And he’s with the AFP and a man. I know how that will end.”

“So we just keep it tabled for now, like you suggested before?”

She nodded. “But if he slips up or does something that doesn’t make sense? Then we come down on him, hard.”

“You said you had something to add to the agenda?”

“I think more information from Charlotte Woolwine might be in order.”

“But she said to deal with her attorneys from now on,” Devine pointed out.

“She hasn’t been charged, so she’s not entitled to an attorney. If her attorney is present, so be it.”

“And if she refuses?” said Devine. “I assume the right to remain silent is alive and well here.”

“It is. But I thought we could talk to Mueller first. What he can’t answer, he can go back to her for answers.”

“That actually might work,” he said. “What more do you know about Mueller?”

“He fought alongside you chaps in the Middle East. He mustered out and he’s been with the Woolwines for over ten years now. Moved up the ranks. His father worked for them, too. He was an ex-cop. Then became their head of security. He was with them for over thirty years until he died around three years ago.”

A startled Devine said, “Over thirty years? Wait, so considering Mueller’s age he was still a kid when his father started working for the Woolwines?”

“Yeah, he was.”

“Then he must know where all the skeletons are buried.”

“And maybe he’ll share some with us,” she said.

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CHAPTER

31

MUELLER DID AGREE TO MEET with them and said he would come down to the police office on Charles Street to do so.

Devine was thinking that might be a way for the man to keep such a meeting hidden from his employers. If so, that could be a good thing for the investigation, particularly if Mueller decided to cooperate. But then his agenda might simply be to act as a buffer to keep them away from the Woolwines. Given his history with the family, that was a more likely scenario, thought Devine.

In a small, drab conference room Devine and Jones sat on one side of the table and Mueller on the other. He was dressed in a suit jacket and slacks and an open collar. His manner was affable if guarded.

“Mr. Woolwine said you had an interesting conversation,” began Mueller.

“We were hoping to have an interesting conversation with you, too,” began Devine.

“Whatever I can do to help clear this up.”

“Clear what up?” said Jones sharply.

“I just meant, you know, helping you with the case.”

“Okay, for starters, we were wondering if you knew why Walker wanted a divorce,” said Jones.

“Didn’t you ask Charlotte that?”

Devine said, “In so many words, but we didn’t really get an answer. Only that he was the one who wanted it. She still loved him, or so she told me on the plane.”

“Well, then that’s a fact. Her word is her bond.”

“So what can you tell us about it?”

“Their personal lives were their own, as I told you before. I’m just the hired help.”

“Really?” said Devine. “That’s your story?”

Mueller glanced back and forth between the pair. “Why would you think otherwise?”

Jones opened a file in front of her, turned over a few pages and said, “Because you grew up with Charlotte Woolwine. Your father was head of their security. Your childhood home was on Carlton Woolwine’s old Sydney estate. You know the family, just like your father knew the family. He was devoted to them, just like you are. They paid for all his cancer treatments and had around-the-clock help when he went into hospice at the home they had given him. He was clearly more than hired help. Am I wrong? And before you answer, is your word *your* bond?”

Devine had been watching Mueller closely as Jones said all this, and the man’s expression was revealing. The DS had hit a nerve.

He interjected, “Nothing wrong with loyalty, Mr. Mueller. You were in the Australian Army. I was in the U.S. Army. Loyalty isn’t a virtue for those in uniform. It’s *expected*. It’s how you live your life. With honor and service. I think those qualities carried over. I think your growing up with Charlotte Woolwine and your father’s obvious devotion made this less of a job and more of a calling.”

Mueller looked at his hands for a few moments, seemingly to gather himself. “Bill was sick.”

Jones said, “Yes, with terminal cancer. Did his wife know before all this happened?”

Mueller shook his head. “I don’t know, but I think he was keeping it a secret.”

“But why?” asked Devine. “She was his wife, the mother of his kids. She had a right to know.”

“Be that as it may, it was Bill’s choice, at least that’s how I saw it.”

“But he told you?” said Jones.

“No, I found out, accidentally. If he *had* confided in me I would have strongly encouraged him to tell his wife.”

“How did you find out?” asked Jones.

“Two things. I saw him coming out of a building that houses an oncology practice here in Sydney. I knew it well because I had taken my father there for treatment when he was ill. And another time I was with him

when Bill dropped his bag and several bottles of pills fell out. I helped pick them up and recognized one of them. It was the same medication my father was on for nausea from the chemo."

"If Walker was on chemo, how come his hair hadn't fallen out?" asked Jones. "He wasn't wearing a wig when he was found, we know that."

"Not all chemo treatments make your hair fall out, or it just thins it, like it did my father's."

"Did Walker know that you knew?"

"I think he might have guessed, but we never talked about it."

"And you never told Charlotte?" said Jones.

"Despite my loyalty to her and the family, no. I respected Bill and, again, it was his choice. I had found out by accident, and I was not going to betray him. And . . . I did not want to tell his wife something like that. It was not my place."

"You thought highly of both of them, I take it," said Devine.

"Marrying into the Woolwine family is not easy," said Mueller, the emotional strain showing on his features. "I first met Charlotte when I was around ten and she was about the same age. I was around her a lot until she went off to boarding school in Europe. When the Woolwines traveled there to see her, and my father went along, I would sometimes go, too. It was a pretty dark place, the school, I mean. Really old and . . . well, dreary. Sort of like something out of Dickens."

"Any idea why they would send her so far away and to a place like that?" asked Devine.

"I think Mr. Woolwine didn't want her to grow up privileged and entitled, at least as much as was possible being born into such wealth. He'd grown up with nothing and I guess he thought it made him stronger, tougher. He wanted the same for Charlotte. And then she was sent to a university in Prague. This is while I was in the Army. I didn't see much of her then. I did one time, though, when I was on leave over there."

"How did she seem when you saw her?"

"Like a different person. Grown-up. Strong, independent, and tough, actually, so I guess her father's plan worked."

"You told me on the flight down that her priority was her family," noted Devine.

"Yes, but as the children got older and went off to school, that changed. Charlotte is now far more involved in the business. In fact, her father is

grooming her to take over as CEO one day."

"Any particular part of the business?" asked Devine. "She told us a little, but that was all. I'd like to hear your take."

"Mr. Woolwine is now heavily engaged in AI and crypto mining and the infrastructure that each requires. Charlotte is involved in that part of the business, and is doing a good job. But she's also still very much engaged in her children's lives."

"Busy lady," noted Jones.

"Yes, and more than that, it's hard to . . . understand the demands, the . . . expectations of being in the Woolwine family. It eventually changed Charlotte, I think, but Bill didn't let it change him. He rolled with the punches, did what he needed to do, but he had his life, his work, *his* very demanding career. And he loved Charlotte and she really loved him. I mean, *really* loved him. She's one of the richest people on the planet, but she's never acted like it. She suffered a grievous loss when her mother was killed. They were extremely close. And Mrs. Woolwine was all about using her wealth to help others, and Charlotte was of the same mind."

"How did the two of them meet?" asked Jones. "Walker was already working in the intel field, I know."

Mueller nodded. "They met in Kyiv, I think. Bill had gone there for work, and Charlotte was traveling through the region during a college break. They met at some gathering and hit it off. When she came home, the lady was in love."

"She told you that?"

"I was stationed in East Timor at the time, but then was redeployed to Afghanistan. She emailed me about this great guy she'd met. He was a number of years older than she was, and already established in his field. He wouldn't talk much about his work, she said. But her father had him checked out."

"That was standard?" asked Devine.

"Oh, yes. She was the sole heir, and you can't take chances at that level. But the thing was, Bill didn't even know she was rich. He didn't even know her last name, because Charlotte used a fake surname. Something she did often in those situations. Sort of comes with the territory of being a member of a billionaire family."

"I would have thought being in the intelligence field that he would have done some digging on her," said Devine.

“Bill would not have used any resources from his job on a personal matter, I can assure you,” replied Mueller. “He was not that sort, and it would have been illegal. Anyway, her father’s people did their due diligence and there were no skeletons in Bill’s closet. He was doing well financially and wasn’t the grifter type that can sometimes prey on women like Charlotte. They started dating and Bill moved to Australia. Then they got married and he continued his career in the intel field with Five Eyes. They had three kids, happy marriage, and then . . . this. The perfect world went belly-up, with a damn vengeance.”

Devine said, “Understandably a terminal cancer diagnosis is devastating for everyone. But why would that prompt him to seek a divorce? Especially if they were so in love? I mean, the vows are for better or worse, in sickness and in health, right?”

Mueller shook his head. “I . . . I don’t know the answer to that, Agent Devine. It came quickly, out of nowhere. In fact, Charlotte told me he had filed for a divorce a few days after I saw the pills he dropped.”

“So maybe that was the impetus,” said Jones. “He might have guessed that you recognized them. Does Charlotte still not know about his illness?”

“When Bill’s body was discovered, I told her. I thought she had a right to know at that point, and Bill could no longer tell her.”

“And how did she take it?” asked Devine.

“Not well. A lot of cursing, crying, throwing things . . . Not well,” he added.

“Probably made her hate him some, but also love him even more,” said Jones quietly.

Devine glanced at her in surprise, but she didn’t look at him.

Mueller said, “She was so mad at me for not telling her before. I thought she was going to fire me just for being the messenger. But . . . well, I’m still here . . . for now.”

Devine said, “Look, to be perfectly frank, we’re not getting any traction on this case. Walker’s world won’t talk to us, and the Woolwines have not been particularly helpful. But the thing is, what happened to Walker is tied to either his personal or professional life.”

“It has to be his professional life, Agent Devine. The Woolwines are rich beyond belief, but they don’t live in a world of murderous intrigue.”

Jones said, “But that’s not really true, is it? The Russians? The tobacconist shops matter? And I understand that they almost detonated a

bomb in Charlotte Woolwine's car. I would call *that* murderous intrigue."

Mueller sat back and glanced sharply at both of them. "But those men were arrested. They're in prison."

"The street crew's in prison. Their bosses were never identified," countered Jones.

"And going from trying to blow up Charlotte to murdering her husband is not a big leap," pointed out Devine.

"Did you raise that when you spoke with Mr. Woolwine?" asked Mueller.

"We did. And he clearly didn't want to talk about it," said Devine.

"I don't think there's anything I can add."

"How was the bomb plot derailed?" asked Devine.

"Now, that was interesting. It was Bill who uncovered it in time."

Devine said, "Walker? How did that happen?"

"His work in intelligence, apparently. The shop bombings had happened. More threats were being made. Everyone was on edge. But Bill picked up on some chatter during the course of his work that revealed the plot. When he was in New Zealand he actually called and told them to check all the vehicles. That's when the bomb was uncovered on Charlotte's Jaguar. She was going to take it out that day, in fact, to drive one of her daughters to a party."

"But Carlton Woolwine must have been eternally grateful to his son-in-law for doing that," noted Devine.

"I'm sure he was."

"Yet when we talked to him, to be blunt, it didn't seem that the man even cared for Walker or knew much about him. And he never mentioned Walker's role in saving his daughter's and granddaughter's lives."

"Mr. Woolwine does not reveal . . . his feelings easily."

"So he secretly liked him or had a personal relationship with him? That's not the impression we got from Charlotte, either," said Jones.

Mueller looked at them helplessly. "The Woolwines simply do not lead normal lives."

Devine glanced at Jones. "Instead of answers we get more puzzles."

"I'm sorry," said Mueller, and the man seemed genuinely apologetic.

"Me too," said Devine. "Me too."

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CHAPTER

32

AN EMAIL FROM CAMPBELL WAS waiting for Devine when he checked his phone after Jones dropped him off at his hotel. He sat on his bed and read it, disbelief chief among his reactions.

> BOTH LEE'S AND WALKER'S PERSONAL COMPUTERS, PHONES AND CLOUD ACCOUNTS WIPED CLEAN. TECHS HERE SAY THEY HAVE NEVER SEEN SUCH A THOROUGH JOB.

How can that be possible?

Devine went to the bathroom and ran cold water over his face.

One step forward, four giant leaps back.

He texted Jones and relayed this bit of distressing news. He then emailed Campbell with the latest on his interview with Mueller.

Campbell emailed back a few minutes later telling Devine to keep pushing, and also that he was desperately trying to compel the Five Eyes components in both the United States and Australia to at least begin to cooperate with the investigation.

Devine thought that it was almost like no one other than him, Jones, and Campbell actually wanted to find out the truth. The FBI and CIA, the typical American agencies with skin in this game, had not entered the field, really, other than the FBI doing some perfunctory forensic crime scene work back in New York. As he and Campbell had previously surmised, these sister agencies to DHS seemed to be taking a wait-and-see approach. And if Campbell and Devine screwed up they might step in if there were any advantages to doing so.

A luxury I don't have, thought Devine.

And then the AFP down here seemed to be in bed with the Woolwines.

He stepped to the window. Somewhere out there were the people who had kidnapped and killed Walker, and shot Lee. Devine wanted them, he wanted them badly, to hell with the interagency politics.

And Devine decided right then and there that if they tried to pull him from this case he would fight them. Maybe his decision was partly due to what was going on with his family at the moment. Devine was desperate to hold someone accountable for something. There was nothing he could do for his father except pray his brilliant brother could figure it out. And he still didn't know what to do about his mother. In that sphere, right now, he was helpless.

But I'm not helpless down here. Here, I can find shit out. I can hold the bad actors accountable.

He had to make some decisions about what to do next, and he wasn't sure what they were. He took a walk around the harbor and looked out to the water as the ferries came and went. He continued to gaze around, taking in the people walking about. He pulled out his phone and activated the recording device to memorialize some thoughts about the case.

That was when something hard hit him in the back and a man said quietly in a thickened accent, "What you feel is a pistol chambered with armor-piercing rounds that will vaporize whatever it hits. My friend has a grenade. You don't come without making noise, it goes right at those folks stuffing their fucking faces over there."

Devine surreptitiously slipped his phone down the front of his pants and pulled his sweater low to cover it. Then he turned and looked at the second man, who showed a grenade in his right hand. He next glanced at the dozens of people seated at an outdoor restaurant.

Not much of a choice.

The three men walked off. They reached an SUV, and Devine was forced to get in after they disarmed him and zip-tied his hands in front of him. But they didn't find his phone, and his sweater covered where he had hidden it. The men sat on either side of him. A third man was in the front passenger seat, and a fourth man put the vehicle in gear and drove them off.

Devine said, "I hope this won't take too long. I have an appointment."

The men said nothing. Two looked Middle Eastern with beards; the other two looked Eastern European with buzz cuts and matching intimidating expressions. To them, apparently, this was just a job, and Devine was the target to take out.

They drove out of the harbor area. Minutes and miles flashed by. Now all Devine could do was wait and wonder what all this might be about. But maybe he wouldn't do any of that, he thought after a moment's reflection. He was angry about a lot of things, including the stonewalling on this case and his father being in the hospital for a purported stroke, and still finding the strength to yell at him.

So let's be proactive, Travis, because what did being patient ever really get you?

He took the time to eye each of the men and do a quick evaluation. Though clearly professional, they had made some mistakes. No doubt they felt their superior numbers would carry the day. Well, any general who had ever commanded in battle could tell you the fallacy in that assumption.

"If you're going to try to kill me I'd like to know why," said Devine.

The man next to him leaned in and said in a thick Slavic accent, "Just be good little boy and shut the fuck up. And eat the bullet and piss all over yourself when the time comes. But you better not piss on me. This is new suit." He added a sharp gut punch to his words, doubling Devine over.

When he'd gotten his breath back Devine said, "Would you shut up if the positions were reversed?"

"I would never allow myself to get in this position," the man replied with a sneer stamped over his features. "So you fucked yourself, no tears."

"Okay, important question. Do you have badges?" asked Devine.

"What the fuck, you think we're cops?" said the front-passenger-seat man in a similar accent. He laughed. "I take offense at that."

The other men chuckled, and the same man who'd struck Devine before hit him in the face with a sharp elbow. "Me too," said the man, laughing. The man on the other side of Devine slugged him as well, and then slammed a bony fist into Devine's ribs.

Devine, who'd cinched his core before the blow fell, nulling its effects, wiped the blood off his face with his sleeve and said, "I just want to verify that you're not."

"Why does this matter to you?" said the man next to Devine who had first spoken. "And answer carefully unless you want more pain. But why wait?"

He slugged Devine again, knocking him into the other man, who punched Devine in the head and side.

Devine slowly recovered from this pounding and said, “The thing is, I don’t want to kill cops by mistake.”

The men eyed each other with mirth. The man next to Devine said, “Okay, we’re *not* cops, you fucking moron—”

Devine exploded forward and headbutted him, slamming the man back against the window; the twin impacts knocked him out. At the same moment Devine reached over with his zip-tied hands, pulled the man’s gun from his holster, turned, and shot the man on the other side of him in the face. He then did the same to the stunned gent in the front passenger seat. Blood and brains were blown around the car. Devine next leveled the muzzle of the heated pistol against the back of the driver’s head.

“When you abduct someone, make sure their hands are bound *behind* their back, *you* fucking moron.”

“Please, please do not shoot,” said the man, who was Middle Eastern with a thick dark beard and matching hair. “You get out here. Please. You get out here.”

He stopped the SUV.

“The thing is,” said Devine, wiping blood that wasn’t his off his face. “I don’t want to ‘get out here.’ You drive me to where we were going before things . . . changed. And if you try to mess with me I will shoot you, and you can join your friends wherever I decide to dump the bodies.”

The man eyed Devine in the mirror, panic all over his features. “You Americans are seriously screwed up.” ’

“Yeah, but I am one of the more rational ones, so there is that.”

“Shit,” exclaimed the man, eyeing the man next to him, who was missing half his face.

As the man drove off, Devine used his teeth to move the lock on the zip ties around his wrists so it lay directly between his two wrists and facing him. He next leaned forward and then threw himself backward while at the same time pulling his hands apart and back. The zip ties burst.

Devine slipped his phone from his pants, sent a text, and also dropped a pin location. He made sure the two dead guys were sitting up in their seats to look less dead. But when the man he’d headbutted started to come around, Devine smashed his face into the window, sending tendrils of blood across the glass. He then propped him against the door, his shoulder harness the only thing keeping him from face-planting against the back of the front seat.

Devine then put the muzzle of his gun against the driver's head and used his free hand to slide the 9mm SIG Sauer out of the man's shoulder holster.

"Observe all traffic laws, because I don't think you want to be stopped by the cops. You'd have a lot of explaining to do."

The SUV halted ten minutes later in front of a home that was set behind a gated wall. The place was large, dark, modern in design, and not the least bit welcoming.

"This is it?" said Devine.

"Yes," said the man, trembling.

"You're sure? Because it doesn't look like the place." He pushed the gun's muzzle against the back of the man's head and his finger went to the trigger. "I'm feeling lied to and I don't like it."

"Please, I swear to everything I hold dear, this is the place."

"So who lives here?"

"I . . . I don't know."

"You don't know and yet you drove me here?"

"I was just given the address. He knew." The man pointed to the faceless dead man next to him.

"Well, that's convenient, for *you*. What's your name?" asked Devine.

"My name?"

"Yes, I always like to know the identity of my enemies."

The man didn't answer, so Devine reached into the man's pocket and took out a passport. "This says you're a Saudi and your name is Hazma Ayad. So I'm going to ask you one more time, Hazma Ayad, who lives here?"

"My boss."

"And your boss's name?"

"I can't tell you."

"Why not?"

"They'd kill me."

"Then you have a big problem because *I'll* kill you if you don't tell me. And I'm holding a gun on you, they're not."

"You can't do that. You are an American cop. I was told this."

"American cops shoot people all the time. And I'm running out of patience, so I guess it's time to say goodbye." He started to squeeze the trigger.

Ayad screamed, “Boris Semenov. He is my boss.”

“Your boss is Russian?”

“I don’t know what he is. But he is my boss.”

“Since when do Saudis work for Russians?”

“I just go where the work and money are. The Russians pay well. And my country is trying to play nice to the world, so the work I do is not so much in demand. The Russians don’t give a fuck. They shit on everybody.”

“And what does Boris Semenov want with me?”

“I do not know.”

“Okay, who is Boris Semenov?”

“A very powerful man. A man not to cross.”

“He’s inside the house?”

“Yes.”

“How many guys with him?”

“Many. Very many.”

Devine nodded and glanced down at his phone. “Okay, look at me, Hazma.”

“What?”

“Look at me.”

When the man turned Devine slugged him so hard his head bounced off the window and he fell unconscious. Devine searched for and found his Glock; it was in the pocket of the dead man next to him.

He next used the driver’s belt to hog-tie him and did the same with the belt of the fellow next to Devine in the back seat who was still alive, if unconscious. The other two men, of course, did not require restraints.

Devine slipped out of the SUV and looked up at the house. It was dark, intimidating, and perhaps full of men who wanted to kill him. But the cavalry was almost here.

One minute later, four marked police cruisers pulled sharply up in front. Anais Jones stepped out of one along with two other officers carrying shotguns. The three of them had on body armor. From the other vehicles emerged eight body-armored and helmeted cops holding AR-15s.

They surrounded Devine and the SUV.

“I got your text and pin drop,” she said. She then handed him a set of body armor, which he quickly donned.

“Thanks for bringing the firepower.”

Jones looked inside the SUV and said, “Jesus Christ, what the hell did you do in there?”

“Only what I had to do.”

“So who lives here?” said Jones, nodding at the house.

“Let’s go find out.”

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CHAPTER

33

THE HOUSE, AS IT TURNED out, was anticlimactically empty. A forensics team was called in to see if they had left anything helpful behind.

Jones and Devine met back outside. It was warm now, the sky clearing but, to Devine's thinking, that was all that was clear about his time so far in Australia.

He took out his phone. "Luckily, I had this on when they grabbed me."

He played it for Jones and she jumped when the gunfire was heard.

"I take it that was you?"

"Yeah. The driver said his boss was a Russian named Boris Semenov. Ring any bells?"

"No," she said. "Sounds like a bad guy on a bad TV show. But I'll run it anyway. You said they snatched you at the harbor?"

"One had a grenade. Like you heard on the recording, he said he'd chuck it into a crowd of people having dinner unless I went peacefully."

"Well, you sure as hell didn't remain peaceful."

"I'd be dead if I hadn't done what I did."

"I'm not arguing with you. But the paperwork on this is gonna be a bitch."

"Just blame the gun-happy American."

"Don't joke. You could have died, Travis."

"I could die in the shower."

"I'm being serious." She looked at her now-holstered sidearm. "And except for tonight I've never even pulled my service pistol in the line of duty."

"And I hope you never have to. But that hasn't been my experience. People just have to stop trying to kill me and I'm a real teddy bear."

"What do you think they wanted with you?"

“My first guess would be whatever I know about the case. And then two taps in the head and they’d throw me in the harbor like they did Walker.”

“Why wasn’t Semenov or whoever he really is here then?” she asked.

“I think they either had eyes on the SUV or some sort of electronic surveillance. When things went south, they lit out. But if someone owns or rented this place, we might get a lead.”

“I already sent particulars to the office. And the forensics team will be here shortly to tear this place apart.” Jones looked at his bruised and bloodied face. “Do I need to take you to the hospital?”

He shook his head. “I’m okay.”

“I’ll need to take a formal statement from you. You’re now a crime scene witness.”

“Okay. And I hope you get something out of the two guys still living.”

“We plan to do our best interrogating them.”

“Can I sit in on that?”

“How about you observe from the other room. That work?”

“Guess it has to.”

*** * ***

Devine watched from behind a mirrored wall that looked into the interrogation room.

Jones and another member of her team sat across from the two survivors of Devine’s turning the tables on his kidnappers.

The men had been cautioned and informed of their rights, and the recorder started. They had not asked for an attorney, yet. Hazma Ayad had a bandage wound around his head and his jaw was purple and yellow where Devine had popped him. The other man’s right eye was swollen shut, his face heavily bruised and cut up, and his nose broken from being slammed into the window.

Poor guy, thought Devine.

Jones opened a file and peered at it for a few moments.

“Hazma Ayad and Ivan Petrov. A Saudi and a Czech. Both visitors to our fine country, and here you are kidnapping nice people and carrying guns and grenades around. Naughty boys indeed. And you have no license to carry a weapon.”

“It is for our job,” said Ayad. “You know, security protection back in our home countries. And the grenade was not real. I am sure you are now aware of this.”

“You still don’t have a license to carry here. And just because the grenade was fake doesn’t give you the right to threaten to kill people with it, or kidnap someone.”

Petrov said, “We kidnapped no one. This crazy bastard carjacked us. And it was actually *his* grenade. Americans all carry grenades. They are violent as shit, everyone knows this.”

“Violent as shit and yet carrying around a *fake* grenade?”

Petrov waved this off like it was a mere technicality. “He killed two of my dear friends. All you need to know. He is murderer. Arrest him and let us go free.”

Jones said, “That’s really how you want to play it?”

He looked at her like he wanted to slit her throat. “I play at nothing. It is the *truth*.”

“It is what I say as well,” added Ayad. “He jumped in and started shooting. He is maniac.”

“With *your* gun?” said Jones, still looking at the Czech.

Petrov exclaimed, “He knocked me out, killed my friends. It is two words against one.”

“And why would he do that?”

“You will have to ask *him* that.”

Jones took out a recorder and turned it on. They heard the conversations between Petrov and Devine and then Devine and Ayad play out.

Jones said, “So you want to try that again? And this time maybe the truth?”

Petrov folded his arms over his thick chest and looked at Ayad like he now wanted to slit *his* throat. “What I want is lawyer. Now.”

“Me too,” said Ayad. “And fucking bail.”

“Lawyers we can do. But good luck on bail, mate.”

A few moments later, after the men were led away, Jones joined Devine.

“Good thing you made that recording,” said Jones. “But I think the CCTV in the harbor would have corroborated that they abducted you.”

“Now what happens?”

“I doubt they’ll make bail, even with their passports confiscated. In New South Wales the courts do a risk assessment instead of looking at the ability to post bail. The fact that they’re foreign nationals, had illegal guns and a grenade, and committed various felonies? My read is their butts are staying in custody.”

“Okay.” He started to leave.

“Where are you going?”

“I gave my statement. Now I’m going to ice my face and ribs, put on some Band-Aids, swallow some Advil, and get some sleep. And maybe tomorrow will be a better day.”

“It has to be better than today.”

Devine looked at the woman and shook his head. “No guarantees for people like us, Anais. Ever.”

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CHAPTER

34

EIGHT HOURS OF SHUTEYE PRECEDED by a handful of Advil, ice, ointment, and Band-Aids, and Devine was as good as new.

Well, close enough.

He awoke to a text from his sister, who was now with her brother and parents.

TESTS ONGOING. DANNY WILL FIGURE IT OUT. DAD IS STABLE AND RESTING. MOM DOING BETTER. LOVE YOU. CLAIRE

The last part had surprised him. He couldn't remember his sister saying that to him before. But maybe his memory had gotten selective.

Maybe all my family memories are playing me false.

He had not thought very much about his father over the previous several years. Now he was front and center, and it had thrown off Devine's emotional equilibrium. He was, of course, rooting for his father to get well. And . . .

Maybe he and I have a shot to . . . work things out. We think we have all the time in the world, until we don't.

He answered Claire, ending with twin heart emojis, and then checked his phone for other messages. He had emailed Campbell about his encounter in the SUV and its aftermath.

Turned out Campbell had sent a terse email detailing Bill Walker's rescue of Theresa Lee from human traffickers in Somalia. There were enough details there for Devine to call him.

"How are you feeling?" Campbell asked.

"Better. But your email created more questions than it answered."

"I know."

"You really think Walker saving Lee in Somalia was *staged*?"

“The chatter he said he relied on? My people said it looked dicey, as in faked.”

“What would be his motive for that?” asked Devine.

“Well, one would be to get Lee on his side.”

“Why?”

“Future stories that help his interests somehow.”

“But why pick her out of all the other journalists?” asked Devine.

“A question I’ve been asking myself.”

Devine said, “What if she was working on a story at the time that he *didn’t* want to see the light of day?”

Campbell didn’t reply right away. Devine could almost hear the gears of the other man’s brain spinning away.

“Okay, he finds out about a story she’s working on. He sets up saving Lee so she owes him. Walker then convinces her the story isn’t worth pursuing or it’s premature to publish it. She either postpones or drops it. That would also explain him targeting her in the first place instead of any other journalist out there.”

“And then in New York he confesses to Lee because he’s dying and feeling guilty?” added Devine.

“Which would also comport with her anger captured on the CCTV. Now we just have to find out what she was working on at that time. Since I’m here, I’ll get on it.”

“I’ll follow whatever I can down here as well,” said Devine. He clicked off, showered, dressed, and headed to breakfast. He’d decided to take a break from his normal workout to allow his battered body to rest and heal.

He had black coffee for some antioxidants, scrambled eggs and ham for protein and fats, and a waffle and fruit for carbs.

Just your average super agent’s breakfast.

As he watched a gentle rain fall, Devine’s attention turned to the empty table next to his. A colorful bird had alighted there and grabbed one of the sugar packets from its holder. He nimbly ripped it open with his beak, poured the contents on the table, and scarfed down the granules. Another bird joined him, and they continued to rip through the packets. Devine noted they only went after the raw sugar and left the white processed sugar and artificial stuff alone. A waitress finally hurried over and shooed them away. She cleaned up the mess and glanced at a smiling Devine.

She said in a soft Caribbean accent, “Every morning those birds do this. They’re rainbow lorikeets, but we call them *sweet tooths*.”

“I see they only go after the natural sugar, though.”

“Oh, yes, they know what is good and not good for them.”

“We should be so smart,” said Devine as he looked at the birds perched in a nearby tree and staring at the sugar packets. *Who really is the advanced species and who isn’t?*

After she walked off his phone buzzed.

It was Anais Jones. “How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Not bad for having been a punching bag.”

“So, you’re having breakfast at your usual spot.”

“I didn’t know I had a usual spot, and it doesn’t seem like you’re asking a question.”

“I have eyes on you for your protection. I’ll be there in two minutes. I can use some coffee. And when is this bloody rain going to pass? Very depressing. I can’t wait for Christmas so I can go to the beach and work on my tan.”

“Yeah, everything is backwards here, like the direction of water going down the toilet.”

“That’s a myth. Now, the Coriolis effect does impact large-weather patterns like hurricanes, which do turn in the opposite direction than in the northern hemisphere. But the effect is too weak to impact a toilet.”

“Thank you, Bill Nye the Science Guy.”

“Who?”

“Never mind. See you in now one minute.” He clicked off.

When he saw her coming into the restaurant Devine poured her out a cup of coffee from the carafe on his table. She sat across from him while Devine watched the ferries operate with efficient regularity.

“Where do all those ferries go?” he asked.

“All over the harbor. Manly Beach. Rose Bay. Darling Point and Watsons Bay you already know about. Then there’s Cockatoo Island, the Taronga Zoo, Barangaroo, and Balmain East. Dozens of stops. When my family comes into town we always go out on them. Lovely way to see things and get from place to place. And it’s very inexpensive.”

“Maybe I’ll do that on my day off.”

“Oh, you think you’ll get a whole day off while working this case?” she shot back with a smile.

“Guess I’ll have to come back. Maybe for Christmas and work on my tan, too.”

“I know the non-touristy spots.”

He smiled and raised his coffee cup. “I appreciate that, DS Jones. Spending non-touristy beach leisure time with a professional colleague would be . . . different.”

“You know what they say, all work and no play makes for very dull cops. I already gave my spiel about that.”

“Yeah, just never heard it quite that way before.”

She sipped her coffee. “Well now you have.”

Devine then told her about the possibility that Walker’s rescue of Lee in Somalia might have been staged.

Jones looked dumbstruck. “That would explain some things and then open a can of worms on other things.”

“My boss is running further details down in New York. But now I’m thinking about Walker saving his wife and daughter from a car bomb. Could that have been faked, too?”

“I guess it could. I just don’t know what anyone would have gained from that.”

“Walker was still working for us back then.”

“So maybe something to do with your Five Eyes?”

“And maybe yours because he worked with them, too, on a joint mission.”

Jones slowly nodded. The woman looked nervous, Devine noted.

He said, “Which might explain why none of them are cooperating with us.”

“A cover-up, you mean?”

“What else?”

“This is starting to get really weird, Travis.”

“Hell, Anais, for me it’s been weird ever since I stepped on the Woolwines’ jet.”

“So what do we do now?” she asked.

“Think we can get into the prison to see some of the Russians who burned down the tobacco shops?”

She stared at him wide-eyed. “Why would you want to do that?”

“Because if I got set up to take a fall and do serious prison time I might be pissed enough about it to spill whatever I know.”

“Wait, you think that was, what, staged, too? Those shops *did* burn down, Travis. People were injured.”

“I’m just saying maybe there’s more there than we know. Like maybe it was an inside job.”

“Hold on. Why would Carlton Woolwine burn down his own shops?”

“I don’t know the answer to that, Anais. But maybe some of these Russians do. Can you get us in to see them?”

“I can try. But what leverage do we have to make them talk? They didn’t confess anything when they were charged.”

“Some time off their sentence?”

“I’d have to talk to people about that. And it’s not even my jurisdiction.”

“Okay, then, what bright ideas do you have about what we should do next?”

She stared at him for a few moments, then shrugged and pulled out her phone. “It’s worth a shot.”

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CHAPTER

35

"Goulburn Correctional Centre?" said Devine, reading off the sign on the wall.

They were three kilometers out of the Goulburn downtown area and a two-hour drive northwest of Sydney.

"It houses the supermax in Unit Seven." Jones slowed the car as they approached the gate, which was chain-link fence topped with concertina wire. Beyond that was a liftgate, and beyond that a sandstone façade.

She added, "It's called HRMU for High-Risk Management Unit, although the inmates refer to it as HARM-U."

"Creative," said Devine. "But then again, they have nothing else to do all day."

"It houses terrorists, serial murderers, and rapists. Two of the men convicted of the tobacconist shop bombings are here."

"What'd they get sentence-wise?"

"They pled guilty, which gave them each a reduced sentence, and they both ended up with twenty years. They're only a few years into that sentence. Their crime was deemed to be an act of terrorism, which made the potential penalties far higher. Under the Crimes Act, if lives were intentionally set at risk there's a maximum of twenty-five years. And there were multiple bombings that were attributed to them. But these men were only charged with three of them, where a shopkeeper and two customers were severely injured but ultimately survived. They swore they didn't know anyone was in the buildings. I wouldn't have let them plead down, but it wasn't my call. They're both in their early twenties, so they'll be in their forties when they get out."

"Plenty young enough to do a lot of damage when they're free."

“They’re going to be deported back to Russia immediately after their release.”

“They probably would have gotten life back in the States.”

“In NSW the only way to get that as a *mandatory* sentence is for the murder of a police officer, although it can be imposed by the court for other offenses.” She looked around. “Ironic.”

“What is?”

“The NSW Police Academy is in Goulburn. I spent nearly half a year here. Not much to do other than study, train, eat, and sleep.”

“At least it’s not *twenty* years, Anais. I think you clearly got the better deal.”

They were cleared through security after relinquishing their weapons.

As they walked down the hall, escorted by a prison official, Devine said in a low voice, “Who knows about our visit today?”

Jones said, “I kept it on the QT. But I can’t guarantee Drury won’t find out.”

“And if he does, what will you say?”

“I don’t answer to the AFP, Travis. But if a question comes up I can say that we’re investigating every possible lead and the people who bombed Woolwine’s shops are on the suspect list. And if he objects, I don’t give a shit.”

“And it’ll tell us a lot about where his loyalties lie.”

“Or his *disloyalties*,” amended Jones.

The prisoners were waiting for them in the contact room. Any conversations would be recorded, as indicated by the lighted red button.

Outfitted in green prison uniforms, the men were lean, fit, and curious looking. They had shaved heads and tattooed forearms and necks. They were shackled and sat back in their chairs looking bored.

Jones and Devine sat across from them while the prison guard waited just outside.

“We know you both speak English,” began Jones.

The men looked at each other and shrugged. “So?” said one. “What do we have to speak *English* to you about?”

“We’d like to know who you were working for when you bombed the shops.”

“What shops?” said the other man, grinning.

Jones held up her phone where there was a picture. “This shop for starters. One man was paralyzed. He’s married and has three kids.”

“Guess that’s why we’re in here,” said the first man. “They think we did it.”

“You pled guilty to doing it,” Jones reminded him.

His response was a shrug.

Jones gazed at him. “Yuri Medvedev.”

“That is my name,” he said snidely. “Has nice ring to it.”

Jones looked at the other man. “And Mikhail Popov.”

“Has *nicer* ring to it,” said Popov with a grin.

“You both have family back in Russia. Mothers, fathers, and siblings.”

“Tell them hello for us,” said Medvedev. He waved a shackled hand. “Take picture, send them. Hi, Mom. Hello, Dad. Put on Instafuckinggram.”

“The names of the people you were working for?” said Devine. “We’re still waiting for your answer.”

Both men turned their attention to him. “American, right?” said Popov.

“Yes.”

“Too bad for you and your loser country. After Ukraine, you assholes are next.”

“In your wet dreams. Squirt gun versus a *real* army. But that doesn’t answer our question.”

“Sorry, what question was that?”

Devine looked at Jones. “What’s the penalty for being an accessory on a murder investigation that could be deemed an act of terrorism?”

Jones said, “Twenty to life last time I looked.”

On that both Russians sat up. Popov said, “What accessory bullshit are you speaking of?”

“Bill Walker. Worked in intelligence. Abducted in New York and found dead in Sydney Harbour. National security stuff. We think your bosses are involved. We’re here to give you the opportunity to help us before the hammer comes down.” He looked at Jones. “So would that run concurrent with their twenty years or would it be added on?”

“Added on.” She looked at her notebook. “I’m figuring at least a forty-year mandatory sentence because it’s murder *and* a national security impact. With the remaining time on their original sentence added on top, they’ll be over eighty when they get out of here. No chance they’ll live that long. The food here will kill you after twenty years, truly.”

“What is this bullshit!” exclaimed Medvedev. “We got *twenty* years total. They told us this. That is all. And maybe parole before this time for being good prisoners.”

“Not if you helped kill Bill Walker.”

“We have been in here. How could we kill this man?”

“So you know that he died *after* you went to prison?” Devine glanced at Jones. “Interesting, right?”

“Very interesting.”

Popov said, “We . . . Yuri just meant that . . . we do not know this man.”

Jones said, “Well, that’s irrelevant. If your bosses killed him and you know something about it and don’t tell us, you’re accessories to murder. And considering your criminal record, a judge will throw the book at you. By the time you get out your parents will certainly be dead as will more than likely all your siblings and all your friends. But I wouldn’t worry about it. Like I said, there’s no way you’re making it that long in here. You’ll get old and the young Turks will bend you over and then shiv your throats after they stuff the shitty food down it. At least your deaths will be quick.”

Popov eyed Medvedev. “I want to talk to lawyer.”

“Sure,” said Jones. She looked at Devine. “You lost the bet. I told you they’d lawyer up because they’d be scared to death. You said they’d be smart guys who’d cough up something to maybe get a reduced sentence.”

Devine opened his wallet and handed her an Australian ten-dollar bill. “I thought the Russians were tougher. My mistake.”

They rose to leave.

“What reduced sentence?”

They looked at Medvedev and then sat back down.

“We’re not expecting you to do this for nothing,” said Jones. “You give us names and we’ll see what we can do.”

Popov shook his head and looked around. He leaned forward and said in a low voice, “We talk about our bosses, we die.”

“In here?” said Jones.

“In anywhere,” replied Popov.

“How about solitary confinement at a medium-security facility?” said Jones. “And out in twelve years?”

“You can do this?” said Popov.

“We will try our best. But only if your information is helpful,” replied Devine. “And we’ll be the judge of that. Otherwise, this meeting is over.”

The men sat back and Medvedev said, “We need to think about this. You will have to come back.”

“Do you really want to play it that way?” said Devine.

“We do not *play*. This is serious shit. We cannot decide this minute.”

Devine glanced at Jones. “How long do you need?” she asked.

“Two days. Then you come back.”

They reluctantly left the prison, got back into the car, and returned to Sydney.

The next morning, Jones called Devine as he was heading down to breakfast.

“You’re not going to believe this.”

“What?”

“Popov and Medvedev were transferred out of Goulburn last night.”

“What? Where the hell did they go?”

“Nobody can tell me. It’s like they’ve disappeared off the face of the earth.”

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CHAPTER

36

DEVINE IMMEDIATELY EMAILED CAMPBELL AND told him of this recent development.

Campbell phoned him a minute later. “Okay, Devine, talk me through what you and Jones did and why.”

Devine took a couple of minutes to do so, and Campbell said, “Risky, but I think it was worth it. Only now we know they were listening, and executed a plan on the fly so those two could never talk.”

“By ‘they’ you must mean the government.”

“I’m not sure what the hell I mean, Devine. *They* in this instance could be all-encompassing, and include *several* governments.”

“Including ours?”

“Careful, Devine, we don’t know who might be listening to *us*.”

“So what do I do?”

“You and Jones better be prepared to answer some uncomfortable questions from her people, if I’m reading the tea leaves right.”

“But those Russians might have helped us with the investigation.”

“I agree. You don’t remove people who *couldn’t* help your investigation.”

“Why do I feel like no one has our back on this, sir?”

“Because you’re not an idiot, Devine.”

“We may never get to the truth.”

“Well, we won’t if we sit around whining about all the walls we keep hitting. Now we have to just keep punching through them. I’ll be back in touch soon.”

Campbell ended the call, and Devine looked down at his phone. There was a dread creeping up his spine that he could never remember feeling before, not even in combat, when he could be alive one minute and dead the

next. But in those situations he knew who the enemy was, so there was at least some clarity. Here, he didn't really know who was on the other side.

But like his boss had just said, there was no complaining allowed in their world. There was only overcoming obstacles and getting results.

Until the end came for you.

* * *

Sergeant Drury fiddled with a pen while Devine and Jones looked back at him from the other side of Drury's desk in his AFP office.

Campbell's warning had come true when they had been called in to meet with Drury.

Drury finally looked up. "Can you tell me, DS Jones, why you went to visit the two Russians at Goulburn?"

"As a *courtesy* I can tell you that we were running down a possible lead. They bombed Woolwine's businesses. The same group could be behind the murder of his son-in-law. We wanted to ask them who their bosses were."

"That question was asked at the time of their arrests."

"But it also wasn't answered. And we thought we'd give it another try."

Devine added, "And it looked like they were amenable to opening up. And then, for some reason, right after we met with them, they were transferred out of Goulburn to God knows where. I'm sure that's just a coincidence."

"I don't like what you're implying, Agent Devine."

"I don't like having to imply anything, but I don't see any way around it, quite frankly." He paused, studying the other man. "So where are they now?"

"Not my jurisdiction. You'll have to check with Corrective Services."

"I did," said Jones. "They haven't gotten back to me. Nor do I think they will."

"Well, people are busy."

"So you won't push to find out where they are so we can interview them again and possibly make some progress on this case?" asked Jones.

"No, I won't, because I think it's a complete waste of time."

"Well, I was taught when you have no leads, you go back over every scrap of the case and try new avenues, no matter how long a shot they are."

"Well, that's where you and I disagree. So, forget about those two men."

"All due respect, you are not in my chain of command, Sergeant Drury. You are not even with the police. So back off."

“I can make this very uncomfortable for you, Jones. The AFP *does* have influence at the NSW Police. So take my advice and forget about it.”

Devine took out his phone, brought up a picture, and held it out to Drury. “Are we supposed to forget about this, too?”

Drury looked at the image of himself meeting with Dennis Mueller and Charlotte Woolwine at Watsons Bay. He froze, but only for a moment. “Just talking to people involved in a case I’m working. What could possibly be wrong with that?”

“Not a thing, usually. But *conflicts* are *troublesome*, aren’t they?”

Jones added, “And Charlotte Woolwine seemed to think this was not how it should be playing out.”

“But she apparently had someone who was willing to take care of it,” finished Devine as he put his phone away. “I’ll let you guess who that might be.”

Both stared pointedly at Drury, who said, “The Surveillance Devices Act prohibits the recording of conversations without the consent of all parties.”

“Who said we recorded anything?” replied Devine.

“But you just—” Drury cut off and looked chagrined at this admission.

“—repeated something we overheard in a public space, yes,” said Devine.

“No law against that, because a person talking in a public setting has no reasonable presumption that his conversation won’t be *overheard*,” added Jones.

“So would you care to explain what it is exactly you’re supposed to take care of with respect to this case?” asked Devine.

“No, I really don’t think I will. And I’m not conceding that what you claim to have overheard is accurate. Your recollection against mine.”

“Two against one,” said Devine.

“An NSW DS and a Yank versus an AFP sergeant and decorated war veteran who bled for his country” was Drury’s retort.

Devine looked at Jones. “Well, I’m a decorated war vet who bled for my country, too, but I never get into a pissing contest over medals and ribbons because that cheapens the memories of all the soldiers who *didn’t* make it back. But maybe you think differently.”

Drury flinched at this comment.

Devine continued, “Now, the AFP must have some sort of internal affairs division to ferret out bad cops, right, Anais? I mean, it seems that Sergeant Drury has compromised and tainted the entire investigation. I’m going to have to report this up the ladder at DHS. Five Eyes across the board will probably want to know because of what Walker did for a living. We could be talking espionage, terrorism, conspiracy, who the hell knows?”

Devine glanced over at Drury to find the man staring at him menacingly.

“Do you really think it wise to go down that road, Yank?” he said.

“I don’t know. What would you do if you were me?”

“Trust in the system and let it go.”

“So when the shit hits the fan you can blame everything on us for not disclosing what we saw and heard?” Devine shook his head. “You’re going to have to do better than that. A lot better.”

Drury turned his attention to Jones. “Is this how you want your career to end, Jones? Following this fucking git off the cliff?”

Devine looked at Jones, who was staring directly at the man.

“Which fucking git are you referring to? The one busting his ass and risking his life to find out the truth, or the one meeting in secret with people connected to this case, who are also possibly suspects in this case, and telling them that he’ll take care of things?”

Drury gave her a knowing look. “Okay, I see the lay of the land. The young, tall, and handsome Yank goes all Clint Eastwood in the back of an SUV with a gang of toughs and now he’s what, your white knight, Jones? Didn’t think you were that gullible, but then I guess women usually are.”

“If *you’d* been in that SUV instead of Agent Devine, you’d be dead,” said Jones bluntly. “And the word salad you just threw out doesn’t make a damn bit of sense. And how did you know about what happened in the SUV?”

“The AFP knows a lot more than you think. And I have many friends at NSW.”

“Good to know. But you might have a lot fewer if this comes out.”

“I think it’s time you two got the hell out of my office. And this is not the end of it.”

Jones rose and looked down at him. “I was about to say the same thing to you.”

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CHAPTER

37

JONES AND DEVINE STOOD OUTSIDE the AFP building.

Devine looked upset, but Jones roared right past him on the pissed-off scale.

She barked, “That pompous, fucking, chauvinistic, piece-of-shit arsehole.”

Devine looked at her, barely able to hold back his grin. “Don’t pull punches, Anais, go ahead and tell me what you *really* think of him.”

She sucked in a deep breath and slowly released it. “But he’s not going to let this go, Travis. He’s probably talking to his top brass right now. And then he’ll take the fight to the NSW Police.”

“Maybe not. If there’s an investigation, dirt on him might show up. And with so many other orgs involved, I don’t think the AFP can do a whitewash that’ll stand up against scrutiny.”

“So maybe we’re at a standstill?” said Jones.

“Not a standstill, because we have a case to investigate.”

After she had driven him back to his hotel and parked out front, Jones said, “So what’s our next move?”

“The Russians.”

“But they’ve been taken away.”

“Then let’s find some more to take their place. Because there were others, right, in the bombings?”

“Yes. Four others, to be specific.”

“Where are they?”

“At a prison facility in Victoria. Western Plains Correctional Centre.”

“How far?”

“Two-hour flight to Melbourne. Train is eleven hours. Car is around ten, nonstop.”

He looked impressed. “I can see you’ve already checked into this?”

“I did, yes, because policing is all about Plan B. But will they still be there when we show up? I have to get permission to interview them, so people will know ahead of time. Plenty of time to make them disappear.”

“What if we go there and then ask permission?”

“Why would that make a difference?”

“If they move them, we’ll be there to see where they go.”

Jones thought this over. “That could work, yes. But if I requisition plane tickets, that will be a giveaway.”

“Then I’ll do it on my end.”

“My sudden paranoia is telling me that they might have us on a watch list, Travis.”

“Then we can drive. Tough to watch us that way.”

“When do you want to leave?”

“How about early tomorrow morning?”

“You can stay at my apartment and we can start from there. Save us some time because my place is on the way. I have a couch you can sleep on.”

“Works for me, thanks. What’s wrong?” he added, because she had frowned suddenly.

“It just occurred to me, and maybe I’m being overly paranoid, but using my police car might be an issue. Far easier to track. And I don’t have a personal vehicle.”

“No problem. I’ll rent a vehicle. Just give me your address and I’ll see you tonight.”

“You okay driving on the other side of the road?” she said, with a smile lighting her eyes.

“I drove a blown-to-shit Stryker in the sands of Iraq, so I’ll be okay.”

“I’ll text you with my address.”

Devine got out and she drove off. He walked into the hotel and to his surprise found Dennis Mueller waiting for him in the lobby.

“Mr. Mueller, what can I do for you?”

“Can we go somewhere and talk? It’s . . . it’s important.”

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CHAPTER

38

They headed to The Rocks, where they sat outside at a small café. There was an open-air market going on, where one could buy anything from old stamps and coins to hats, scarves, posters, knives, scents, and shoes, among dozens of other goods.

They ordered flat white coffees, and Mueller took a few moments to seemingly gather his thoughts.

"Forgive me, but this is not something I'm used to doing."

"What would that be?" asked Devine.

"I heard about your kidnapping. It's been all over the news. I'm sure you've seen that."

"I was there. That was enough."

Mueller looked embarrassed by Devine's retort. "I'm sure. The thing is, Agent Devine, this is a delicate situation."

"Why don't you enlighten me as to why, and maybe I can make it less delicate."

Mueller studied him. "You have more nuance than I initially gave you credit for."

"Just to be crystal clear, I was sent here on a mission because it was suspected that Five Eyes might be somehow compromised by Walker's abduction and murder. Now, I figure, regardless of the motivation behind what happened to Walker, my job is finding out who killed him and shot Theresa Lee, and why. I will do whatever it takes to get there, including employing *nuance* when necessary."

"You visited Goulburn Prison."

"How do you know that?"

"Doesn't matter. What matters is they've been transferred."

"Do you know where?"

“No, I don’t. If I did, I’d tell you.”

“Why?” replied Devine.

“When I was young my father told me that the Woolwines were the greatest family in the world. And then all those years later Mrs. Woolwine was murdered.”

“Leaving father and daughter alone.”

Mueller glanced up at him. “Mrs. Woolwine acted as the buffer between the two. Carlton and Charlotte? Even their names are alike, which was probably intentional.”

“Although she doesn’t seem to care for wealth as much as he does, or at least she’s ambivalent about it. Just my observation.”

“A good observation, Agent Devine. Let me add one more. Charlotte loves her father. And Charlotte despises her father.”

Devine thought about his relationship with his father for a moment. He said, “Tell me about them.”

“As I said before, Charlotte and her mother were very close. When she was killed Charlotte lapsed into a funk she’s never really come out of. And then with what happened to Bill, I’m not sure she ever will. I lost my father to cancer and I miss him terribly. But losing your parent to a murder?” He shook his head.

“I feel for her, I really do. But can you tell me something that will help me with my case?”

Mueller hesitated and then plunged in. “You ever heard of BRICS?”

“As in the building material?”

“As in B-R-I-C-S. Stands for Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. It also includes Iran, the UAE, Indonesia, Egypt, and Ethiopia. It’s a bloc of countries that was formed fairly recently to build cooperative alliances on trade, economics, some military functions, and to provide an alternative to the U.S. dollar as the de facto currency of the world. Those countries alone approximate roughly half the world’s population, over ten times that of America and over eight times that of the EU.”

“So a serious player in the world?”

“And it will only become more significant as other countries jump on board, which they undoubtedly will. Many countries are tired of America’s dominance and bullying, you see, at least in opinions I’ve heard. And the EU is full of former colonial empire builders who have few friends in the BRICS part of the world because those memories of Western exploitation

are long, Agent Devine. And as America continues to pull back from its global role, and the EU also focuses on internal matters, a vacuum has been created. And vacuums never remain unfilled for long."

"But what does that have to do with my case?"

"What I'm about to tell you is highly confidential and I have no proof of it. So you must not let anyone else know."

"Homicide investigations make ironclad promises . . . difficult. I can tell you I'll do my best to keep it under wraps."

After a few moments of silence Mueller finally nodded. "Okay. The fact is Mr. Woolwine would very much like Australia to jump on the BRICS bandwagon. We don't have a large population, but we do have a top-fifteen economy, export many things the world needs, and our military, while not huge in number, is one of the most technologically advanced in the world and can punch far above its weight. In addition, we are strategically located between east and west. We're not part of Five Eyes by happenstance, you know. And though my country is close with the Americans on many things, on some things, important things, it is not. We could be a dominant player in BRICS and through that, the world, instead of always being in the shadow of both the U.S. and the EU. Mr. Woolwine very much likes to be on top calling the shots, and I believe that is why he's pushing very hard for this. I think that's one reason why he was recently meeting with Xi. Of course, China is by far the most powerful member of BRICS."

"But there are downsides to joining, surely," noted Devine.

"Yes. For starters, we're part of the G20. We have strong security ties to the West and particularly America. BRICS is not a value-based organization, and their current climate goals do not align with ours, but then America has also abandoned its goals on global warming. Although most companies in the energy sector see the folly in that. But there are many reasons to join BRICS as well, or at least to have stronger ties that do not reach to full, official membership."

"Still pretty dicey," noted Devine.

"Just to be clear, this is not the official policy of Australia. Or New Zealand, at least to my understanding. The situation is fluid, and leaders of this country do not want America to think that we're going behind their backs. I really shouldn't be telling you any of this. I just picked it up here and there because of my proximity to Mr. Woolwine." He paused. "And he trusts me implicitly, which is why I feel so disloyal sharing this information

with you.” He halted again and his expression turned guilty before stiffening. “But Bill shouldn’t have been taken and killed. It was wrong, and I can’t sit by and do nothing if there is some sort of connection.”

“Wait a minute. Are you saying Walker found out about Woolwine working to have Australia join BRICS, and that’s why he had to die?”

Devine was thinking that if that were true, DHS would need to know all this. But if the CIA or FBI were privy to this? It might turn into the mother of all jurisdictional battles.

“I believe it’s possible, yes.”

“Do you have proof?”

“There may be proof out there,” he said.

“I was told that Woolwine had big business with Moscow. So maybe that’s why he downplayed the bombings at the tobacconist shops. I know there are sanctions on now and trade pipelines have been affected, but nothing lasts forever. So he’s probably playing the long game.”

“I . . . I would not disagree with that.”

“And maybe the Russians who went to prison know something? Which is why they were transferred before they could tell us anything?”

“I think some people are breathing a sigh of relief that they didn’t tell you anything on your visit there before they could be gotten out of the way.”

“But we’re talking the prison system. How could Woolwine do anything?”

“Oh, didn’t you know?”

“Know what?”

“Last year Goulburn Correctional Centre was bought by a subsidiary of Woolwine Enterprises. In fact, he’s one of the largest operators of private prisons in the country.”

Devine couldn’t keep the shock off his face. “No, I didn’t know that. And I wonder why Jones never told me.”

“She probably doesn’t know. You see, the deal was kept very hush-hush. Private prisons are not very popular in Australia at present. There’s been lots of allegations about filthy facilities, harsh treatment of inmates, and not much rehabilitation built in, which results in a high recidivism rate. Profit over people, you understand. Very American philosophy, actually. There’s a movement to abolish the industry here, but that’s a big hill to climb politically and probably won’t happen anytime soon.”

“So, again, any proof of whether Walker knew about BRICS?”

“For that you’re going to have to make a trip.”

“A trip? Where?”

“To see a man named Andre Lavigne.”

“And who is Andre Lavigne?”

“I will leave it to him to explain.”

He handed Devine a slip of paper; Devine looked at the information on it before glancing up questioningly at Mueller.

“You can’t hack a piece of paper,” said Mueller as he stood.

Devine said to him, “Why are you really helping me? Because of what happened to Walker?”

“Yes, and also because I care about Charlotte.”

“You think she’s in some kind of danger?”

“I don’t think. I *know*, Agent Devine.”

“But who would want to harm her?”

“What if Bill found proof that this country is planning to *secretly* join BRICS, but still maintain our Five Eyes connection?”

“Your country could spy on the west and feed BRICS valuable intelligence. But I can’t imagine Australia ever doing that.”

“We are an honorable people, Agent Devine. But the *people* won’t necessarily know, will they? And over the last decade or so I have learned not to ever use the word *never*. And if they killed Bill over it, they could kill Charlotte.”

“So what are you going to do now?” asked Devine.

“I’ve submitted my resignation to Mr. Woolwine. I never married, have no family. I think I might travel for a while. I . . . just need to clear my head.” He paused. “Good luck.”

Mueller walked off, leaving Devine to process all that he had just learned.

A minute or so later he finished his coffee and left. As Devine stepped outside, he heard people shouting and running. And then the sounds of sirens filled the air.

He ran in the opposite direction of where people were headed, figuring they were running away from whatever it was. He called out to some of them asking what had happened. None of them stopped to answer.

Dodging fleeing people, he turned the corner, and picked up his pace.

He slowed when he saw a police car pull up a half block away, its rack lights flashing. The officers got out and knelt down next to where something lay in the street.

Devine fast-walked toward them and then stopped, pulled out his phone, and used the camera zoom and enhanced lighting to get a closer look at the object.

His heart sank.

It was Dennis Mueller, minus a substantial portion of his head. He recognized him more by his clothes than his features.

Devine looked to the tops of the buildings all around because it seemed to him that he was looking at a long-range sniper shot with a heavy-caliber load.

Then he turned and hurried off into the darkness.

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CHAPTER

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"My God," said Jones when Devine finished telling her about his meeting with Mueller and the man being shot right after.

They were sitting at Jones's kitchen table on the second floor of her apartment building about twenty miles outside of Sydney.

"I listened to the news on the drive here," said Devine. "The shooter is still at large."

"But Mueller believed that Charlotte is at risk? Why?"

"Apparently this Andre Lavigne may know."

"And BRICS is somehow in play, too? That came out of left field."

"You know much about BRICS?"

"Just what I see on the news. They're trying to build up an alternative to how the world has been ordered for a long time. Middle powers are banding together. But I had no idea that Woolwine was pushing for Australia to join BRICS. Look, I'll need to call in what you just told me, Travis."

"If you do that we might never get a chance to nail whoever is behind this. And if Lavigne's name comes out, he might end up dead, too, Anais."

Jones looked torn. "Shit. This is against every protocol the NSW Police has. If this blows up and I'm shown to have not revealed—"

Devine interjected, "No one will find out from me. I feel terrible about what happened to Mueller. Yet there was nothing either of us could have done to stop it. But if we go public now, we could win a skirmish but lose the war. If Woolwine is working behind the scenes for your country to secretly join BRICS, he will unleash an army of lawyers and his political friends, and they will cover all tracks and the truth will never come out. We both know that."

"But Mueller might have been lying. Or else he got it wrong."

“The fact that someone killed him right after he met with me makes it far more likely he was telling the truth. So, do *you* think Carlton Woolwine could be behind this? Would he take a risk like that?”

Jones looked doubtful. “He plays rough, everyone down here knows that. He’s also lined the pockets of many politicians and he’s a big supporter of the current PM and vice versa. But he’s never been accused of any criminal activity, much less murder.”

“So can you keep it on the QT for now?”

She finally nodded. “But if we don’t break something soon, we’ll have to come clean.”

“I thought we could stop in to see Lavigne when we go to the prison in Melbourne.”

Jones looked at the address on the slip of paper Mueller had given Devine. “It’s certainly on the way. Are you going to call him first? His number is on there.”

“With what happened to Mueller, I’m not sure I should.”

“If they shot Mueller, it means they were following him.”

“Which means they know he met with *me*. So I won’t be sitting near any windows.”

She glanced toward her door. “Do you think you were followed here?”

“I made sure I wasn’t. And I’m pretty good at that.”

“Okay, I’ll make the coffee. Hit the road around six?”

“I’ll be ready.”

“The couch is made up. Alarm’s on. If you hear footsteps during the night, check to make sure it’s not me before you shoot.”

“And you do the same for me.”

“Good night.”

She headed off to her bedroom, leaving Devine alone.

He thought about everything Mueller had told him. Now the man was another homicide victim, and Devine needed to hold someone accountable.

He checked his weapons. His Glock and his backup. Locked and loaded. He also had his Army K-bar knife and a strong desire to kick the shit out of somebody. It seemed like the longer he did this job the more he wanted to do that.

The world was changing fast. His own country was doing crap around the world that he didn’t agree with. And that was giving excuses for bad actors to run rogue over *their* neighbors. It might play well for the rah-rah

crowd who liked displays of military power. But Devine the former soldier knew that was the short game, which was the easy part. The far harder part was what to do after the bombs and bullets stopped. That's where failure usually happened.

As a combat vet, Devine knew that the policy of might makes right was a fool's errand. After two world wars that stemmed directly from that misguided policy, the world seemed to have learned its lesson. And his country, after Vietnam and the disastrous wars in the Middle East, seemed to have wised up as well; simply bombing and shooting people was never the answer. Now? Devine wasn't so sure that message was sticking.

As he tried to fall asleep on the couch, the image of Mueller and his destroyed head kept intruding. He figured Charlotte Woolwine would know about the fate of her childhood friend and employee by now. He wondered what she would feel about it. He also speculated about who Andre Lavigne was, and what he could know about all of this. He finally wondered if there would ever really be any firm answers to this convoluted mess of a case.

As he drifted off to sleep, Devine's final image was of the crosshairs of a sniper rifle's scope flitting over his head, and a finger edging to the trigger.

Sweet dreams.

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CHAPTER

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"It's basically the M31 all the way to Melbourne," said Jones. "But it's not a superhighway like I understand you have in America."

"So long as it's paved and reasonably fast, I have no issues," said Devine, who was focused on staying on a side of the road that he was not used to driving on. "And the place where Lavigne lives?"

"It's called Wangaratta. It's in Victoria, at the junction of the Ovens and King rivers. Lovely landscapes and a nice downtown area with shops and restaurants. I visited there when I was a little girl; I had a great-aunt who lived in Wangaratta."

"I googled Andre Lavigne and got a bunch of people who clearly have nothing to do with anything. Although a character with that name was assassinated in some video game."

"Contrary to some people's beliefs, not everyone cultivates an online footprint," said Jones. "I know I don't."

"Neither do I," said Devine. "I don't want a bunch of strangers knowing my business."

"But clearly Mueller believed that Lavigne could provide us with some information."

"I hope that turns out to be the case, considering Mueller paid with his life for his decision to tell me what he did. Keep an eye out for any tails on us."

"I have been ever since we pulled onto the M31. But these folks obviously have resources, so we can't let down our guard for even a second."

Wangaratta was about seven hours from Sydney and 150 miles outside of Melbourne. The drive wasn't all that remarkable. When Jones took over the wheel, she caught Devine's bored look and said, "The M31 route, or the

Hume as we call it, is inland and not much to look at. Now, the South Coast ride along the M1 is spectacular, but it takes twice as long."

"We need speed over sightseeing." He pointed in the distance to a series of enormous structures, some completed while others were still being constructed.

"What are those?"

"Data centers. I'm sure you have them in the States."

"Oh, right, yeah, we do, tons of them. They're sprouting up like mushrooms after a rain. Our economic growth is now pretty much only in health care with the aging Baby Boomers, and data centers, which are the billionaires' latest favorite toy to make even more money."

She glanced at him while she drove. "Any insights on that, Mr. Wall Street?"

"Companies are building these places like mad all over the world and then leasing them to Amazon, Meta, Google, Microsoft, all the big players, although these companies are also building their own data centers as well. Regular consumers are competing with them for land, water, and electricity. People are up in arms, but there's not much they can do because the politicians get bought off and they do provide a lot of construction jobs even if very few people actually work in them after the buildout is done. Lot of computing power to replace humans and, with the crypto mining, which these data centers can also do, replacing actual money."

Jones interjected bitterly, "Probably have Robocops before long. What could go wrong?"

Devine kept glancing at the buildings. And then he watched as a long column of vans and trucks drove on the road to the data centers. He saw three vans with Blue Mountain Electric on the side panels, a large truck with the logo for Woolwine Construction on its sides, as well as three HVAC vans. And other vehicles with the names Palo Alto Networks, Cadence, Purple Sage OT, VMWare, PrecisionX Software, and BlastWave.

"What are you so deep in thought about?" asked Jones.

"Lot of change going on in the world and a lot of money being dropped into what might just turn out to be an abyss. But there's only one thing wrong about that assumption."

"What?"

He looked at her. "The smart money never loses. They get in and get out and they leave the losses for the ordinary people who have no idea they

were conned until they lose their house and their retirement." He looked back out the window. "So all this building, all this mining, it has a purpose. Regardless of whether any of it is actually successful."

She exclaimed, "Of course it does. It's so billionaires can become trillionaires and leave the rest of us with shit. Welcome to the twenty-scary-as-shit-first century."

After reversing course multiple times and pulling off the road to check for anyone tailing them, they took the exit for Wangaratta and drove on to the address that Mueller had provided Devine.

"It's the white house on the left, third one up," said Devine. "Pull over here, Anais, I'm going to call Lavigne, introduce myself, and pray he doesn't go batshit."

She did so, and he punched in the number while Jones kept a lookout.

A man answered the phone. "Yes?"

"Mr. Lavigne?"

"Yes? Who the hell is this?"

Okay, not the best of beginnings.

"My name is Travis Devine. I'm with DHS in the U.S. I was given your number by Dennis Mueller. He said I should come by and see you."

Lavigne didn't answer for a few moments. "Dennis is dead. Saw it on the telly."

"He actually died right after meeting with me."

"Did you kill him?"

"No, I didn't. He met with me to give me some information that would help me solve Bill Walker's murder."

"Well, I have no reason to accept your word about anything. And the fact that someone killed him tells me I can't meet with you."

"Why not?"

"I do not wish a similar fate for myself, that's why," barked Lavigne.

"I can offer you protection."

"Not in this country you can't. And I don't trust the authorities here, I never have. And you Yanks are even worse."

"Can we at least meet and discuss this? Mueller thought you could help me. And I don't want to see him die in vain. I bet you don't, either."

A long silence passed broken by: "Where are you?"

"Two doors down from your house. Red SUV."

They both watched as the front door of Lavigne's house opened and a man appeared there.

"How can I know you are who you say you are?"

"A man as careful as Mueller was must have sent you my picture. I'm going to get out of the car and you can see me. Fair enough?"

"Do it," said Lavigne.

Devine stepped out of the truck and held up one hand while holding his phone to his ear.

"Who is with you?"

"DS Anais Jones with the NSW Police Force. And before you get all paranoid, she has bucked her own agency to be here and may end up being fired for trying to do the right thing."

"You could have been followed here," barked Lavigne. "Led them right to me."

"But we weren't. We made sure. I rented the SUV and it was locked in a garage overnight and we checked it for trackers this morning, and we've kept a sharp lookout the whole way. No one followed us. I got pretty good at that in the U.S. Army before I joined DHS."

Lavigne let out a sigh. "Oh, all right. Come to the house. But be damn quick about it!"

A few seconds later Lavigne met them at the door with a gun pointed at them. He demanded to see their credentials. After he carefully looked them over, he led them to a back room with no windows that was set up as a study.

Lavigne was a tall, beefy man with graying, thick hair, fair, freckled skin, and in his early sixties, judged Devine. His voice was deep, cultured, and authoritative and tinged with a British accent. Devine noted the matte-finished SIG Sauer he had placed back into his belt holster.

He told them to sit, and he sat across his cluttered desk from them. Devine noted that there was no computer and that the phone on the desk was an old-fashioned landline.

"Off the grid?" he commented.

"As much as one can possibly be," said Lavigne. "The worst invention ever, the bloody, fucking internet, and particularly this social media crap. There is no more privacy, which means there is no more safety. And all for what, convenience? So old friends can send baby pictures and yearbook photos from their blasted youth? That was the hook, you see, to get us on.

Oh, it's so fun to catch up. Yes, well, we are caught up all right. In a web of destruction of our own making. Here cometh the apocalypse. Fucking idiots all."

Jones glanced at Devine in some alarm. Lavigne must have noted this because he added in a calmer tone, "I am not a conspiracy theorist, DS Jones. I am a *realist*. I have always looked at the world exactly as it is. And judged it solely on those merits. And I have never changed my approach for the last thirty years or so. But today, the world is a very dangerous place. Far more dangerous than when all we had to worry about was nuclear weapons. Now what is being weaponized and created is something far more deadly."

"What's that?" asked Jones.

"The truth. It is whatever the superrich and the tech corporations and certain governments want it to be. And their legions of demented followers suckle on the teat of technocracy. Now they are calling those who oppose AI and crypto and all related things the Antichrist. I'm sure that won't spawn any violence, correct?" He picked up a pencil and started twirling it between his fingers. "Now, tell me what happened to poor Dennis."

"First, how do you know Mueller? He never told me."

"Now that, Agent Devine, is a long story."

"Well, that's why we're here, to listen."

"And hopefully learn," added Jones.

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CHAPTER

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DENNIS MUELLER WAS, FIRST, a fine soldier, and second, a good, decent bloke," began Lavigne. "I'm a transplanted Brit with a background in military intelligence. We first met in one of those little Middle East shitstorms that seem to keep happening. Then Dennis and I hooked up again because I joined Five Eyes here in Australia after performing similar duties for Britain."

"Did you know Bill Walker?" asked Devine.

"Indeed I did. In fact, Dennis was the one to introduce us. I had moved to Australia, you see, and Bill was the reason I ended up going to work for Five Eyes here. Exceptional talent and, like Dennis, a good, decent man."

Devine shot Jones a glance. "Small world."

"And getting ever smaller," said Lavigne. "Thanks to an out-of-control technocracy."

"Do you still work for Five Eyes?" asked Jones.

"As a matter of fact, I do not. I was asked to leave."

"Why?" said Devine.

"I became too outspoken, I suppose. But I could see the dangers clear as day. We're allowing private companies headed up by billionaires to control our satellites, our facial recognition capabilities, and the most prominent social media and podcast platforms that are far and away more popular than traditional news media, even if they are paid mouthpieces for their billionaire masters.

Who thought it was a good idea for a tiny group of little rich fucks to decide what the future of humanity should look like? Trilliondollar companies vacuum up all of our personal data, store it, and then sell it to others who then track our every move online. And it's not just to sell us stuff we don't otherwise need. It's to know where we go, what we think,

who we communicate with. Our beliefs, what politics we support, bloody well everything. They already know more about the three of us than we know about ourselves, because while we forget things, or remember them in the wrong chronological order, they forget nothing and recall it with complete accuracy. They also deploy AI to put our lives in a neat little box that they can retrieve at any time and use for any purpose. Every time we use a chatbot we're providing billionaires free training for their latest monstrous creation. And on top of that they use it to spy on us. It's like billions of digital Trojan horses. We have never been less free than we are right now, although they try to sell the fact that social media is actually liberating. My ass," he added sharply. "It's made a few people disgustingly wealthy and plunged the rest of us into cesspools of depravity that should shock all of us, but most have become desensitized to its soul-and decency-sucking effects."

"I can see why Five Eyes might have asked you to leave," said a wide-eyed Jones after this forceful diatribe. "Although I agree with a lot of what you just said."

"What did Walker think about all this?" asked Devine.

"Bill was an interesting man who shared many of my beliefs. Indeed, he led me to some of the opinions I now hold. He possessed a truly exceptional intellect, but he married into the Woolwine family of all things."

"Why do you say it that way?" asked Devine.

"Did you not see the monstrosities being built on your way here?"

"The data centers, you mean?" said Jones.

"You call them data centers. I call them digital prisons, because that's where they're keeping all of *us*. If it's not large language models for AI, it's the cloud where all of our personal digital lives are stored. Then we have *crypto*, which will blow up the fucking financial sector before too very long. Crypto! It's our *crypto-nite* if you ask me. Because just ahead is darkness for all of us."

"And Woolwine is behind a lot of the data center construction?"

"It's not simply about the buildings. It's about controlling information. It's about controlling the movement of wealth. It's about enslaving us all. And I know I sound like a bloody lunatic, but I'm very sorry to have to tell you that it's true and it's also too late to stop it. The algorithms are too good, too addictive, because they have evolved to be exactly that. The pop

of dopamine is akin to meth. The brain is powerless in the face of it. They have actually done the goddamn cigarette manufacturers one better."

"Did Walker feel that way, too?" asked Devine.

Lavigne didn't answer right away. He fiddled some more with the pencil. "Bill was greatly influenced by the amount of corruption that was going on around the world. Offshore accounts, tax havens, labyrinths of financial skullduggery that would make a math genius's head explode. It goes on in every country and involves many world leaders, billionaires, celebrities, moguls, lesser politicians, anyone with enough money to matter, connections, and an absolute obsession to not pay their fair share. Thirty, forty, fifty trillion dollars and more, all dark money, all deployed to do evil shit around the world all in the name of capitalism, theocracy, racism, eugenics, you fill in the fucking blank. Bill hated this because he had seen the other side of the ledger, namely the abject poverty that is being endured by the vast majority of the world's population so that a handful of people can live like fucking royalty times a thousand."

"And yet, like you noted, he married into a billionaire family," said Jones.

Lavigne smiled sadly. "A chance encounter with a lovely young woman. Then what happened is something that often happens: They fell in love."

"But we understand they were getting a divorce," said Jones. "Do you know anything about that?"

"Bill had terminal cancer," said Lavigne, his brow furrowing. "It had metastasized."

Devine said, "We know, but that's not a reason to divorce. To my thinking, it would be a reason *not* to divorce."

"I think as you do, Agent Devine. But the situation was complicated. And I believe it was complicated most of all by Carlton Woolwine."

Devine glanced again at Jones, who said, "How so?"

"I don't know everything. Indeed, Bill was reticent on a lot of his personal details. But he and his father-in-law did not get along."

"Even though Walker saved Charlotte and one of their kids' lives from being bombed?" said Jones.

"So you heard about that, then?" said Lavigne.

Devine said, "We were told he heard some chatter in his job at Five Eyes and sounded the warning just in time."

“Apparently it was the Russians coming after Woolwine again,” added Jones.

“Bill told me some about that,” noted Lavigne.

Jones said, “Did he say it was the same group of Russians who had bombed Woolwine’s tobacconist shops that also planted the explosive device on the car?”

Lavigne spread his hands. “I’m not sure.”

“You’re not sure, or Walker wasn’t sure?” said Devine.

“I have no doubt that Bill got that chatter. Whether the bomb would have gone off or not if he hadn’t made the warning?” He shrugged.

“I’m not following,” said Jones, and Devine nodded in agreement.

“Intimidation works wonders,” noted Lavigne.

“Mueller said he was afraid for Charlotte Woolwine. Is it people trying to intimidate her father? So was the attempted bombing just a *warning*?”

“I always thought it was convenient that Bill found that chatter when he did.”

“You think they planted it so he *would* find it?” asked Devine.

“Not outside the realm of possibility. I mean, he was excellent at his job, but, you know, that is a fairly large coincidence that he of all people would be the one to unearth that information about his own family.”

Devine thought about Walker finding out about the possible kidnapping of Theresa Lee in Somalia and intervening just in time. Another coincidence, or staged, as he and Campbell had discussed?

“Okay, but that still doesn’t explain why Walker would seek a divorce,” said Jones.

Lavigne glanced at her before settling his gaze on Devine, who said, “Unless he didn’t have a choice.”

Lavigne smiled and said, “You’d make a good analyst.”

“Why wouldn’t he have a choice?” said Jones, who clearly had not made the connection that Devine had.

Devine said, “If his father-in-law gave him an ultimatum. Leave or . . . ”

“Or what? Are you saying Carlton Woolwine would harm his own daughter?” asked Jones.

Lavigne said, “I don’t personally know Carlton, but I assume he would not wish harm on his own family. However, his enemies are another story. They could wish harm on whoever they wanted to.”

Jones said, “But why would Woolwine’s enemies care if Walker stayed married? And just because he was divorcing her didn’t mean he couldn’t continue to do whatever he was doing before.”

“But he didn’t just seek a divorce, did he?” said Lavigne.

“He left Five Eyes, and then took a job with a private outfit based in Belgium,” noted Devine.

“And why would he do all that?” asked Jones. “When he knew he was dying?”

Lavigne said, “Have you checked out his employer? The one based in Brussels?”

“The Artificial Intelligence Protection Company,” said Devine. “My boss and I have both spoken to the managing director. We think he lied to us. And I have no idea what the company even does.”

“I researched them and found almost nothing. They’re privately held, so there are no reporting requirements. I have no idea who is behind them. I will say that Belgium, and Brussels in particular, has been home base to some seriously dangerous people.”

“So are you saying that Walker was *forced* to take up with this private outfit?” asked Devine.

“I can’t think of another reason he would have taken that position, given what was going on in his personal life,” replied Lavigne.

“And what would he be doing there?” asked Jones.

“Maybe whatever Woolwine and his partners wanted him to do.”

“So this firm is in league with them?” said Devine.

“Possibly, yes. But I have no proof.”

“And what could Walker do for them? His expertise was intel collection.”

“Those are valuable skills that can be applied widely.”

“And the divorce?” asked Jones.

“I don’t think Bill seeking a divorce was his idea.”

“Then whose was it?” persisted Jones.

“Charlotte is her father’s only heir. If Bill is married to her, he’s also an heir, really. Maybe Carlton didn’t want his empire to go to Bill, as his daughter’s husband.”

“Because Walker knew what was going on, whatever it was?” she said.

“And the divorce would create a rift between Bill and Charlotte, and maybe her father thought that would be a good thing. I don’t think Carlton

liked the influence Bill was asserting over her."

"Wait, did Charlotte and her father not get along because of Walker?" asked Jones.

"Partly him and partly her mother, who also thought the ultrawealthy clinging to their riches was not a good thing. If she'd had her way she'd have given all their money away. At least that was what Bill told me on more than one occasion."

Devine looked at Jones. "Which would be a motive to kill her."

"Okay, with all that planning and purpose, then why murder Walker?" asked Jones.

"My best guess is that brilliant Bill outfoxed them, forced their hand, and they had to get rid of him," said Lavigne. "Bill also knew something that Woolwine didn't."

"That he was dying?" said Jones.

"Yes. So maybe their threats didn't mean as much to him as they otherwise would have. He could take risks and fight back."

"And the leverage they had over him? To make him leave Five Eyes in the first place, and seek the divorce?" asked Devine.

"The chatter with the bomb on Charlotte's car?"

"You really think it was telegraphed to *Walker*. As a warning?"

"It could very well have been," said Lavigne.

Devine shook his head. "But what about Theresa Lee back in New York? The CCTV showed that the meeting with Walker and Lee was not a coincidence. Walker meant to run into her but *she* was surprised. So why do they kill her? They could have just tased her when they took him. It makes no sense."

"Oh shit," exclaimed Jones.

Devine looked at her. "What?"

She said, "It makes sense if they weren't just following Walker, but they were also following *Lee*."

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CHAPTER

42

THE THREE OF THEM SAT there quietly for a bit, each pensive, and tense, and . . . unsure.

Devine finally said, “Okay, I made an assumption about the attack I shouldn’t have. They *could* have been going after Lee, or both of them, which would explain a lot. Take out Lee, they thought, snatch Walker, make him talk about whatever he was up to, and then kill him. Two birds with one bifurcated hit squad that collectively pounced when its twin targets merged.”

Jones said, “And was it important to bring him to Australia for some reason?”

Lavigne suggested, “Perhaps the person who wanted to question him lives here and wanted to do a face-to-face debrief before the deed was done?”

“Like Carlton Woolwine, you mean?” said Jones.

“He would certainly be at the top of my list,” replied Lavigne.

Devine considered this but shook his head. “But reportedly he was in China until *after* the body was found.”

“I’d check that out very carefully,” suggested Lavigne. “And China is only an eleven-hour flight. And he has personal jets to whisk him around.”

“Anais, any word from the Border Force on how his abductors got Walker into the country?”

“Nothing, and I checked before we left to come here.”

Devine nodded. “Okay, let’s keep going. Mr. Lavigne, did Walker ever mention Theresa Lee?”

“No, but I understand from the news that she was an investigative journalist.”

“They might have been having a personal relationship,” said Devine. “Walker saved her life once, although the facts around that have become a bit murky.”

Lavigne shook his head. “Bill truly loved Charlotte. I have no doubt about that. So I can’t believe he would be involved with another woman.”

“Did he ever mention the name Petrykha Kryvoshapka?” asked Devine.

Lavigne shook his head again. “Slavic? Sounds Ukrainian.”

“Yes. But we can find nothing about the person.”

“Is this something you found from looking into Bill?”

Devine shook his head. “No, Theresa Lee. That name might be connected to a story she was working on. And Walker might have been helping her on it, but then had a change of mind.”

Lavigne looked dubious. “I can tell you that Bill took his career seriously and would never have divulged confidential information. Especially to a reporter.”

“But if they both were targeted, they *had* to be working together somehow, right?” said Jones.

“And what if he felt the stakes were high enough to break those professional confidences?” added Devine.

“That would be a very high bar indeed,” opined a clearly dubious Lavigne.

“Well, I assume Mueller directed us to you so that you could tell us what that high bar might be.”

Lavigne twiddled with the pencil some more and then set it aside. “I imagine he did, Agent Devine, yes.”

“I assume Mueller briefed you on all this, including our investigation,” added Jones. “So he must have wanted you to help us get to the truth.”

“But I don’t know everything, not by a long shot. And I didn’t know Dennis was going to be murdered. I was paranoid before. You can imagine where I am now.”

“I can understand that,” said Jones. “And it was good of you to meet with us under those . . . tragic circumstances.”

Lavigne smiled sadly. “The gathering of intelligence has been my whole world, you understand. And I was fortunate enough to work with Bill. He was a good person trying to always do the right thing.”

“I understand that Walker was particularly proficient in rumint,” noted Devine.

“Rumor intel?” said Jones.

Lavigne said, “Human intel based on gossip, tales by the campfire. Yes, he had a considerable network. And human intel, I believe, often beats what you can get through all the fancy technology.”

“So if he *was* working with Lee on something based on some sort of rumint, might it have been connected to what got him killed and Lee nearly so?” asked Devine.

“It’s certainly plausible,” said Jones, while Lavigne nodded in agreement.

Devine focused on him. “Mueller told me that Carlton Woolwine wants Australia to join BRICS and that perhaps Walker knew something that could blow that up. He said there might be proof. And that’s when he directed me to come and talk to you.”

“Did he indeed?” said Lavigne.

“*Do* you have proof?” asked Jones.

“That is a devilishly tricky question, DS Jones. And one man’s proof is another’s hearsay, especially these days when who the hell knows what truth is anymore.” He smiled. “Surely, you must remember my diatribe on the subject from a few minutes ago.”

“So what can you tell us?” asked Devine. “I’m sure you don’t want your friend to have died in vain.”

“Don’t play the guilt card with me. I haven’t survived this long in an extremely dirty business, where backstabbing is not only commonplace but expected, by not watching my rear flank. And I have no desire to get my brains blown out like poor Dennis.”

“If you tell us what you know, it might actually make you less of a target,” remarked Jones.

“Perhaps in some fantasy world,” countered Lavigne.

“So you won’t help us?” said Jones. “Great, well, thanks for nothing. Let’s go, Travis.” She started to get up.

“Just calm down, Jones,” exclaimed a now-irritated Lavigne. “I *do* want to help. And I don’t want Dennis to have died in vain. I am simply trying to think of how I can do it without getting us all killed.”

She sat back down and watched him. “Okay. Fair enough.”

Lavigne said, “The Western allies are far more worried about BRICS than most of them let on. Indeed, there are some members of the EU who would have no problem joining, at least on a limited basis. Whether you

agree with it or not, it is incontrovertible that the Americans have turned the trade structure and historical alliances upside down and that has set everyone on edge. Partners that would never have looked for new allies are doing just that. There are a limited number of chairs and everyone is angling for the best place to sit before the music stops. The whole conversation has turned to so-called middle powers aligning together to fight back against what they see as the bullying and irrationality of the superpowers, or one in particular." He eyed Devine. "Not telling tales out of school, am I?"

"Politics do not come into my mission," replied Devine.

"But they do influence greatly how the world works. There is no denying that."

"What about Australia?" said Jones. "Woolwine is tight with the PM. I would imagine other wealthy people might be similarly inclined to join BRICS if they see a monetary advantage."

"I can tell you that Bill's sources here thought as you did. Rumint is not limited to terrorists hiding in underground caves, or rebel militias building up strength in the middle of nowhere. It can also occur in the halls of wealth and power. Loose lips are everywhere, and those lips can be used for many purposes."

Devine said, "Mueller and I also discussed the possibility of Australia being a stealth partner to BRICS."

"And reporting its Five Eyes intel to the West's enemies without their knowledge?" said Lavigne, looking quite dubious. "That is a perilous game, Devine. If the truth came out, I don't think the benefit would outweigh the risk. No, I think it's all or none. If Australia joined and were then kicked out of Five Eyes they would be welcomed into a new intelligence-gathering orbit. And with AI technology widely available, even smaller powers can afford cutting-edge intel-gathering tools."

"If Australia joined BRICS, would that be a tipping point for some other players looking for a chair before the music stopped?" asked Devine.

"Quite possibly. Hell, perhaps France, Germany, and the UK. If so, maybe the whole of the EU. I know that would have seemed absurd a decade ago. But so did Brexit. So did America exerting its military force to bully its neighbors. Now? Who the hell knows?"

"Getting back to what Walker knew that got him killed?" said Devine. "You seem to keep digressing. Is there a reason?"

“There’s another recent death that you might want to look into.”

“Whose?” asked Jones.

Lavigne opened his desk drawer and took out a news clipping. He handed it to her.

She read down it while Devine did the same over her shoulder. They both looked up in surprise.

“Emily Roylott?” said Jones. “She’s the house manager for the Woolwines’ estate near here. She’s dead?”

“Murdered. And she’s also my ex-wife.”

“Your ex?” said a stunned Devine.

“After the divorce she went back to using her maiden name.” He smiled sadly. “That was probably aimed squarely at me. I will clearly never win a best spouse award.”

“It says it was a home invasion gone wrong,” said Jones. “Travis and I had discussed her before because she was the only witness to Martha Woolwine’s killer. I had not heard that she had died.”

“Well, it was very recent and the media never really picked up on it. But make no mistake, Emily was targeted.”

“Why would someone want to kill her?” asked Devine.

“Jones already said it. She saw a murderer.”

“But that murder was over two years ago,” noted Devine. “Why wait to kill her?”

“Because something *changed*, clearly.”

“And are you saying it’s connected to our case?” asked Devine.

“I think it may well be. And so did Dennis. I think that’s principally why he gave you my name. Because of my connection to Emily.”

Devine and Jones exchanged surprised glances. “Tell us about your wife,” he said.

“We moved here over a dozen years ago and got divorced six years later. As I alluded to, my occupation does not make for being a very good husband. Lots of travel and never being able to talk about work. I suppose Emily could bear it while she had the kids at home taking up all her time. But as empty nesters and living in a foreign country? Things went off the rails. We tried to make a go of it and ended up making each other even more miserable. And now, she’s dead. And I think she was murdered by the same bastards who killed Bill.”

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CHAPTER

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DEVINE ASKED LAVIGNE, "SO WHAT do you think *changed*?"

Lavigne said, "The estate in question is right outside of Canberra. Martha Woolwine kept her horses there and she would go there to ride frequently with her daughter and granddaughters. But her husband also used it to entertain the politicos who call the capital home when Parliament is in session. PMs have been there and other government heavyweights as well as foreign leaders and titans of capitalism who are Woolwine's cronies.

"Emily lived on a cottage on the estate. She'd been working there for about five years or so. Started out as a more junior person, but being talented and hardworking and ambitious she then worked herself up to house manager, meaning she ran the staff on the inside. Others managed the grounds and whatnot and then there's a bloke, Malcolm Jarvis, who oversees everything. Anyway, as I said, there are a lot of VIPs coming in and out of there at all hours. Emily would call and tell me about some of them. Starstruck, she was. A-list stars, other billionaires who are always in the news. The PM, kings and queens, and a dictator or two here and there. She wasn't supposed to reveal any of that, of course. And I hope to God no one was monitoring her calls to me." He suddenly looked worried. "Well, can't help that now."

"You think she was killed because she saw who shot Martha Woolwine? Or because of something else she saw or overheard while she worked there?" asked Jones.

"It could be both, actually."

"But the police don't agree, obviously," noted Jones.

"Home invasion gone wrong, hook, line, and sinker. The evidence was perfectly staged. *Too* perfectly." He glanced at Jones. "For what it's worth,

the AFP took a particular interest, and I seemed to sense their influence over the eventual verdict."

"You think they whitewashed it?" she said. "Why?"

"Any number of reasons. If the BRICS scheme is for real and the PM put in a call?"

"I thought the AFP didn't really do homicides," said Devine, looking at Jones.

"They usually don't. But they did with Walker, and now with Roylott."

"At Five Eyes we would call that a *pattern* worth exploring," said Lavigne.

"Did she ever mention anything to you about seeing or hearing something unusual other than during the time Mrs. Woolwine was killed?" asked Jones.

"Not directly, no."

"But you said Mueller agreed with you that her death was perhaps linked to our case," said Devine. "Why?"

"Dennis did say that he wanted me to talk about Emily and what had happened to her. From that I took it to mean that he believed her death was suspicious and tied to what had happened to her employer."

"And did Walker know Emily?" asked Jones.

"Yes. Bill and Emily got along very well, in fact. Sometimes I think she confided more in Bill than she did in me. She, of course, knew that we worked together. And I had long sung Bill's praises in the intel field. Charlotte also got along well with Emily. I heard she was right cut up about her death."

"So you think she might have gone to Walker with what she had seen or heard?" said Devine. "But if so, why wouldn't Walker talk to you about it?"

"Emily may well have asked him not to. And Bill kept confidences as well as anyone. Bill called me when Emily was killed to offer his condolences. He was in America by then, of course, and not knowing he had only a short time left to live himself. Bill also asked me if Emily had talked to me about her work. I told him aside from the occasional celebrity spotting that she hadn't. But I could tell he was not satisfied with the police investigation."

"And Mueller?"

"Dennis knew where all the bodies were buried, like his father before him. And he was loyal, to a fault. But he was very upset with Emily's death.

More so than simply a friend or work colleague might be. He knew something, which I suspect is why he led you to me."

Jones glanced at the news clipping. "Even though it happened recently, the trail already looks pretty cold."

"I wish you luck if you care to take a shot at it," said Lavigne.

"Not wanting to see it through, then?" said Jones.

"I have no idea how much longer I have to live, either, DS. But regardless, I don't want to do anything to shorten it by a single minute."

"What will you do now?" asked Jones.

In answer Lavigne pulled a plane ticket from his pocket. "Your timing was impeccable. I am going on holiday to South Africa *tomorrow*. And I may not be coming back. If you find out the truth, I'm sure I'll hear about it in the news."

"And if we don't find out the truth?" said Jones.

"Unfortunately, you may not be around to tell me or anyone else."

They left Lavigne and slowly walked back to their car.

"A lot to think about," said Devine.

"It could take us the rest of our lives to run this all down."

"You have something better to do?" asked Devine.

"Well, we have some Russians to interrogate tomorrow," replied Jones.

After a quiet evening at a nearby hotel they rose, had breakfast, and drove on to the prison.

But when they got there they were told that the men they wanted to meet with were no longer there.

"Where the hell have they gone?" asked Jones.

The prison supervisor looked back at her. "Have no idea, DS. It was a special transfer, done at a higher level than mine."

"How far up is that?" asked Devine.

"So fucking far, you don't want to know, mate," replied the man forcefully. "And if you know what's good for you, go back to where you came from and forget everything about this."

"I'm a detective sergeant with NSW Homicide," retorted Jones.

The man gave her a weary look. "If you think that matters anymore, you haven't been keeping up with the bloody world, have you?"

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CHAPTER

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EMERSON CAMPBELL WAS ON THE move. Something had been puzzling him. Well, everything about this case had been confounding him. But this one had really gotten to him, particularly because he had the gut feeling that he was missing something important.

He could have done this by email or text, but face-to-face was his preferred method of gathering critical intelligence.

He walked into the coffee shop, and the man at the far table stood and waved. Campbell quickly joined him.

Samuel Higgins was short and wick thin and wore an ancient wool suit, a wrinkled button-down shirt, and a colorful bowtie. Higgins was close in age to Campbell, and his thinning white hair ran helter-skelter over his head.

"Samuel, it's been too long," said Campbell as the men shook hands and then sat.

"Emerson, you are looking well. Your broad shoulders are clearly holding up well with your responsibility. I don't know how you manage, since we are no longer young men."

"Well, I have good people to help me with that responsibility. Like you used to do."

"My time with you and your organization was some of the most exciting of my life. Although, I have to say my long-suffering wife is quite happy that I am back in the safe hands of academia."

"Your linguistics skills were extremely valuable, Samuel. And if you ever have the hankering to leave NYU and come back into the fold?"

Higgins waved this off with a smile. "I would need another wife, and I have no desire to go down that road." Then he became serious. "But I also

know you, so I am well aware that a man like you does not have the leisure of catching up with old colleagues. So what do you need?"

In answer Campbell took out a slip of paper and slid it across to the man.

Higgins looked down at it. "Petrykha Kryvoshapka?"

"Yes, first thoughts?"

"Slavic. *Petrykha*. It means 'wife of Petro' in Ukrainian. *Pietro* in Italian and *Peter* in English."

"Okay."

"And *Kryvoshapka* is probably of Cossack origin. It's also descriptive."

"How so?" asked Campbell curiously.

"The derivative word *kryvaya* translates to 'not straight.' Now *shapka* can mean 'cap' or hat. It could refer to an occupation or some trait of the family. Many names originate along those lines: In English, Potter, Miller, Baker, Taylor."

"Wife of Peter and a hat not on straight?" said Campbell slowly. "A *crooked* hat, so to speak."

"A puzzle, then?"

"A damn difficult one. We need to find this woman. She could be important."

"What is the context of how you came to this name?"

"It was found in the office of a woman who had been shot."

"Oh dear," said Higgins. "What does this woman do?"

"She's a journalist. She worked on some important stories."

"Ah, so secretive, protective of sources."

Campbell shot him a look. "Meaning?"

"Meaning, of course, that I doubt that is a person's actual name, Emerson. It is too . . . *elaborate*. But it would make a good cover if you used it as the name of a story you were working on."

"So it's maybe a code for something else?" said Campbell.

"That is my best guess, yes." Higgins's eyes twinkled. "You do not seem surprised by my comment. I think you came here not for inspiration, but *confirmation*."

Campbell smiled. "You sure you don't want to come back to work for us?"

"Alas, I would not survive. My wife would kill me."

"Any ideas on what this code might refer to?"

“I will give it some thought, Emerson.”
“Now let me buy you a coffee.”
“That is not necessary. I’m sure you are too busy to dawdle.”
“I’m never too busy to have coffee with an old friend, Samuel.”

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CHAPTER

45

DEVINE DROVE SLOWLY AND CAREFULLY while Jones accessed some police databases.

"Okay, Emily Roylott, aged sixty-one. She'd worked for the Woolwines for a total of five and a half years, the last two as the house manager for the Woolwines' Canberra estate. The cottage was a quarter mile from the main house. She was found dead when she didn't show up for work in the morning. Her throat had been cut. She'd been deceased around six hours or so, meaning the attack took place in the middle of the night. The back door had been forced open. Nothing looked to be taken. No one saw or heard anything. No usable trace was found."

"Clearly, more a pro hit than a botched home invasion robbery," opined Devine. "Which makes the official police conclusion asinine."

"Agreed."

"Lavigne mentioned that the AFP was involved. How come?" added Devine.

"Through the Australian Capital Territory Policing Service. They're an arm of the AFP."

"That's right, you mentioned that before when we were meeting with Drury."

"ACT does the day-to-day grunt work of catching robbers, rapists, and murderers. You know, like Drury intimated: *petty shit*."

"What's the status of the investigation?"

"From what I can see, not much. No leads, not much energy, despite a reward offered by Carlton Woolwine of $100,000."

"A hundred grand and no takers?" noted Devine.

"Well, Woolwine offered a million-dollar reward for information on his wife's murder, and no one has claimed it."

“But Roylott provided information. Didn’t she get the reward?” asked Devine.

“No one was ever arrested for Martha Woolwine’s murder, so I guess that was a condition. Did you ask Mueller about his meeting with Drury and Charlotte Woolwine?”

He shot her a glance. “No, I didn’t.”

“Why not?”

“He was being cooperative, and I didn’t want to give him any reason to stop. And I didn’t know he was going to be murdered after he left me.”

“I guess I can understand that.”

“Oh, FYI, Goulburn prison is owned by Carlton Woolwine.”

“What, since when?” exclaimed a stunned Jones.

“Recently. And what do you think the odds are that he also owns Western Plains Correctional Centre, too?”

“Shit! So when the guy said the prison transfer came on orders from high up?”

“Maybe all the way up to Carlton Woolwine, yeah,” said Devine.

“Shit twice.”

“Well, your country’s not the only place where stuff like this is taking place. It happens in my country, too. Apparently if you’ve got deep pockets the law does not apply to you.”

“But I keep coming back to the question you asked Lavigne: Why kill Roylott *now*? Martha Woolwine was murdered over two years ago.”

“Like Lavigne said, something *changed*.”

“Granted, but what exactly? Any ideas?”

Something occurred to Devine. “Maybe what changed is Roylott saw Martha Woolwine’s killer *again* because he came back.”

“You think?” she said skeptically.

“It’s definitely plausible. So how do we find out who was visiting Woolwine around the time Roylott was murdered? Without tipping off Woolwine?”

“I can get a list of staff at the estate. And there must be a pub they go to on their off hours. I’ve gotten more good info by sitting in pubs than any other place I can think of. That’s why I work out so much. All the beer and fried foods I’ve had to ingest.”

“Get them drunk and let them spill?” said Devine.

“You have a better idea?” asked Jones.

“I actually think your idea is great. So get the list and let’s find that pub.”

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CHAPTER

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DEVINE AND JONES HAD SPENT most of the day running down the names of staff members, and then looking at the various watering holes in the area.

It was well past dark, and he and Jones were seated at a tattered booth in the Black Lion pub. The establishment was within walking distance of Woolwine's sprawling estate. After making discreet inquiries, they had been told that many of the local employees would congregate there in the evening.

"Snookers and darts. Very British, but then again, of course," said Jones. "And I would imagine this pub is here because the Woolwine estate is right next door. I guess working for billionaires drives folks to drink and throw sharp objects in their off times."

They had ordered beers, and Jones was scrolling through her phone where there were pictures of the staff who toiled at the Woolwine estate. She had gotten these records from the local police, who, she told Devine, had helped vet the staff members before they were hired.

"How much did those records cost you?" asked Devine.

"Probably a dinner. My uni roommate is a DS here."

"Convenient."

"We both always planned to go into law enforcement. Our careers have pretty much paralleled each other's. I took a chance on calling her and found out they'd helped Woolwine with the hiring process."

"Man definitely carries some hefty weight here."

"He's an eight-hundred-pound gorilla all over the country. You'd probably find Aboriginals in the Outback who know and/ or fear the man."

"By the way, any trace from the house where those guys who snatched me were going?"

"Boris Semenov, you mean?"

“Yeah.”

“Only a partial print. We ran it through the usual databases. Nothing.” She stiffened and then relaxed, “Okay, there’s one coming in the door.”

The woman was in her twenties, brown hair cut to the shoulders, a lot of makeup, a tight blouse and short skirt, and heels that looked painfully high. She carried a leather bag over one shoulder and looked thirsty for more than alcohol.

Jones scrolled on her phone and said, “Bridget Handley. She’s a housemaid. Been there two years.”

“Okay, what’s the plan?”

She looked at him incredulously. “The *plan* is she’s a lovely and lonely sheila, and you’re a nice-enough-looking bloke, and this is a pub. Recall your twenties and have at it.”

“I love it when you talk Australian.” Devine took his beer and waited for Handley to get her drink and settle on a stool before walking over to her.

Devine sat next to the young woman and ordered some chips from the barman.

He took some nuts from a bowl midway between himself and Handley and said, “Never thought I’d find myself in Australia. It’s a long way from home.”

She looked at him, apparently liked what she saw, and said, “You an American?”

Devine grinned. “Do I sound that much like one?”

“Yeah. And I’m good with accents and the like. And watching lots of American shows on the telly.”

“I’m from the Washington, DC, area. I’m Frank, by the way.”

“Bridget,” she said. “What brings you to a place like this?”

“My company has some business in Canberra. Computer stuff, boring as hell, but it pays the bills. They told me to come, so I came. Started out in Sydney, though. Now, that’s a cool place.”

She ran a hand through her hair, fluffing it out, and crossed her legs as she turned toward him. “It’s not that far, but I’ve never been to Sydney. I’d love to live there, actually. But it’s so bloody expensive. What’s it like?”

“Pretty amazing. Food, culture, the ferries and beaches. You have ocean and cliffs and the nearby Blue Mountains. If you’re bored there it’s your fault.”

She said wistfully, “That’s what a lot of people say.”

When the chips came he shared with her.

“Like you said, Bridget, it’s not that far. You could easily do a weekend thing.”

She sighed. “My mum lives here. She’s not all that well, and I take care of her on my off time.”

“That’s good of you. But you look way too young to have a mother who needs help.”

“She’s not even fifty but she had cancer. She’s in remission but, well, her health hasn’t been so good with all the treatments and such.”

“You have siblings? And your dad?”

“My brother escaped to London. He’s a banker there, or so he says. My sis lives across the ditch in Queenstown. And my father . . . well, he’s no longer in the picture.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. So you live with her? Full-time caretaker? Oh, but you said off time. So you have a job?”

“Right. We have to eat, Frank.”

“What is it you do? You in finance like your brother?”

She smiled weakly. “I’m . . . ” She hesitated and looked nervous and flicked at her hair before saying, “I actually work for a very wealthy man. Maybe the richest in the country.”

“Who, the Murdochs? Really?”

“No.” Her voice sank. “A lot of people think they are the richest, but my boss is a lot richer than them.”

“I just know about the Murdochs. But then I’m just an ignorant Yank.” He smiled.

She grinned. “Well, he’s probably not as well-known as the Murdochs.” She looked around. “Woolwine. Carlton Woolwine. You ever heard of him?”

Devine shook his head. “Sorry, no. But he’s really richer than the Murdochs?”

“Oh, yeah.” She took out her phone and went through some screens. “See, here’s a story *Forbes* did on him just last year.”

Devine quickly read through it and noted that the story also had old pictures of Carlton, his deceased wife, and Charlotte.

He finished reading and said, “Damn, his wife was *murdered*?”

“Yeah, I guess a hundred billion dollars doesn’t make up for that.”

“I guess not. So he lives around here?”

“He lives everywhere. Has homes all over Australia, New Zealand, Europe, Asia, a penthouse on Billionaires’ Row in New York, and like a whole bloody island in the Caribbean.”

“And here I thought I was doing okay with a nice little one-bedroom condo in Fairfax, Virginia,” said Devine, which made her laugh. “So what’s it like working for a guy like that? Do you have to travel with him? Are you like his assistant or something?”

She started to say something but then took a chip and bit into it. “Not really, no. I work at his estate here. But at some point, if I keep rising up in the ranks, maybe, you know. I could be jetsetting all over the place.” She looked wistfully at him. “Right?”

“I’m an American. We dream big, so I’d say kick ass and get what you want.”

She clinked her glass against his. “I like the way Americans think, Frank.”

“A guy like that probably has kings and queens and presidents and prime ministers visit all the time. I bet you’ve met some incredible VIPs.”

Handley’s look became more guarded. “I’m not really supposed to talk about any of that.”

“Hey, that’s cool. It’s just that I don’t run into someone who works for a billionaire every day. Call me intrigued.”

She smiled. “Yeah, I guess I’d be the same way.”

“Well, at the very least, you’re super safe. No one’s getting in to rob the billionaire, right?”

She looked at him fearfully.

“What’s wrong?” he said. “Did I say something out of line?”

“No, it’s not that. I . . . a woman was . . . she was killed at one of the cottages. Very recently.”

“The cottages? You mean on Woolwine’s property?”

“It was the house manager. Emily Roylott. She was my . . . that is to say, we worked together.”

“Jesus, she was killed? An accident?”

“No, it—”

“Ms. Handley?”

They both looked around to see a stern man standing in the doorway. He was dressed in a suit and tie, his starched shirt collar seemed to meld into

his neck. His mustache was trim and nearly matched his thick eyebrows in color and size.

He came forward and ran his gaze over Devine.

“Ms. Handley, you know we do not talk to strangers,” he said. “We were just having a conversation over drinks, Mr. Jarvis. I *am* off duty now.”

“Your responsibilities to your employer do not end when you are off duty.” He looked at Devine. “And who might you be?”

“Just a visitor passing through,” said Devine.

“May I see your ID?” asked Jarvis.

“No, you may not.”

“An American?”

“And what are you? You don’t sound like an Aussie.”

“None of your business.”

“Yeah, that’ll be my answer to any other questions you might have.”

“Come along, Ms. Handley.”

She glanced embarrassedly at Devine. “Sorry, Frank. Nice talking to you.”

Devine lifted his beer. “Yeah, same. And we were just talking, mister,” he said to Jarvis. “There’s no reason for her to be in trouble.”

Jarvis said, “Enjoy the rest of your time here, *Frank*.”

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CHAPTER

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JARVIS ESCORTED HANDLEY OUT OF the pub, while Devine headed back over to Jones, who had watched the whole exchange.

"I don't think he believed my cover story," said Devine.

They watched out the window as Handley and Jarvis climbed into the back seat of a Range Rover, which quickly drove off.

"I don't think he did, either. So they watch their employees even in pubs? Interesting."

Devine had a thought. "Or maybe they managed to follow us."

"I don't see how, Travis. So what did she tell you?"

"Stuff we already know. I had just swung the conversation around to Emily Roylott when her boss showed up. It was Jarvis, the guy Lavigne mentioned."

Jones looked at her phone and pulled up a screen. "Right. Malcolm Jarvis. He's the estate manager. The head of everything. He's worked for Woolwine for a few years. He's originally from Germany."

"I thought his accent sounded off."

A short, stocky man in his twenties walked over to them with a beer in hand. "It ain't right, you know."

"What's not right?" said Jones.

"That a girl can't even have a damn drink without that arse comin' round."

"You mean Jarvis?" said Devine.

"Bridget's a good girl," said the man.

"And you are?" asked Jones.

"Timothy, Timothy Blair, Tim to my mates."

"You live around here?" asked Devine.

"My dad's station."

“Station?” said Devine.

“I believe what you’d call a ranch,” said Jones.

Blair nodded. “Some places are really big, but our place is pretty little. Been working with horses since I was an ankle biter, or so said my mum. My great-grandpa started it all. Been in the family ever since.”

“I take it you know Bridget,” said Jones.

“Went to school together. From primary all the way through senior secondary. Sneaking tinnys on the weekends and watching footy.”

Devine looked perplexed.

Jones said, “Drinking beer while watching . . . not soccer?” She looked at Blair.

“Rugby. Aussie rules.”

“Of course.”

“Then she went off to university in Melbourne for a year but came back. Guess it didn’t agree with her. But then her mum’s been sick and her dad left a long time ago. And her brother went to London and got all rich and never sends a damn dime home.”

“Is that when she started working for Mr. Woolwine?” asked Jones.

He nodded. “Bloody Woolwine. He’s king ’round here, but I don’t like the bloke. He’s bought up land ’round here and put up them damn data centers. Nobody works in ’em. It’s all computers and the like. He tried to get my dad’s station because we’re right next to his place. Probably wanted to build an even bigger house, like he needs more space. But my dad turned him down.” Blair smiled at this memory but then it faded. “But he might get it after all is said and done. Not much money in stations no more. Can’t get a fair go.”

“And your mother?” asked Jones.

“She died five years ago. It’s just me and my dad now, although we got a lot of part-time help. Guess I’ll take the station over one day if we still got it. I love the place. Can’t see myself doing anything else.” He eyed Jones. “You probably think I’m an idiot.”

“No. If you love what you do, you never work a day in your life.”

“We understand that a woman was killed at the Woolwines’ recently,” said Devine.

Blair nodded. “Emily Roylott. Nice lady. She’d worked there a good while. Somebody cut her throat in her cottage. Police still don’t know who done it. Or why. Folks right here are spooked, I can tell you that. I mean, if

it can happen on Woolwine property? And then there was Mrs. Woolwine getting shot there and all a couple years ago." He shook his head. "She was a nice lady, too."

"You have any thoughts about either murder you'd care to share?" asked Devine.

Something seemed to dawn on Blair, because he looked at Devine suspiciously. "Here now, you were hitting on Bridget, but now you're here with *her*, asking bloody questions about murders. What gives?"

Devine and Jones exchanged a glance. Then Jones produced her warrant card.

"Tim, how would you like to help us out on a little matter involving Carlton Woolwine?"

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CHAPTER

48

JONES DROVE WHILE DEVINE RODE shotgun and Blair perched in the back seat.

"We're interested in who might have been visiting Woolwine around the time Emily Roylott was killed," said Devine.

"Why's that matter?" asked Blair.

"We think she might have seen or heard something that she shouldn't have," said Devine.

Blair sat up straighter. "And that's why she was killed, you mean?"

"It's a working theory. Unless she had enemies?"

"Not that I know of. Always a pleasant word for everyone."

Devine said, "But she was also the only one who saw the person who killed Mrs. Woolwine."

"That's right," said Blair. "I'd forgotten that. You think the person came back and killed her? But why wait so long?"

"It might not have happened exactly that way. So do you know of anyone visiting the estate around the time Roylott was killed?" asked Jones.

"Our place is next to Woolwine's. Why he wanted to buy it, like I said. Only one road in and out. You'd see some, you know, like, motorcades from time to time. Dad and me figured it was rich folks going to visit or do some sort of business. Charlotte Woolwine comes a lot, sometimes with her kids. But they fly in on the chopper and go out the same way. Fast commute between here and Sydney. If you got a ten-million-dollar bird to ride on."

"I was told that Charlotte Woolwine would come here to ride horses," said Devine. "She was an equestrian."

"Yes, sir. Her mum kept a stable of horses here, and after she died Ms. Woolwine kept it up. She's a good rider. Her daughters too. Beautiful animals, them horses. Love to have some like that, but they ain't cheap."

“What about Charlotte’s dad?” said Jones. “Does he ride?”

Blair scoffed, “Only thing that man is interested in is making more money.”

“Okay. So, again, any visitors right before Roylott was killed?” asked Jones.

Blair looked out the window into the well of darkness. “Night Ms. Roylott was killed, we had a mare about to drop a calf. They never seem to come during the day, always in the middle of the night. Me and Dad were up in the barn with her. Dad had forgotten something he needed, and he sent me to the house to get it. I lit out on a dead run ‘cause I knew that calf was coming and I didn’t want Dad to be there alone. That’s when I saw it.”

“Saw what?” asked Devine.

“It was a chopper. I could hear it. Saw the lights.”

“But not necessarily connected to the Woolwines,” said Jones.

“No, it was. I saw it land on the grass off to the side of the main building. The chopper belongs to Mr. Woolwine.”

“Could he have been on it?” asked Devine.

“Don’t think so.” He paused and collected his thoughts. “Yeah, um, earlier in the evening I saw Mr. Woolwine in his car heading out.”

“You sure it was him? It’s important, Tim. If we can place him on or near the estate at that time.”

Blair pondered this for a bit. “Okay, yeah, I was repairing some fencing by the road. Saw him clear as day. Yeah, that’s right. He even waved. And I was there until dark. And if he’d come back after that I woulda seen him. Road goes right by the front of our place. He travels in a motorcade of sorts. One SUV in front and one behind. Hard to miss. Guess that’s how billionaires go from one place to another. So does that help you?” he asked anxiously.

“Yes, it does.” Devine glanced at Jones.

She said, “But what if he came back in the chopper that you saw land that night?”

“Why would he leave in his motorcade and come back by chopper?” said Blair.

“I’m not saying he did, I’m just saying it’s possible.”

“Well, I don’t think he ever did that before,” countered Blair.

“Maybe he sent his chopper to ferry someone else to the house?” suggested Jones.

Devine nodded. “Possibly. And you’re sure Roylott died that night?”

“Yep. Cops were there the next morning. You think Mr. Woolwine had something to do with it?” he said eagerly.

“We don’t know. Did you see the chopper leave?” asked Jones.

Blair shook his head. “After the calf came and we got them both settled, we went to bed for a few hours. Bomb coulda gone off and we’d never hear it.”

Devine looked at Jones again. “Just a few hours’ window, then. But wouldn’t Roylott have been asleep? The chopper probably came in at that hour of the night, so no one would be around.”

“Oh, Mrs. Roylott coulda had a gander at someone, sure,” said Blair.

“Why’s that?” asked Jones, glancing sharply at him.

“She had insomnia. She told me. And me and Dad seen her walking around at night when we’ve been out doing some stuff that needed doing and couldn’t wait. Or early in the morning because life on a station starts long before the sun comes up. Talked to her across the fence mor’n once ’cause her cottage was on our side of the Woolwine estate.”

“So she might have seen who was on the chopper even though it was so late because she couldn’t sleep?” said Jones.

“Sure.”

“The airport in Canberra? Does it have international flights?” asked Devine, turning to Jones.

“Mostly domestic. But they do fly to Wellington and they did to Singapore. And I think flights to Doha will start soon.”

“What about private jets?” said Devine.

“Charter and privately owned. I’m sure Woolwine flies in and out of there.”

“Yep, he does that,” confirmed Blair. “Got a friend who works there. He told me so.”

Devine said, “So whoever flies in on his jet can ride the chopper to the estate. And leave the same way.”

Jones added, “And with private wings they’d never have to enter the terminal.”

“Which means Border Force would have no record of who it might have been.”

“But they’d have to file a flight plan,” noted Jones.

“If they had an intermediary stop that would help bury the ultimate destination, especially if they changed aircraft,” replied Devine.

“So a dead end,” concluded Jones.

“All that work to keep the person’s identity secret,” noted Devine thoughtfully.

“And it might have cost Roylott her life,” added Jones. “Some serious crap is going down at his place here.”

“What the hell is Woolwine mixed up in?” Blair asked.

“Don’t know. But thanks for the help. Can we drop you at your place?” asked Jones.

Blair looked out the window. “No, I . . . I think I’ll just walk from here.”

“Please do not tell anyone about this,” she added in a warning tone.

“Truth is, I’m gonna try my best to forget this ever happened.”

“Good on ya,” said Jones.

She pulled to the shoulder of the road, and Blair got out and rapidly walked off down the dusty road into the darkness.

They drove away in the opposite direction. After a few minutes of silence, each lost in their own thoughts, Devine said, “Can we find out what jets came in that night at Canberra?”

“We can certainly try.”

“Lot of firepower aligned against us on this, Anais.”

“I have to admit this is a first for me. How about you?”

Devine was about to reply when something shattered the back window, shot the length of the car, and exploded out the windshield.

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CHAPTER

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HOLY SHIT!" SCREAMED JONES AS she cut the wheel hard to the right and nearly lost control of the vehicle.

Devine gripped the wheel and kept the car on the road. "Deep breaths, Anais."

Shots pinged off the car's hide, and they both ducked down.

"Hold us steady," said Devine as he unbuckled his seat harness.

"What the hell are you doing?" she cried out.

"I'm going to assess the situation from the back."

"Assess the *situation*? The fucking situation is someone's shooting at us!"

"Steer the car evasively, side to side, but don't fall into a pattern. Switch it up. But don't slow down."

Another shot blew out her side mirror.

"Oh my God!"

He clenched her shoulder and said, "Deep breaths, Anais, slow your pulse, and let me see what I can do."

He scrambled over the seats and into the back cargo area. He could see lights back there. Twin vehicles rolling nearly side by side on the road. When he saw the muzzle flashes he ducked down. Bullets ripped into the back of the vehicle, and one made its way inside and very near Devine's head.

He rose up, and took aim with his Glock through the blown-out back window.

"Slow it down to fifty, Anais."

"But you said—"

"Do it, now!"

She cut her speed, and the vehicles tailing them quickly came closer.

Devine fired not at the windshields but at the front tires on one vehicle and the grille on the other.

The radiator on the one started smoking, while the tires on the other started to shred. As both drivers focused on keeping their rides under control, Devine poured round after round into each of the windshields on the driver's side.

It took him two beats to eject the spent clip, pop in a fresh one, and fire at the passenger's side of each truck as they both now left the road. But he kept firing because when you had the advantage, the only thing to do was to press it until the advantage turned into victory.

"Hit it, Anais. Go, go!"

She slammed down on the accelerator, and the SUV leapt forward so fast she nearly lost control and flipped them.

Devine returned to the front seat and buckled up. She looked over at him, her face as white as the car seats.

"Did you . . . hit anyone?" she began.

"I think I did," he said.

"Should we go back and—"

"No, we keep going where we're going."

Jones let out a breath that she apparently realized she was holding in. "Mother of God, Travis."

He gripped her shoulder. "Anais, it's over. They're out of commission. We're safe. Okay? We're safe."

"Do they teach all American DHS agents to do that stuff?" Jones asked as she turned onto the main road heading back to Sydney.

"I don't know. But they *do* teach it in the United States Army."

"I forgot about that part of your history. It came in handy tonight."

"Not the first time."

"Who do you think it was back there?" she asked.

"Your guess is probably better than mine."

"The guy who came into the pub? Jarvis? He could have gone back to the estate, reported in, and given your description. They make the connection and send out a hit squad to make sure we stop asking questions forever."

"That sounds very plausible, Anais."

Jones, her breathing returning to mostly normal, said, "But what the hell is Woolwine involved in that would justify this level of . . . criminality?

Killing his son-in-law and shooting Lee? Murdering his house manager? Trying to kill us? Having prisoners disappear? Dennis Mueller being gunned down? You being kidnapped and almost killed? And now this? I mean, he can't spend the money he has. What else does he need in life, for fuck's sake?"

Devine could sense that the woman was close to losing it again, and he could hardly blame her. She had just listed the deaths of three people connected to this case, *and* their attempted murders. His twice!

He said, "This can really be overwhelming, I know. But we have to maintain focus and keep our wits and just work through it."

She glanced at him as she drove. "How do you stay so calm through shit like this?"

"Fortunately, and unfortunately, I've had a lot of practice. Muscle memory breeds calmness, because you're focusing on your training and the mission and not necessarily the almost dying part."

"Wait, do you think Blair is okay?"

"There were no vehicles following us when we left the pub. And there was no one behind us when Blair got out. When we turned onto that road is when they crept up behind us. Not too many roads out here. They were probably waiting for us to pass by."

She looked out the shattered windshield. "I can barely see where I'm going."

"Let me look on the phone for some place to stay nearby tonight. Driving back in the dark in a shot-up vehicle is not a good idea. It could easily break down on us."

As he did so, she said, "This trip was a waste."

"No. Lavigne filled in some gaps, and what we learned from Blair was critical. We know that probably someone important visited the Woolwine estate that night even though Woolwine might not have been there. Roylott may have seen this person and that was the reason for her death."

"You really think she saw the man who killed Martha Woolwine?"

"That would make sense. Okay, I found a place. Looks nice. Not too far, but far enough away from here."

"Book one room with twin beds," said Jones. "I . . . I think we need to keep together, in case they come after us again." She wouldn't look at him as she said this.

“Okay,” he said quietly. “We’ll stick together and have each other’s backs.”

The inn was clean, quiet, and remote. They got to their room and quickly unpacked only what they would need. They took turns in the bathroom, changed into their sleepwear, and each settled on their bed with the covers drawn up.

She said, “I called the attack on us in. We’ll have to give them a statement tomorrow. Okay, it took a while, but officers arrived on the scene. They found debris and shell casings, but nothing else. Oh, except blood.”

“They must have gotten the vehicles workable enough to get out of there,” said Devine. “But they couldn’t have gone far.”

“And I had them check on Tim Blair. He made it safely home.”

“Good.”

After a few moments of silence she said, “When I signed up to be a police officer I knew there was risk, and danger. But . . . not like this. I feel like I was just in combat.” She turned toward him in the darkness. “This sort of stuff doesn’t happen here, Travis. Although we did have that awful shooting in Bondi. So I guess I’m wrong. That stuff *does* happen here now.”

Devine stared at the ceiling. “I wish it didn’t happen in my country, either. Or anywhere, for that matter. But, unfortunately, it does. A lot more than here. Or anywhere else, for that matter.”

“I . . . I’m sorry for losing it back there. Unbecoming in a member of the force.”

“There is nothing comfortable about people shooting at you. You can’t really practice it for real. And you did just fine. You drove us out of there while under automatic weapons fire. I know a lot of people who would have crashed and killed us both.”

“Thanks. But I did it with some coaching from you.”

“Teamwork. It usually pays off.”

“Are all American agents as nice as you?”

“Nope. Not by a long shot.”

She smiled. “Well, I’m glad I got one who is.”

“We’ll get through this, Anais. And we’ll find the truth, too.”

She let out a long sigh and closed her eyes. “From your lips to you-know-who.”

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CHAPTER

50

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, DEVINE left a note for Jones and went for a run. He brought his Glock with him just in case and kept his hoodie up. As he was jogging along, he kept an eye out for anyone or anything that looked suspicious. Whoever had been after them last night might have been able to follow them somehow, although they had once more checked the rental for any type of tracking device, but found zip.

He was heading back when his phone buzzed. He expected it to be Campbell, but it was his brother.

"Danny? How is he?"

"I'm not sure, Travis."

The color drained from Devine's face and he stopped running. He had not expected this from his Mayo Clinic doc brother. "How can you not be sure?"

"We ran every test I can think of. But his platelets keep dropping and nothing we do seems to be working."

"No idea what it could be?"

"If I did, I'd fix it," his brother snapped. But then he said, "I'm sorry, I'm just—"

"I know, Danny. Claire texted me. So she got in okay?"

"Yes, she's set up a command station in the waiting room. Partly for her business, and partly for running down anything that might help Dad."

"Sounds like Claire, maximum efficiency and the world's best multitasker. Mom?"

"Not great. Sort of in denial, I guess."

"It's that serious, then?"

Danny sighed. "It's not just the thrombocytopenia. It's the underlying cause, which is still unknown."

“You must have some guesses, Danny.”

“I do. ITP, or immune thrombocytopenic purpura, where the body attacks the platelets. Or a bone marrow malfunction, where it fails to produce sufficient platelets. It could be myelodysplastic syndrome, which is damage to the bone marrow. Or it could be issues in the liver or spleen, the latter of which can be removed. But there’s another possibility, one we’re checking now.”

“What’s that?” said Devine, thinking the worst.

“Leukemia.”

“Jesus.”

“I *could* use some divine intervention right now,” said his brother.

“You know, I don’t often fail, Travis, at my job. But even the best practitioners lose patients. I just didn’t expect it to be my own father.”

“He’s not gone yet, Danny. And I have faith in you.”

“Thanks, little brother. I wasn’t around much when you were growing up, but I know Dad was harder on you than he was on me and Claire.”

“You guys were superstars. What was there to critique?”

“You risked your life, were wounded, and almost died for your country. That is far more *superstar* than anything Claire or I have ever done.”

“I appreciate that, Danny.”

“So how’s Australia? I hear it’s quite the healthy lifestyle down there.”

Devine looked around and touched his still-injured face. “I haven’t really seen that side of it. Thanks for calling and keeping me in the loop. And . . . and tell Mom I . . . love her. Dad, too, if he’s aware of things.”

“I will, Travis. They’ll both be glad to hear it, I’m sure.”

He clicked off. Devine put his phone away and continued his run.

Jones was in the shower when he got back. When she was done he cleaned up, too. When he came out of the bathroom he was shirtless.

She was putting on her shoes and looked up. “Oh my God,” she said.

He looked at her funny. “What? Shampoo still in my hair?”

“Um, your *shoulders*?”

He looked at the scars. “Oh, right, sometimes I forget.”

“Those look like really nasty wounds. Combat?”

“One was. The other was from a round when I was working, well, back then as a *consultant* for DHS.”

“You got shot in the line of duty?”

“Something like that, yeah.”

She just shook her head and finished with her shoes.

He put on his shirt, and they had breakfast at the little restaurant attached to the inn.

“You okay?” she asked as he thumbed in some texts and frowned.

“Um, the truth is my dad’s in the hospital. It’s pretty serious. They’re trying to figure out what’s wrong.”

“I’m so sorry. Where does he live?”

“Connecticut. My brother and sister are there with him. My brother’s a world-class doc at the Mayo Clinic, so my dad’s in good hands. But still.” He eyed her over his coffee cup. “How about your parents? They good? You said your father had retired from the NSW Police Force.”

Devine rarely got personal with people he was working with, but the moment seemed right to do so with Jones, especially after their harrowing encounter the previous night.

“He actually died last year, kind of sudden. My mum moved back to Queensland.”

“I’m sorry, Anais. You have any siblings?”

“Five. I’m the youngest, by a long shot.”

“Really? Me too. They live nearby?”

“My oldest sister’s in Victoria, and one of my brothers lives in Perth. The others are all in different countries. Way of the world now. And Australia, while lovely and special, is a long way from anywhere.”

“Yeah, I guess it is.”

“I hope your father gets better, Travis.”

He glanced up at her, appreciation keyed into his expression. “Thank you.” He laid his phone and the personal discussion aside. “Anything new about last night?”

“The locals are doing a deep dive into the attack scene now. Haven’t located the shot-up vehicles. But they told me they’d keep me in the loop.”

“You mention Woolwine?”

“I thought it best not to. Just told them we were working a case. I gave them a statement over the phone, so we’re all good there.”

“So back to Sydney?” he asked.

“How about the airport first? Maybe we can get some info directly from the source on who might have flown in around the time Roylott died.”

“Now that’s a great idea, Anais.”

They drove to the airport in Canberra, and Jones's warrant card got them in to see the appropriate party, a young woman named Dana Task. She worked in a small office with computer screens arrayed around.

Task said, "Okay, I've got the private flights up on this screen for the time period you gave me, DS Jones. There were only six of them." She swung one of the screens around so they could see. "The first one was an Exxon corporate jet. The second one was Raytheon. The third was a private charter company with twenty passengers. The fourth was a NetJets with some footballers who I know live around here. They fly in and out often. The fifth was an AFP plane."

"AFP?" said Devine. "Do we know who was on it?"

Task clicked some keys on her other computer. "Two inspectors and Assistant Commissioner Gregory."

"Do you know why they were here?" asked Jones.

"We don't keep records on that," said Task. "But they have flown in before."

Devine looked at the screen. "And the last jet?"

He noted that it was the only one that had landed the very *night* Roylott was killed. The others had come in during the day or early evening. And the insomniac Roylott might have been wandering around at the time the chopper had landed, with perhaps the person on board who had flown in on that plane.

Task said, "Another corporate jet, coming in from Perth. Owned by the Link-off Company."

"How many passengers?" asked Devine.

"Four."

"Can you give us their names?"

Task tapped some keys and the printer on her desk engaged. She handed the printed page to Jones, who looked down at it.

"Matt Dillon, Woodrow Call, Will Kane, and James West? Doesn't ring any bells."

Devine took the sheet from her. "Wait a minute." He ran his gaze down the list and then got on his phone and started pressing keys.

A minute later he said, "Damn."

"What?" said Jones.

"Well, I recognized Matt Dillon. And then I checked the other names."

"You know these men?" asked Task.

“They never existed.”

“What!” said Jones.

“Well, Matt Dillon is an American actor. But the other Matt Dillon as well as the other three names are fictional characters in American Western films and TV shows. And they were all lawmen.” Devine shook his head. “Whoever it is has a sense of humor.”

“I suppose they didn’t go through passport control?” asked Jones.

“Like I said, it was a *domestic* flight from Perth,” replied Task.

“Any record of a chopper picking up someone at the airport and flying out?”

She clicked some more keys. “No, but they could have picked the person up outside of the airport’s operational footprint.”

They thanked her and left. After getting back into the rental they sat in the front seat staring out the damaged windshield for a few moments.

“So how do we run down four men who never existed?” asked Devine.

“Well, we have one lead. The Link-off Company.” Jones looked it up on her phone. “Registered in the Seychelles. Never a good sign.” She kept tapping keys and then checked the results. “Looks like a blank wall company. No list of employees.”

Devine had also been working on his phone. “I ran the tail number Task gave us. Here’s the jet in question.”

He held up his phone with the picture of a sleek tri-engine Dassault Falcon 8X.

“Not cheap,” she said. “Whatever the Link-off Company is doing pays well.”

“And maybe not legally. Roylott may have indeed recognized one of the four men on that flight as Martha Woolwine’s killer. In fact, right now it seems to be the only lead we have for her murder.”

“We just have to find him,” Jones said as she put the car in gear.

Devine’s phone buzzed. And it wasn’t his brother with another update.

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CHAPTER

51

CAMPBELL SAID, "I'VE GOT NEWS."

He told Devine about his discussion with the linguistics professor, Samuel Higgins.

"So it's not a name, but maybe some sort of code?" said Devine.

"That's the theory at least. I've had our people run it through some protocols. Nothing that makes sense so far. I'm heading back to Lee's place of business to talk to her colleagues. They might have some insight on whether Lee used that sort of subterfuge."

"Good idea."

"What's new on your end?"

Devine started with their conversation with Andre Lavigne and ended with the information they'd just gotten from Task at the airport. And the attack on him and Jones in between.

"You've rattled some cages, then. That's valuable."

Devine had to appreciate Campbell's bluntness and not expressing concern about Devine almost being killed. He knew the man cared; he had shown it before in his own way. But they were both former soldiers, and the mission was the critical thing; personal risk just came with the territory.

"So you really think Roylott saw Martha Woolwine's killer when he came back?" said Campbell.

"That's our working theory. Can you have your guys do a deep dive on the Link-off Company and see who's behind it?"

"Roger that. What about the AFP plane that landed around that time, with the assistant commissioner?"

Devine glanced at Jones. "My partner here is going to see what she can find out about that."

"Can you trust her?" asked Campbell quietly.

“No reason not to that I can see.”

“Just watch yourself.”

He clicked off and Jones said, “He asked if you could trust me, right?”

“Good hearing or good deductive skills?”

“Let’s go with both.”

“They tried to kill *us* last night, not just me.”

“I’m really sorry it took something like that and so late in the game,” she said, and not in a joking manner.

“I knew well before that, Anais.”

“Really, when?”

“When you put a tail on one of your own.”

“I don’t count the AFP as one of my own,” she retorted.

“He wears the uniform. You know what I mean. And take the win, okay?”

“Yeah, you’re right,” she said grudgingly before smiling. “Sorry. And, by the way, and belatedly . . . thank you for saving my arse last night.”

“You would have done the same for me. And we should have some more leads to chase as soon as my boss comes back with what he finds.”

“So now on to Sydney?”

“Where I have to turn this rental in. Think they’ll give me a problem about all the damage? I had two rentals shot up on a previous case back in the States.”

She gave him a sly look. “Just show them your American passport. Should be self-explanatory.”

*** * ***

“Yes, Agent Campbell,” said Helen Clark at the Focus Is Liberty office. Campbell had called and arranged to meet with the woman in the late evening after everyone else had left the office. “Theresa *did* use coded language in her files so that if anyone got a glimpse of something they wouldn’t know what it was pertaining to.”

“So Petrykha Kryvoshapka?”

“Possibly a code, yes. I would actually say more likely than not. She never mentioned a person by that name to me.”

“It’s been translated to me as ‘the wife of Petro or Peter’ and ‘a cap or a crooked hat.’ ”

Clark looked sufficiently bewildered. “I wouldn’t know where to even begin with that,” she said, and Campbell believed her.

“Your colleague Ron Kittery saw the name on a file in Lee’s office. But he didn’t look inside the file and apparently just assumed it was an actual name. And our warrant is pending but not approved, meaning we can’t legally get into her office. The lawyers are still fighting it out. All very technical, but without a warrant the *authorities* can’t get into those files and our chances of finding who shot your friend are rapidly diminishing.”

He eyed her steadily until Clark realized what he was asking.

“Wait, you . . . you mean you want me to . . . ?”

“I want you to do what you think is right for your friend.”

“But . . . I could get into serious—”

Campbell didn’t let her finish. “I can assure you that no one will find out anything from me. And I understand that your boss is out of town today and no one else is here.”

Clark’s gaze swiveled in the direction of Lee’s office down the hall. “Which is why you wanted to meet at this late hour.”

“I thought it best, yes.” Campbell, sensing the woman’s unease, leaned forward and said, “In everyone’s life they are confronted with difficult choices. Where no direction taken is perfect, but life is very seldom perfect, Ms. Clark. My job is to find out what happened to Theresa Lee. She is unable to help us because she’s in a coma. So, to do my job, I have to look for alternatives. Imperfect alternatives, but still, I have to find some way forward. I came here to ask you because this might possibly be the best way to uncover the truth. And if your friend were able to, what do you think she would do?”

The pair gazed at each other for a long moment.

Clark took a key from her drawer, rose, and said, “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

Ten minutes passed before she returned. She passed him a file without a word.

Campbell said, “Thank you.” Then he got up and left.

A few minutes later he walked down the darkened street with the file safely tucked in his briefcase. As standard protocol, he had used his phone to take pictures of every page in the file before he’d left the building.

With what was in the file, Campbell was thinking they might finally be getting somewhere.

And then he felt the pain in his side, and his briefcase was ripped from his hand.

The next moment Emerson Campbell hit the pavement, with blood oozing out of him.

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CHAPTER

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THEY DROPPED OFF THE RENTAL back in Sydney. Jones flashed her warrant card and explained to the stunned clerk what had happened to the vehicle.

"It's now a crime scene. A uniformed officer will be here in a few minutes to secure it and a forensics crew will be coming to do a thorough scrub," she told him. "So no one touches it or even goes near it, understood?"

The clerk mumbled something and nodded.

After she and Devine walked out, Jones said, "Let's Uber back to my place, where I can pick up my car."

On the way Devine was looking at something on his phone. "Damn."

"What?" asked Jones.

He passed over his phone after enlarging the picture. "I took another look."

She looked at the screen. "Walker's autopsy photo?"

"Look at the marks on his waist."

She ran her gaze over it. "Right, some abrasions. It was noted in the report by the examiner. He was in the water and drifted all that way. Amazing there's not more damage on him. And you saw the body for yourself. So what are you saying?"

"The photo gives a different perspective and in better light than was available in that room. And you know I always thought it was too big a coincidence that he was dumped in one part of the harbor and ended up pretty much in the front yard of his wife's house."

"So what do you think happened?"

"I think something could have been around his waist that tethered him to that dock. Then when it failed or was cut somehow, the body would come

to the surface. And then maybe lodged against the dock pilings. Did your guys check for any underwater restraints?"

Jones looked uncertain. "I'm . . . I'm not sure. So you're saying they really wanted to send a message to her?"

"Like Drury said, the tide charts and currents aren't an exact science when it comes to where something will end up. The body might have washed ashore around there, but right at that little dock? The odds are too long for that. And this would mesh with what Mueller told me when he said he was fearful for Charlotte's safety."

Jones mulled over this and nodded. "Okay, let me make a call." She phoned her office and gave the order for a search to be made at the Darling Point dock for any evidence of underwater restraints at the boat ferry stop.

"After we get your car, I think we need to speak to Charlotte Woolwine," said Devine.

"What if she refuses?"

"Tell her we have information about Mueller."

"You want to fill her in on what he divulged to you?"

"Not necessarily. But it'll hopefully get us in the door. Can you make the call?"

Jones glanced sharply at Devine. "This is not how I normally perform my investigations. But it's become clear that this is about as far from normal as is possible."

She left Woolwine a message.

Later, after Devine and Jones Ubered out of Sydney to her apartment and retrieved her car, her phone buzzed. She looked at the text.

"You were right. The diver found a small remnant of cord adhered to the dock pilings far below the water." She looked chagrined. "We should have found that on the first pass. Point for you, Travis."

"Point for *our* investigation. So the restraint was either cut or broke loose, and the body rose from the depths to tell Charlotte Woolwine that she might be next?"

"Could be," conceded Jones. "So all the damage to his body?"

"They must have inflicted that to keep up the subterfuge of him being pulled in the currents all that way. But while they were looking to deceive us, I think the Woolwines might have seen it as the direct threat it probably was."

On their way back to Sydney, Jones's phone buzzed again. It was Charlotte Woolwine. She would meet with them that evening.

Devine said, "Mueller told me two things about Charlotte's relationship with her father. She loves the man."

"Okay, and the second?"

"And she despises him."

"Well, right now, I hope we get *that* woman," said Jones.

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CHAPTER

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WOOLWINE WAS WAITING FOR THEM in the same room as before. Her face was flushed, and her eyes were painfully bloodshot.

"I was supposed to be in Dubai today for a business meeting," she said. "They still haven't released Bill's body and I have a funeral to plan. And I really haven't explained things to my kids. They're devastated and I want them here with me, but . . . I just don't know if it's safe."

"That's understandable," said Jones.

"And now . . . Dennis," Woolwine added miserably.

"What were you going to be doing in Dubai?" asked Devine.

She wiped her eyes. "Everybody wants in on our data center business," she said, staring at her feet. "It's our fastest-growing revenue and profit silo, and I couldn't give a shit right now." She shook her head. "I told you before I was basically a socialist at university. And now look at me? I'm my father. Fucking unrecognizable."

They sat across from her and Jones said, "We're very sorry about Mr. Mueller."

Woolwine wiped her face with a tissue and nodded. "Would you like something to drink? I'm having tea."

They told her tea would be fine, and a young, long-limbed woman came in a minute later with a tray. She passed out cups and poured the tea, glanced once at her grieving employer, and then rushed away like a flushed deer.

Woolwine took a sip of tea with an unsteady hand and then put the cup back on its saucer.

"In some ways Dennis was like the brother I never had. I really cared for him. And he was . . . extremely . . . "

"Loyal?" suggested Jones.

“Yes,” said Woolwine in a husky voice.

“I was with him right before he died,” said Devine. She shot him a look and he continued, “He wanted to tell me a few things.”

“Such as?” she said warily.

“He felt you were in danger.”

“Why would he think that?”

“Not sure, actually. And he told me some things about your father’s plans for Australia,” Devine added vaguely.

“What sort of plans?”

Jones piped in, “International in nature. Sort of playing both sides.”

She and Devine had practiced this tag team on the drive over.

Woolwine looked out one of the big windows at the sculpted grounds of her home. Her expression registered nothing. “And you think *that’s* why Dennis was killed?”

“The timing *might* indicate that, but we have no proof. He also said he had submitted his resignation to your father.”

Jones said, “Do you know anything about recent visitors to your estate outside of Canberra? Where your mother was killed?”

She looked confused, no doubt by the odd segue. “Why the hell are you asking about that?”

“Another woman was recently murdered there.”

“I know that! Her name was Emily Roylott.”

“I assume you knew her,” said Devine.

“Of course I knew her! It’s one of our homes and I go to ride there.”

“Okay,” said Devine. That seemed to comport with what Tim Blair had told them.

“And it was terrible what happened to Emily,” continued Woolwine. “But it was a home invasion. At least that’s what the police said.”

Jones said, “Yet nothing was taken. And no one saw anything. And if it was a burglary why not just tie her up and get away? Burglars don’t usually turn into murderers.”

Woolwine picked up her tea. “Well, she might have seen them and could ID them.”

“She might have. But the very night of her death a jet arrived at the airport.”

Woolwine looked confused. “So? People do fly in and out of Canberra, all the time.”

“But it’s possible that the passenger from this *private* jet might have gone to your estate,” said Devine.

“And Roylott, who suffered from insomnia, might have seen him,” added Jones.

“My *father* does have visitors there sometimes. And so what if Emily saw the person?”

Devine looked at Jones. “The thing is, Roylott might have recognized the man as the person who murdered your mother.”

Woolwine slowly put down her cup of tea. “Are you saying that someone who went to see my father was also the person who killed my mother?”

Devine was getting ready for her to start screaming, or have them thrown out.

Jones hastily said, “I’m afraid it might be a possibility, yes. And after we discreetly looked into that very issue and were probably recognized by your estate manager, Malcolm Jarvis, two truckloads of people tried to kill us. If not for my colleague here, I’d be in a morgue this morning.”

Woolwine glanced at Devine, who just stared mutely back at her. He wanted her to say something, anything, to show what she was thinking.

She leaned forward and said, “My father could never have anything to do with the death of my mother. It’s unthinkable.”

Devine noted that the way she said it, it was almost as if the woman were asking a question instead of making a statement.

“Okay, do you have any other possible motives for why someone would want to kill her?” asked Jones.

Woolwine finished her tea and seemed to make a decision, an important one.

“Do you . . . do you know what B-R-I-C-S is?” asked Woolwine in a quiet voice.

Jones shot Devine another look. He said, “Yes, but why do you bring it up?”

“Because my father, well, he deals with a number of the countries that are members of BRICS. Is that the *international* element you were talking about?”

“If it is, how would that be connected to your mother’s death?” said Jones.

“I remember my mother saying something once after she got back from the Canberra estate.”

“What did she say?” asked Devine in a tense voice.

“That my father was dealing with people he shouldn’t trust.”

“Okay, but how does that tie in with BRICS?” asked Jones.

“When I asked my mother what people she was talking about, she turned and slapped the wall. It was a *brick* wall. ‘This,’ she said. ‘Do you understand?’ When I told her I didn’t, she got really pissed and then walked out of the room. Later, I asked Dennis about it. That was when he told me about BRICS, but he didn’t say my father was involved in that. When I later asked my father about it, he really did not want to go there. When I went to ask my mother about it, she said she had no idea what I was even talking about. And if I knew what was good for me I would never mention anything to my father about it.”

“How long after that did she die?” asked Devine.

“Two weeks,” said Woolwine dully, staring off out the window at the harbor.

“And now Emily Roylott, the only witness to your mother’s possible killer, dies in an alleged home invasion at the very same place where your mother died,” said Jones.

Woolwine shook her head wearily. “My father wouldn’t hurt a fly. But I don’t know about those he’s doing business with. There are probably some who don’t play by any rules. And look at the tobacco shop bombings. He *has* enemies.”

“The Russians, you mean?” said Jones.

“Everybody said they were Russian, but what if they weren’t?” asked Woolwine.

“I can tell you that one of the men who kidnapped and almost killed me was from the Czech Republic,” said Devine.

“That is not Russia,” said Charlotte.

“But the bombers are in prison, and they *are* Russian.”

“In your *father’s* prisons,” added Jones.

“What do you mean by that?” said Woolwine sharply.

Jones said, “When we went to interview the bombers we found they had been moved from the prison to some unknown place.”

“Why would my father move around prisoners who had bombed *his* businesses and injured some of *his* employees?”

“We don’t know,” conceded Devine. “So, data centers? They’ve made your family a lot of money very quickly.”

Charlotte again looked surprised by the abrupt segue. “We *are* in the business of making money.”

“I was just wondering how he made the leap into that sector.”

She shrugged. “My father very early on recognized that you can’t have either crypto or AI without data centers. The computing demands are too enormous. We build the facilities, provide the servers, security, internet pipe, everything. We lease to some of the biggest corporations in the world. We’ve seen incredible growth.” She looked at each of them. “What else?”

“You now know your husband was dying?” said Devine.

“Dennis told me. I . . . I really couldn’t understand why Bill didn’t tell me. And then he was divorcing me? It made no sense. None.”

“He might have been trying to keep you safe,” said Devine.

“What do you mean by that?” she asked, looking angry.

“If your father is involved with some dangerous people, they would know that your husband was part of Five Eyes,” said Jones. “By divorcing you, it might have been a way to distance himself from you in case the bad actors thought he might be using you as a resource to spy on them.”

Woolwine bowed her head and they could hear her low moans.

Jones said, “I promise you that we will do everything we can to bring those people to justice, Ms. Woolwine.”

“Do you think your husband might have possibly been working on getting proof about the BRICS connection? And that’s why he was killed?” asked Devine.

Woolwine lifted her head and glanced at him. “Bill did not like to let things just go. And when my mother was murdered he was devastated.”

“And Theresa Lee?” said Devine gently. “You pretended not to know her. But I think you did.”

Woolwine sighed. “Bill mentioned her to me. But it wasn’t anything personal between them. I know that.”

“What was it, then?” asked Devine.

“She had gotten into some trouble that Bill got her out of.”

“He told you that?”

“Yes.”

Devine said, “If your husband was digging into your father and the BRICS scheme?”

“That could be catastrophic for your father,” observed Jones. She looked at Woolwine. “For the whole family fortune, actually.”

Woolwine looked at her darkly. “I can’t believe that my father had anything to do with my husband’s death.”

Devine said, “But still, I think your husband’s body being found literally in your front yard was a warning. Maybe not to you, but to your father. That *you* might be next. That could be leverage over him and make even a billionaire do their bidding.”

Jones added, “Or *not* do something.”

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CHAPTER

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THE PHONE CALL REACHED DEVINE while he was driving back with Jones from meeting Charlotte Woolwine. It was Campbell's number, only when he answered, it wasn't the man on the other end.

The person identified themself and used various phrases that confirmed their authority and authenticity. Then Devine listened while the person informed him of what had happened to his boss.

Devine sat there, stunned. He then told the person to keep him updated and then clicked off.

"Problem?" asked Jones.

"My boss got the file from Lee's office in New York. Then someone stabbed him and took it."

"Oh my God, is he going to be okay?"

"He regained consciousness and told them what had happened, but there are complications. He's as tough as they come, but not exactly a spring chicken."

Devine looked out the window and thought about the good friends he had lost in combat, and those he had lost while doing this job. It came with the territory. But for some reason he had thought Campbell was beyond such risks.

When none of us are.

"He was only out in harm's way because I was down here."

"You're 'down here' on orders doing your job," she pointed out. Devine clearly didn't see it that way.

She said, "Do you need time to focus on that? Or travel back to the States?"

"No, the mission is unchanged. If I got off track now my boss would get out of his hospital bed and kick my ass."

“Okay, so any ideas as to what we do now?”

“Carlton Woolwine is clearly involved in something that cost him the lives of his wife, his son-in-law, and his house manager, as well as Dennis Mueller. And it could cost his daughter her life. So what the hell could he be involved in that would justify *that* to him?”

“It must be this BRICS business. Even his wife mentioned it.”

“But then wouldn’t talk about it again.”

“You think Martha Woolwine was covering up something?”

“I think it was complicated. For her, and everybody else. And it might have cost the woman her life.”

“Well, I doubt Carlton Woolwine will talk to us. And we can’t force him.”

“I think we need to talk to Drury.”

A surprised Jones said, “Drury? Why?”

“Because he’s the only ally we have left on this case.”

“An *ally*? You think so even after his meeting with Mueller and Charlotte Woolwine?”

“Things are not always what they appear to be. Mueller tried to do the right thing by talking to me and it probably cost him his life too. Charlotte lost her husband. Drury was Mueller’s friend. So he might be open to working with us.” He glanced at her. “At least it’s worth a shot. Don’t you think?”

“Right now anything would be worth a shot. I’ll set up a meeting.”

She dropped him off at his hotel and drove away.

Devine went to the harbor to grab dinner. Then he sat there looking out at the ferries coming and going.

My father is in the hospital with maybe a life-threatening illness, and right now I’m more worried about my boss. So maybe I am the shitty son my old man keeps telling me I am.

He went for a walk over to the Opera House and jogged up the steps. He stood looking out at the water, the same water into which Bill Walker’s dead body had been dumped. Tied to the dock by Charlotte Woolwine’s home. A probable warning to Daddy that he might just lose her, too.

What’s your secret, Woolwine? What are you hiding from the world that allows these guys to walk all over you, burn down your shops, kill your loved ones, and do apparently whatever the hell they want to do? How much are all your billions worth now? Not much, it seems.

He had seen other rich men who had all this money and no spines, because someone had the power to take that money away and the rich would do anything just so long as they didn't end up poor, their pride and self-respect be damned.

If that's not pathetic, I don't know what the hell is.

He texted his brother about their father. When he didn't receive an immediate reply he kept walking. Up one street and down the other. All the time he was hoping someone would jump out of the darkness and try something with him. Try to take his money, or his life. Something. So he could release the fury inside of him like a nuke plant about to suffer a China Syndrome.

But no one appeared, no one tried to take anything from him.

Devine walked back to his hotel and sat on his bed.

He looked at the notes he had taken during their interview with Carlton Woolwine. The man had not said much, the words were definitely few. But sometimes what wasn't said, those gaps, were even more important.

His phone dinged and he looked at the message that had just dropped.

He read it and then grew excited. *Damn, way to go, boss.*

He had just received the photocopies of the file Campbell had taken from Theresa Lee's office.

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CHAPTER

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DEVINE PULLED UP THE PHOTOS of the file pages. The same name, Petrykha Kryvoshapka, was on one of them.

There were also some notes in the file that were probably in Theresa Lee's handwriting. They were vague and also appeared to be in some sort of coded shorthand that was not particularly helpful.

Devine refocused on the pages and the few words that he could make out.

There was one of particular significance. The date on the top of the first page.

Eight months ago. She had been on this for a while.

There were also initials: *F.N.T.*, and *R.M.M.* And *Palo Alto*. What did a city in California have to do with anything? Although, as he thought it over, Palo Alto was part of Silicon Valley, which was connected to the world of AI and data centers. But who were FNT and RMM and how did they figure into this? Was it more code?

He put those questions aside and looked at a phrase that Lee had written.

Rumors are important.

Rumors were squarely in rumint, which was Bill Walker's specialty. He had sources everywhere and had even built a software platform that could scrape off chatter in hotspots all over. So maybe she and Walker *were* working on something together, which might explain the hit team that had been sent out after them.

He looked out the window as he thought this over. Lee had been working on something for at least eight months. Then, two months later, Walker had saved Lee from being human-trafficked in Somalia, an event that Devine was coming to conclude was staged. And, using his having

saved her, had Walker requested that she stop working on her story? Then, maybe in New York he had confessed what he had done, including that the Somalia event was a sham. That would have made the woman angry, thought Devine. Just like she had been on the CCTV.

He had speculated on this before, with Anais Jones. But now, with what Campbell had managed to obtain, it looked far more like a theory transforming into fact.

So that might explain that part, but what about Walker leaving Five Eyes so abruptly? And was his decision to divorce his wife really meant to protect her? Or was there something else going on?

He got on his laptop and did something he probably should have already done, and that Campbell had started. He searched for the Artificial Intelligence Protection Company. The Belgium-based firm with the dodgy Belgian managing director who had lied to both Devine and Campbell.

As Campbell had found, there was very little known about the company, which struck Devine as odd, since Peeters had told him that he had known Walker going back numerous years.

He then looked up Carl Peeters and saw the man's photo staring back at him. The Belgian had a deep CV with multiple degrees, published academic papers, certifications, awards, memberships in exclusive organizations, past professorships at prestigious universities overseas. And he'd worked at some of the biggest firms out there, which was maybe where he had first met Bill Walker. This all seemed absolutely legit and aboveboard.

Maybe too *legit and* too *aboveboard?*

That sounded counterintuitive, but not in the world where Devine labored. People were deceptive as hell. And they smiled the whole time they were screwing you over or else trying to kill you.

And he still didn't know what the hell the company even did. The materials he looked at online had been beyond generic. It was like, *Hey, we have AI in our name, so we can do . . . anything*. He emailed one of the firms that Peeters had worked at, identified himself, and asked for information on Peeters's employment there. He figured he would never get an answer, so he called the number that he had found online for the firm. He went through four different people and landed with a fifth's voicemail. He left a message. He did the same with the other firms listed on Peeters's CV.

When he finished he thought, *Not a single one of them is getting back to me.*

His phone buzzed when the text dropped in.

Drury will meet with us in one hour. I'll pick you up in 30.

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CHAPTER

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When Jones arrived Devine filled her in about what he had found on the files from Campbell's screenshots.

"FNT and RMM? You know anyone with those initials?" she asked.

"Nothing rings a bell, no."

"And Palo Alto? That's where Stanford University is, yes?"

"Right. And Silicon Valley is there, too, which is the mecca of AI. And we have the firm Walker was working for with AI literally in its name. And Woolwine has made a fortune recently on AI and data centers. So it seems that all this has something to do with that sector."

"And Lee also wrote that rumor is important, which comports with Walker's area of expertise," she said.

"I think that Walker knew where she was going that day and arranged to 'run into her.' "

"Maybe he was the one who scheduled the meeting with her so he could 'run into her.' But he did it under an alias."

Devine rubbed his eyes. "This case keeps giving me a headache."

"There's Advil in the glove box. I never leave home without it. And there's an unopened bottle of water in the console."

Devine took the Advil with water and stared out the Passat's window at the busy streets of Sydney. "So what's the deal with Drury? Any insights?"

She glanced at him. "I emailed and asked for a meeting, and he sent an email agreeing and setting the time. That's all I know."

"That's why I don't like emails. You get no context or perspective."

"I think we'll get plenty of both when we meet with him."

* * *

Drury was waiting for them in his office. He looked paler and not nearly as confident as he usually did. He invited them to sit down and then didn't

say anything.

"Well?" he finally offered, grudgingly.

"Mueller?" said Devine. "He's dead, murdered."

"Really? I had no fucking idea," said Drury with a glare at him.

Devine said, "We're not the enemy here, Sergeant Drury."

"Could've fooled me, based on our last encounter."

Devine leaned forward. "Look, let me just lay this out because I sense we are running out of time. My boss got a file from Theresa Lee's office in New York and then he was stabbed on the way back to his office. He's pretty damn high up at DHS, so the people we're going up against apparently don't give a crap who they take out. Including your friend and former comrade in arms, Dennis Mueller. So, I say let's put all the bullshit aside and just do our jobs before more people die."

To his credit, Drury looked deeply concerned. "My God, Agent Devine. I'm sorry. Will your boss make it?"

"They don't know. It's bad, that I do know. But Mueller got it a lot worse. And he was meeting with me right before somebody sniped a long-range round into his head."

A dumbstruck Drury said, "He met with *you*?"

"He did."

"Why?"

"I think, like DS Jones and myself, he wanted to get to the truth. I figure you want to do the same. That's why we wanted to meet. If I'm totally off base, tell us so, and we'll get going. Because like I said, time is not on our side."

Drury glanced at Jones, who looked stoically back at him. He tapped a pen against his desktop. "Losing Dennis was a real blow, personally," he said. "He saved my life in Iraq."

Devine said, "I've lost fellow soldiers. It never gets easier, nor should it. But I lost them on battlefields, not in the middle of a metropolis."

Jones said, "Which shows these folks have great intel and highly skilled personnel."

Drury sat back. "I agree. They do."

"Do you know *more* than that?" asked Devine.

"Not here," said Drury abruptly. "Let's go for a walk."

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CHAPTER

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THEY HAD GONE ABOUT TWO blocks before Drury spoke. “This is not your typical case.”

“*That* we know,” said Jones sharply.

He glanced at her. “I just needed to say it. And, look, if I’ve been an arsehole to you—”

“There is no *if*, you *have* been an arsehole,” interjected Jones.

Drury looked away. “Yeah, I suppose I have,” he said in a resigned tone.

“Glad we’ve got that cleared up,” said Devine. “What do you have to tell us that couldn’t be said inside your own headquarters?”

“The down and dirty is it seems that Woolwine Enterprises is involved in some serious stuff with some seriously bad people.”

“Do you know exactly who and why?” asked Devine.

“Not really, on both counts. But this is a priority at the AFP because Woolwine is critically important to this country.”

Jones looked exasperated, but before she could speak Drury added, “There are rumors that he wants this country to join BRICS.”

“We’ve heard,” said Devine.

Drury shot him a look. “Dennis?”

“Yes. But is that enough motivation for all the people who have died? His wife, his son-in-law, his loyal man in Mueller, the house manager in Canberra?”

“Emily Roylott,” noted Drury.

“So you’re on to that as well?” said Jones.

“Of course we are,” said Drury, regaining a bit of his superior manner.

“Don’t fall back to old ways, Sergeant,” cautioned Jones. “My tolerance level is pretty much nil right now with you.”

Drury started to snap something back but then said tersely, “Right.”

“Any thoughts on why Roylott was killed?” asked Devine.

“Maybe. And you?”

“We think Roylott was killed because she saw something she shouldn’t have,” said Devine.

“Like the man who killed Mrs. Woolwine?” said Drury. “We’re having ACT playing it publicly as a home invasion gone wrong so as not to raise any suspicion while we dig deeper.”

“Okay, care to share the reason you were meeting with Mueller and Charlotte Woolwine?” asked Jones.

Drury hesitated but then leaned against a building and let some people pass before speaking. “I was talking to them because Charlotte asked me through Dennis to meet with her.”

“Why?” asked Devine.

“Charlotte does not like her father. Well, more to the point, she does not like his business interests and endeavors. She sees him as a predator and someone not to be trusted. And there’s something else.”

“What?” asked Jones.

“From what she said at our meeting, I believe she thinks he might have had something to do with her mother’s death.”

Jones and Devine looked at one another. “Why does she think that?” asked a confused Devine. That was the exact opposite of what Charlotte had told them, although he did recall that her manner and tone seemed to indicate uncertainty about her father’s involvement in the murder.

“Intuition, speculation, suspicion. Granted, I have no hard proof that he was involved. He was out of the country at the time, but he could have easily hired someone to do that deed.”

“Motive?” asked Jones.

Drury eyed them closely. “Martha Woolwine might have threatened to go public with her husband’s BRICS campaign.”

Devine said, “Charlotte told us that her mother knew about her husband and BRICS, but she was also adamant that her father had nothing to do with her mother’s death, although the way she said it, I’m not sure she’s as certain as her words were.”

“It’s not easy to talk to people about your father possibly murdering your mother. She didn’t like how the whole thing was playing out, which would explain what you overheard. I told her I would take care of things, but in no way did I mean that to be any sort of cover-up. My intent is to

investigate this to the fullest and follow the evidence where it leads. And whoever falls, falls, Carlton Woolwine or not."

Devine said, "At our first meeting you seemed to be trying hard to put suspicion on Charlotte."

Drury smiled sheepishly. "I didn't know you. So a little misdirection I employed."

Jones said, "You really think keeping BRICS quiet is the motive?"

Drury looked around. "It's a possible motive, but, apparently like you, I'm not sure it's *enough* of one. I mean, some elected leaders also want to join BRICS. It's not exactly taboo. The world has changed. And the EU finally rammed through the trade deal with South America because the Chinese can't be trusted, and now neither can the Americans, which also drove the Canadians to do a deal with Beijing. And you have other countries banding together because of America's changing positions."

Jones said, "So you think there's another motive somewhere?"

"I believe it's possible, yes. In fact, more likely than not. BRICS just doesn't seem a big enough incentive for all these felonies."

"Any inkling as to what it might be?"

Drury said, "Walker's new job? The firm has very little history. And my blokes can't find out what it really does."

"We're running into the same problem," noted Devine. "But what if he had no choice in going to work for them?"

Drury looked intrigued. "How do you figure?"

"The guy's terminal with cancer. Then he files for divorce from a wife he apparently loved and quits his long-held job to move thousands of miles away from his family? What would be the point? Unless he was *forced* to do that."

"How would they force him?" Drury wanted to know.

Jones said, "The attempt on Charlotte Woolwine's life? We think they gave Walker a heads-up about that. But maybe it was a clear warning that you do what we want you to do or next time she will be dead."

"Okay, assuming you're right, why did they want Walker to join this particular firm?"

Devine said, "Walker had built up an impressive expertise, including rumint. He had sources all over the world."

"But I'm sure there are lots of folks with that expertise. Why did they need him specifically?" asked Drury.

Jones said, “To get him under their thumb and not working against them, and also cut him off from Five Eyes, which might be problematic for them.”

Devine added, “And rumint wasn’t his only skill. He was a coder, a gifted one who had created a platform for Five Eyes that scraped rumors and innuendo and the like off sites around the world to create a database to study.”

“Okay, so he was going to create a similar platform for the new company? With what goal in mind?”

Jones looked at Devine, who seemed unsure.

Devine said, “There are lots of things a gifted coder can do besides re-creating the same platform.”

“You think he was doing something else for them?” asked Jones. “Maybe.”

“Then why kidnap and then kill him?” said Drury.

“Maybe he was planning to double-cross them.”

“How would they know that?” asked Drury.

Jones answered. “Because he met with Theresa Lee.”

“That’s right,” said Devine quickly. “He must have been working on something with Lee. Now, we’ve speculated that his saving her from being trafficked in Somalia was staged. He did that in order, we believe, to get her to back off a story she was working on. I think that story has something to do with the file that my boss got from Lee’s office and was then stabbed over.”

“But the file is gone now?” said Drury.

Devine studied the man, sizing up whether he should trust him or not.

The latter won out.

“Looks like it. But they’re still checking some possible leads on that.”

Jones, who knew that Campbell had taken pictures of the files, shot Devine a glance but said nothing.

“Worse luck,” said Drury.

“But I thought he and Lee had something personal going on, too,” noted Jones. “The letter you found?”

Devine looked at her. “Here’s the thing. That woman who tricked me and the cop away from Lee’s apartment?”

“Yes. You said she then broke in and took something,” said Jones.

“No. Now I think she broke in and *left* something.”

Jones sucked in a breath. “You mean the photo and the letter hidden behind it?”

“Yes, to make it seem like they were having an affair. And I also have it on corroborated authority that Lee is gay.”

“But you said the handwriting was confirmed as Walker’s.”

“They probably forced him to write it before they brought him here and killed him. They wanted us to think that their relationship was strictly personal.”

“Crickey,” exclaimed Drury. “This is a lot of stuff going on. Whatever these people are trying to accomplish, it must be big.”

Devine looked at him. “I think it’s fucking gigantic.”

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CHAPTER

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BACK IN THE CAR AFTER leaving Drury, Jones said, “You lied to Drury about the file going missing.”

“I made a tactical decision not to fully loop him in.”

“A nice way to say you lied.”

“You disagree?” asked Devine.

“No, I actually heartily agree. So, where do we go from here? To the estate in Canberra? Maybe talk to some of the folks who work for Woolwine?”

Devine looked out the window as they drove along.

“How about we hit a little closer to home.”

“Meaning?”

“Cletus Barnes.”

“Walker’s former boss at Five Eyes? He made it pretty clear that he had no interest in telling us anything. And after you basically accused him of being part of some conspiracy, I don’t see him opening up now.”

“We have to dangle the right carrot.”

“Which is?”

“Saving the world.”

“You’re joking?”

“I actually wish I was, Anais.”

It took about an hour and some back-and-forth calls and messages and a promise by Jones that Devine was extremely sorry for what he had said previously and would be on his best behavior, before Barnes agreed to meet with them.

As they sat across from him in his office the man glared disdainfully at Devine before settling his gaze on Jones.

“Yes, *DS Jones*? How can I help *you*?”

“I’m going to be very candid with you, Mr. Barnes, in the hope that you will feel comfortable in helping us.”

“I can make no promises. But feel free to go ahead,” he added in a magnanimous tone.

And she started, pretty much from the beginning. As she got into their theories on why Walker had left Five Eyes and what he might have been doing before his death, Barnes’s jaw dropped lower and lower.

“You . . . you think Bill was *forced* to leave here and join this other firm? What was the name again?”

Devine told him and added, “The managing director in the U.S. is a man named Carl Peeters. Ring any bells?”

Barnes shook his head. “Everyone has AI in their names these days whether they actually do anything with it or not.”

Devine said, “The point is, Mr. Barnes, we believe they forcibly recruited Walker for two reasons. One, to get him out of Five Eyes and away from his family here. Second, to work for this new firm and use his skills for them instead of you. The thing is, we know he was proficient in rumint and had built a platform here for Five Eyes to do that.”

“And how did you learn that?” asked Barnes sharply.

“Peeters told me when I interviewed him.”

Barnes did not look happy about this. “I would have hoped that Bill would have been more discreet.”

Jones said, “Well, they hired him to use his expertise for them. It seems logical that he would have had to explain what that was, if they didn’t already know from past experiences with him.”

Barnes said, “You see, this is exactly why I never wanted to work in the private sector.”

“Right,” said Devine, with a glance at Jones. “I guess what we want to know is what other skills did Walker have that he used while he was with you.” He added quickly, “Nothing classified or top secret. Just the basics.”

Barnes did not look put off by this query, but simply curious. “Do you think what they were making Bill do would have repercussions for Five Eyes?”

“I think it will have consequences far broader than that,” replied Devine.

An alarmed Barnes said, “I’m not sure I understand. Bill would never have—”

Devine interjected, “We think he was acting under duress.”

Barnes stared at him for a long moment. “I’m not sure . . . ” In a lower voice he said, “Look, we were all stunned when Bill announced he was leaving. And filing for divorce?” He glanced between them. “I did know Bill personally, far more than I let on. He loved his wife, his kids. I was more surprised at the divorce than the job change. But I never imagined it was because he had no choice.”

“So, his other skills?” asked Jones.

Dropping his voice even lower, Barnes said, “When Bill first came here he was deployed as, well, a white hatter.”

“How so?” asked Devine.

“Bill was an exceptional coder. He could have made ten times as much money in the private sector. But he was devoted to public service. We used him as a means to test the strength of our defenses against malware, spyware, and the like.”

“And how did he do that?”

“His mission was to install certain pseudoviruses and the like on our software platforms by getting past our defenses.”

“And was he successful?” asked Jones.

“Enough to where it scared all of us to death. We had never seen some of the techniques and methods he employed. Anyway, we reverse engineered what he had done to protect ourselves in the future from such assaults for real. Bill assisted greatly in that endeavor.”

“So he was a whiz at infiltrating sensitive orgs’ software platforms,” Devine said, more to himself than to Barnes and Jones.

Jones said, “So that may be what he was doing at AIPC.”

“But as a real hacker, not a white hatter,” noted Devine.

Barnes said fearfully, “Do you think we’ve been compromised?”

“Well, if I were you, I would definitely run a security check, like now,” advised Devine.

Barnes got on his computer and sent off an email before leveling an astonished gaze on them. “I . . . I can’t believe this is happening.”

“To be clear, we’re not sure it’s your org he went after,” said Devine.

“If not us, then who?” asked Barnes.

“*That’s* the question I wish I had the answer to,” replied Devine.

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CHAPTER

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"BUT IT HAS TO BE Five Eyes, right? I mean, as the target?" said Jones as she drove them away from Barnes's building.

"I don't know for sure. There are lots of sensitive platforms that could be the target," said Devine. "If we are right about the scheme, which we might not be, since we have no real proof."

"But it would explain a lot if Walker was forced to work for AIPC," said Jones. "Do you have enough for a search warrant against the company? We can't touch it because it has no ties to Australia. I checked."

"That requires probable cause and we have none. Not even with the attack on Campbell, because we can show no connection."

"But you said this Carl Peeters lied to you and your boss."

"We *believed* he did, but it could have been a simple mistake and it's not enough for a warrant to be issued. I'm not speculating. I emailed the lawyers at DHS and they basically told me I had zip and to keep digging."

"Speaking of, how is your boss doing?"

"I asked for hourly updates. The last one had his condition as unchanged."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not. He's still alive and not getting worse."

"And Theresa Lee?"

"Give me a sec. Some messages came in I haven't checked yet."

He brought up his emails, and then his texts. As he read over them, Devine brightened a bit. "Some good news. Lee's now stable. The docs actually think she has a decent chance at recovering."

Jones smiled broadly. "Damn, that *is* good news. You go, Theresa," she added.

"Agents will take a statement as soon as possible."

“She could at least clear up what the two were arguing about when he was taken and she was shot.”

“My folks are doing a deeper dive on AIPC and Carl Peeters. Like Drury said, there’s not much of a history there, which also makes it odd that Walker would voluntarily leave his job at Five Eyes and join them. But judging from their offices in New York, they have deep pockets behind them.”

“Carlton Woolwine’s *pockets* or those he’s working with?”

“Possibly.”

He looked out the car window as a light-rail train rumbled down the street. “So if Walker could hack into anything and AIPC wanted to hack into Five Eyes?”

“But there’s a problem with that,” said Jones.

He glanced at her. “I know there is. If they had Walker under their thumb, why not just have him stay at Five Eyes? He could far more easily get whatever they wanted him to get that way.”

“Exactly. So his separation from Five Eyes must have been for the reason we thought: to get him away from Five Eyes and his family and on to helping AIPC doing whatever it is they’re doing.”

“So if he was killed by them, does that mean that he already completed the mission?” wondered Devine. He pulled up a screen on his phone. “My boss’s linguistic friend said that the Ukrainian name that was on Lee’s file seemed staged, made up to cover what she was really doing.”

“What were the elements again?”

“A crooked cap or hat and Petro, or Peter. Maybe wife of Petro.”

“Speaking of, I need to stop and get some.”

“Some what?”

“*Petrol*. I’m bumping empty, and I don’t like to fully rely on the *E* part of the car,” she replied as she pulled into a BP station and up to a pump.

She turned off the car and started to get out. “I’ll just be a minute.” When she glanced at Devine her eyes widened. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I’ve actually seen the light. *Petro*? How about like you just said: *petrol*? Oil? A petrostate?”

Jones sat back down in her seat. “Oil? And a petrostate? How exactly does that mesh with a hat?”

Devine sighed. “I’m not sure.”

“That pretty much sums up this whole case,” replied Jones.

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CHAPTER

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THE DARKNESS WAS GATHERING AS Devine looked out his hotel window. That a *petrostate* might be involved had narrowed it down, but not enough to his liking. And it also still didn't answer the question of what the endgame was for it all.

Why do I think saving the world really is at stake? Because I don't think this is just about money. Or oil. Or both.

He looked over his notes on the case, then dropped onto his bed and stared at the ceiling.

The road had been long and twisty.

A rain-soaked street in New York with a woman shot and a man tased and then abducted.

An apartment broken into and something most likely left rather than taken.

The body of a murdered man washed up in Sydney at pretty much the front door of one of the major players in this little drama. Warning or coincidence?

Walker possibly pretending to save Theresa Lee and maybe using that to stop her from investigating a . . . petrostate? Him confessing to her, again possibly, on that rain-soaked street.

Walker's cancer and changing jobs and his divorce. The cancer was real, obviously, the other two perhaps forced upon him. Because of his skill set that apparently needed to be taken to AIPC, for some reason. And AIPC, a firm with little history, and thus clouded in mystery. And yet Carl Peeters seemed legit.

Martha Woolwine's murder. And the murder of Emily Roylott, who possibly saw Woolwine's killer when he came back to the scene of his crime. All at Carlton Woolwine's property.

The disappearance of Russian prisoners from Woolwine's prisons.

Devine's kidnapping by a Czech and Middle Eastern gang.

The sniper round that had found the head of Dennis Mueller just after he'd given critical information to Devine.

The people who had tried to kill him and Jones after they left the Black Lion pub. Possibly sicced on them by Woolwine's estate manager, Malcolm Jarvis.

And now came the esoteric bit. Martha Woolwine had slapped a brick wall. Her daughter had interpreted that as possibly a reference to Australia wanting to secretly join BRICS. And that that could be the motivation behind everything that had happened. But Devine wasn't so sure. And neither was Lewis Drury.

And, finally, the attack on Campbell and the theft of the file.

Devine rose and looked out the window again. It really all came down to one man: Carlton Woolwine. He was the spider at the center of the web. If he was truly behind this, he had sacrificed his wife, his son-in-law, his housekeeper, and one of his most loyal subordinates in the cause. And maybe he would throw in his only child as the kicker.

Was it because he was afraid people would find out he wanted Australia to join a competing economic group? And yet right now every country in the world was running around trying to find new playmates in the sandbox. So why would Australia joining BRICS be so devastating that it had to be kept secret? Like Drury had pointed out, Canada had recently signed a big deal with China. The EU had done the same with South America, right in the United States' backyard. And Brazil, a key member of BRICS, was part of that new deal. Canada, Germany, and India were getting into bed together. The old world order was crumbling, to be replaced with a new one with many different alliances and dimensions.

So with everyone shifting around, why would keeping his plans with BRICS secret be motivating Woolwine to do what he is apparently doing? I doubt anyone would really bat an eye that Australia is rethinking alliances, since everyone else is, too.

But if they were secretly going to join BRICS and then still maintain their membership in Five Eyes? Now *that* would be a problem. That might be grounds for war, in fact. And who wanted to take on the U.S. military?

And if Mueller knew about it and had told Devine, and apparently Martha Woolwine knew about it, how big a secret was it, actually? And

Andre Lavigne had thought that if Australia secretly joined BRICS and reported Western intel to them through their Five Eyes membership, it simply would not be worth it. Their openly joining BRICS and giving up their Five Eyes seat would make more sense, at least to Lavigne's thinking.

So if BRICS is really not the motive here, what is?

He fell asleep fully clothed with that thought ringing in his brain. He was awakened early the next morning by his phone buzzing. Groaning, he snatched up his phone. When he saw the person calling, Devine sat up so fast he felt lightheaded.

"Mom?"

Reneé Devine said, "Yes, Travis. I understand that you're in Australia."

"I am. How's Dad?" he said quickly, his pulse galloping.

"Resting. Look, I wanted to—oh, is this a good time?"

"Yes, sure."

He calmed his breathing and heart rate and leaned back against the headboard.

"Well, you know that Danny is here. And so is Claire. We haven't been together very often like this in the last few years. They're so busy. Everyone is. Including you. It was terrible that it took the tragedy of your father's . . . illness, to bring us together. I was only telling Danny just last week that it's been ages since we've seen their kids."

His mother was rambling, and she was not a rambler.

He now thought back to what his father had said about her possibly having some form of dementia.

Devine said, "I haven't seen much of them, either."

"So what are you doing in Australia? Is this for your work on Wall Street?"

"I don't . . . yeah, just business."

"Will you be there long?"

"I'm not sure yet. It's going more slowly than I thought it would."

"I was just thinking that . . . that it would be nice for all of us to get together. I mean, you and your brother and sister and their families. And . . . are you seeing anyone? You could bring her along."

"I'm not seeing anyone at the moment, but us getting all together would be . . . great. So Dad's just . . . resting?"

"Yes, just *resting*."

"I guess Danny will let me know what they found out?"

“I suppose,” said his mother cryptically. “Are you doing all right? You looked fit enough when I saw you, however *briefly*. But you were always very strong, what with the military and all.”

“I’m doing fine,” he replied, deciding not to take the bait on her provocative use of the word *briefly*. And the fact that she hadn’t simply agreed that his brother would update Devine on their father’s condition had rocked him.

“Okay, well, I guess I’ll let you go. I’ll send you some dates on us getting together.”

“Mom, um, how are you holding up?”

“I’m doing the best I can, Travis.”

“You need to take care of yourself, too. None of us are getting any younger.”

She didn’t say anything for a few beats and he wondered if his father had spoken to her about his concerns with her mental acuity. If so, she might interpret Devine’s words as . . .

Exactly as I mean them.

“Your father is a worrier, Travis. Always has been. I’m fine.

Really.”

So, he did speak to her.

But then something else was bothering him. And part of him knew he shouldn’t raise it, not with everything going on with his dad. But he also wasn’t sure if he’d ever get another chance.

“He . . . didn’t seem so *worried* when I was in the Middle East. I mean, he never wrote, never called. And I sent emails and real letters and left voicemails.”

He heard her let out a long breath. “He read every email and letter and listened to every voicemail, Travis.”

This stunned Devine. And part of him didn’t believe it. “Then why didn’t he ever call or write back!” he exclaimed.

Devine did not want to be angry with her, but he wasn’t entirely in control of his emotions right now, either.

“Because . . . because he was scared.”

“What was he scared of?”

“Losing you.”

“Come on, Mom. He never wanted me to go into the Army. He made fun of it. Smokey the Bear? Remember that one? He hates the military.”

“He does. And it has nothing to do with you.”

“Then what?”

“Your father went to Vietnam. That’s what.”

Devine now thought his mother might very well have dementia. “What?”

“We’d just gotten married. No children yet. He was enrolled in dental school. He didn’t have to go because married men in college could get exemptions. But your father . . . ”

“He what?”

“He wanted to serve his country.”

“Then why the hell—” began Devine before his mother interrupted.

“Because he came to see how wrong that war was. He lost friends, family to the damn thing. And he . . . had to do things over there that he . . . that changed him, Travis. When he got back he burned everything he had having to do with his military service and forbade me or anyone else to talk about it. He was full of shame. After that he never trusted the government. And certainly not the military. So . . . ” Her voice trailed off.

“So when I joined up he saw me making the same mistake? He could have told me about his experience. Why didn’t he?”

“I think by that time, Travis, he had completely blotted it out of his consciousness. The way he treated you had nothing to do with you.”

“He used to call me a dumb jock in high school.”

“Well, Travis, if you recall, you were! The hell you put me and your father through. Staying out all night. Doing crazy stuff that could have gotten you killed. We both aged more with you than with Claire and Danny combined.”

“I had a brilliant brother and sister to follow. I guess not being as smart as them meant I had to find another way to get your attention.”

“Well, you got it. Danny and Claire were a piece of cake compared to you. But . . . ”

“But what?”

“You remember when you got your teammates on your high school football team to lift up your girlfriend’s car and carry it around the school grounds?”

“Yeah? That *was* pretty dumb. We ran, literally, into the principal. I almost got kicked off the team when I took the blame. Dad chewed my butt out.”

“Well, you may be surprised to hear that he has told that story a thousand times to whoever will listen. And with the deepest pride. Chip off the old block, he would say, because your father, well, I heard about some of the stuff he did in high school and in college. You did not fall far from that tree.”

“Mom, why the hell did I never know any of this?”

“Because your father and I thought it would set a bad example for you. As it turned out, you didn’t need an example. You always went your own way.”

Devine tried to process all of this and found he couldn’t.

“You there, Travis?”

“Just a lot to think about, Mom.”

“I know, Travis, I know. And . . . I wish . . . we had told you sooner.”

“And you’re sure Dad’s just resting?”

“Yes, Travis. He’s been through a lot. What time is it there?” she asked.

He glanced at his phone screen. “Six in the morning, on Thursday.”

“Oh my God, I had no idea it was so . . . It’s still Wednesday here.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Well, I’m sorry. I probably woke you.”

“I had to get up anyway. Lots to do. So your call was the alarm I forgot to set.”

“You were always an early riser. Danny and your sister liked to sleep in. You’d make me coffee before I went to work. Do you remember that? We’d sit and talk in the kitchen?”

“I remember. Nice way to start the day.”

“Yes, well, I thought it was good . . . bonding time. So, busy day for you then?”

“Yeah.”

“I take it business is good?”

“Business is . . . complicated.”

“Well, you’ll figure it out. You always managed to.”

“Mom?”

“Yes?”

“Though I would have loved to have heard all this years ago, I . . . I appreciate you filling me in now.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too, Mom. Goodbye.”

He stared down at his screen, where his mother's picture stared back at him.

Reneé Eloise Devine. He had always loved that name, the elegance of it. His mother's given name with the accent mark had sounded so . . . exotic to the young Devine. And she was the prettiest mom in the neighborhood. Tall and lovely and *refined*, was how he had heard other people refer to her.

But all these revelations about his father had staggered him, instantly changed the way Devine had thought about the man for all these years. His father had been in the Army, too, in perhaps the most screwed-up war America had ever fought. His father was a fellow soldier, and all this time Devine had been ignorant of it.

My dad and I could have . . . we had a lot in common. The war I fought in was screwed up, too. Shit.

He showered, lingering in the hot water to fully wake himself and try to ease his exhausted mind. He dressed and had breakfast and spent most of the day muddling through his notes on the case and checking on the conditions of both Campbell and Theresa Lee. She was getting better, but his boss was treading water, just a step above critical.

Come on, sir, you can't die on me, not now. Not ever.

Around five o'clock he looked at his phone again as it buzzed.

"Hey, Anais."

"Travis, how quickly can you get ready?"

He looked around. "Uh, twenty minutes. What's up?"

"The Link-off Company? I may have a lead. The company's registered in the Seychelles, like I said, but it's actually headquartered in Dubai. And the four men on the jet that night? I was able to trace one of them. He's Russian."

"How did you manage that, Anais?"

"Leg work and luck, a copper's normal tool kit. His name is Sergei Kozlov. He was actually suspected in the tobacco shop bombings, but nothing stuck and they had to let him go."

"Why would a guy like that be flying in to see Carlton Woolwine?"

"We don't actually know that he did go to see Woolwine. But it's highly suspicious."

"So tell me, how did you get his identity?"

"I checked the security cameras at the Canberra airport. We nailed him on facial recognition and ran it through our databases."

“Was Kozlov even allowed in the country?”

“He’s not on a watch or no-entry list, but his image was in the database. That wouldn’t have mattered at Canberra, since the flight came in from Perth.”

“How do we run it down?”

“There’s no evidence that when the Seychelles jet flew back out Kozlov was on it, Travis. The paperwork I got copies of looks dodgy. He might still be at Woolwine’s estate in Canberra for all I know. Or at least in the area.”

“That’s a lot of ifs, Anais.”

“Well, let me add one concrete fact on top.”

“What?”

“The partial print we found at Boris Semenov’s house?”

“Yeah?”

“It belongs to Kozlov.”

“Damn. That makes a big difference.”

“And you now have seventeen minutes, mate.”

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CHAPTER

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"He looks tough enough," said Devine as he stared at an image of Sergei Kozlov on his phone that Jones had sent him.

"And he may also be a cold-blooded killer."

As the light grew dimmer they were approaching Woolwine's estate near Canberra.

"Your guys ever turn up anything on the people who shot at us?"

She looked at him, clearly troubled. "Nothing. And you'd think in an area this fairly remote they couldn't have hidden two shot-up rides. And the forensic scrub on your rental turned up slugs but no gun to match them to, obviously."

"Well, those vehicles might be on Woolwine's estate somewhere. Probably lots of places to hide them."

"We don't have a search warrant."

"But we can snoop around, right?"

"Um, not really, Travis," she said warily.

"Is evidence inadmissible in a court here if we don't have a search warrant?"

"Not automatically, no. A judge has the discretion to allow it in if the evidence was found inadvertently, or if the breach of privacy wasn't that severe, or if the offense being investigated is serious enough. But I really don't like getting close to the line and then end up with a judge who is not sympathetic. It could blow the whole case."

"Okay, what do you think Drury is doing? He said he'd get back to us with a plan on his end."

"I don't know. And just because he's all friendly rah-rah team guy now I still don't trust the bastard."

They drove to the Blairs' station and found Tim Blair in one of the barns.

He put the hay pitchfork aside and said, "You're back, then?"

"We are. You see, right after we dropped you, some guys in a couple of SUVs tried to kill us," said Jones.

"What!"

"That's why I had the police down here check to make sure you got home okay."

"I was wondering about that when they came by. They didn't say."

"You hear or see anything?"

"No."

Devine held up his phone. "Ever seen this guy?"

Blair looked at the image of Sergei Kozlov. "No. Who is he?"

"Someone we'd like to find," replied Devine.

Blair shook his head. "Don't know the man and I don't think I want to know him. He looks scary as a taipan."

Devine looked at Jones, who said, "Inland taipan, most venomous snake we have down here, and that's saying a lot. So you've *never* seen him around here?" she asked Blair.

Blair shook his head. "Nope."

"How about your dad?"

"Don't think so."

"How about we make sure?" said Devine.

Blair's father, Ned, was tall and thin and wiry with skin scrubbed raw and carved deep, no doubt, by being outdoors so much. He had on faded jean bibs and curled up boots. His curly hair had wisps of gray. He was replacing a fence post for an enclosure around a pasture when they walked up to him.

With a nail in his mouth while he hammered another one into the post, he looked at them keenly and mumbled, "Who're your pals, boy? And you ain't got time to be slacking off, Timmy. Work to be done."

"Uh, Dad, it *is* the evening."

"So? You think you're for office hours or somethin'? On a *station*? Before sunup and after sundown, boy, and mor'n that sometimes. Don't go soft on me, lad."

Tim looked at Devine and Jones and said in a wry tone, "Yeah, mollycoddled, I am."

Jones held up her warrant card. “We’re police, Mr. Blair.”

Ned again angled his gaze at Tim. “You didn’t drink too many middys and do something stupid, did you, boy?”

“It’s nothing to do with your son, Mr. Blair,” said Jones. “And a beer every now and then will do you no harm. It actually lifts the spirits.”

“They want you to take a gander at a photo, Dad.”

Ned nodded and took the nail out of his mouth. “Hang on a tic, need my specs then.” He pulled a battered pair of eyeglasses from his bib pocket.

Devine held up his phone. “We wanted to know if you’ve seen this man around here.”

“You a Yank?”

“I am.”

Grinning, Ned said, “Coming to invade us, are you?”

Devine smiled back. “Not today, no.”

Ned took the phone in his big, calloused hands and ran his spectacled gaze over it. He didn’t say anything for a long moment. Then he handed the phone back and took off his specs. “Yeah, I seen him.”

Tim looked surprised while Jones and Devine exchanged a brief glance. “Where?” said Jones.

“He was riding in a car owned by Mr. Big Shot.”

Tim said, “Mr. Woolwine?”

“Mr. Big Shot,” amended his father. “Who thinks he should be allowed to do whatever he pleases to do like all them other rich folks.”

“When did you see the man?” asked Devine.

“Oh, ’bout couple hours ago, on his way from Mr. Big Shot’s place. Not sure where he was headed. Don’t really care.”

Jones and Devine shared an excited look.

“Just to be very clear, *this* man was at Woolwine’s?” said Jones. “What I said, yup.”

“Was there anyone with him? Mr. Woolwine maybe?” asked Jones.

“There were some blokes, just didn’t see who.”

“Who’s at the house now?” asked Devine.

He shrugged. “They got maids and butlers and I don’t know what else. Makes you want to chuck, don’t it?”

Devine looked at Tim. “Do you have your friend’s number, the one who works at the house?”

“What, Bridget?”

“Yeah, can you call her and see if we can . . . pay a visit, now?”

Jones looked at Devine in alarm. “What sort of *visit*?”

“Possibly looking for some vehicles with bullet holes.”

“Travis, I thought—” began Jones anxiously.

“Anais, in an ideal world it’s done all nice and legal. All she needs to do is provide some intel. We’ll do the rest. And I think a judge will deem the crime we’re investigating serious enough.”

Tim blurted out, “Look here, you can’t go into the house. It’s not just Bridget there. They got loads of others, like Dad said. She’ll get fired.”

“I’m more interested in the outbuildings. And how we can avoid security.”

Jones sighed and looked at Tim. “Make the call, please.”

“You ain’t gonna get the boy in no trouble, are you?” asked Ned.

“No worries, Mr. Blair,” said Jones.

He winked at her. “Well, I was just gonna say it might be worth it, to take Mr. Big Shot down a peg or three, eh?”

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IT TOOK A BIT OF convincing by Tim to get Bridget to agree to what he was asking, but she finally relented.

She said, “You just need them to make it quick then, Timmy. Mr. Jarvis is expected back soon.”

“Thanks heaps, Bridge, I owe you a beer, and maybe a kiss.”

“And I’ll hold you to both.”

After Tim spoke to Devine and Jones and relayed the information, they drove off down the road, left her car behind, and continued on foot.

The darkness was their friend. They hoped.

“Okay, so Woolwine isn’t here,” said Devine.

“But Kozlov is, or was. And Jarvis is expected back soon. He might be with Kozlov. Thanks to Bridget at least we know where the security is stationed, and also where the outbuildings are located,” added Jones, who was looking down at the notes she’d written in her phone.

“And how to get over the perimeter fence and where,” said Devine.

“It will still be difficult if someone sees us,” she said nervously.

“Which is why I brought these. So we can see them first.” He pulled out a compact pair of night-vision goggles.

“You Yanks and all your expensive gadgets.”

“You have to spend all those tax dollars on something.”

They stopped at the perimeter fence surrounding the Woolwine property. They could see that a stone wall ran around the mansion set in the distance with a gate where two men were standing guard.

“Bridget said the storage outbuildings are off to the east and some are behind the main house while the staff cottages, including the one where Roylott was murdered, are on the opposite side of the grounds. If the

vehicles are here, the storage outbuildings are where they would be. No other cover that I can see.”

“She told Tim that over there is the best spot to breach the exterior fence,” noted Jones, pointing to her left.

“Glad to see you’re getting into the spirit of things.”

“What, committing an indictable offense?”

“Surely a misdemeanor, at worst.”

“We call that a *summary offense* and I don’t want to commit that, either.”

“Then we’ll be very careful, and you can blame me if we get caught. Just say you were trying to stop me.”

“And I will, too. *Stop* you, if need be.”

They cleared the fence at the tree line and made their way to the east, heading toward the outbuildings as they circumnavigated the main house, the high stone wall, and the guards.

With his night-vision goggles on, Devine led Jones on the circuitous path Bridget had suggested to Tim Blair, then they came upon several buildings. Some were not large enough to hold any vehicles, or else had no entryway wide enough to allow the vehicles to be driven in. Peeks in the windows of others revealed no shot-up rides lurking inside.

They were going to pass the next building because it was a small cottage with only one narrow door, when Devine noted fresh footprints in the dirt.

“Someone’s been here recently.” He slipped a small pick gun out of his pocket and inserted it in the lock.

“What are you doing?” she hissed.

“What does it look like I’m doing? I’m getting us inside.”

“Bu—”

The lock popped and the door swung open.

“I didn’t see *any* of that,” she said.

“And I’ll back you up on that.”

He glanced down at the door sill where a matchstick was lying.

Devine said, “It must have been set between the door and the jamb as a booby trap. Whoever’s here is careful about his privacy. We’ll put it back when we leave.”

Devine closed the door behind them. They eyed the bedsheets and a pillow on the couch, along with a roller bag set next to a duffel.

“Someone’s definitely living here,” said Jones, gazing around the interior. “But only temporarily.”

A careful search through the luggage revealed two pistols and extra mags.

Devine picked one up. “SR Vektor, aka the Gyurza. Russian made. Guys deployed to Spetsnaz carry them.”

“Spetsnaz?”

“Russian Special Forces.”

Jones gave a judicious eyebrow hike. “How lovely to have blokes like that in my country. And how lovelier it will be to imprison them.”

He picked up the other weapon, which was compact with a short muzzle and wooden grips. “This is a Stechkin five-shot, double-action revolver. It’s chambered with silent cartridges.”

“I know a round can be *suppressed*, but can it really be silenced?”

“This does it as well as anything. And, regardless, the target will never hear it coming.”

“How do you know so much about Russian weapons and such?”

“I’m with DHS. They’re the enemy to me, regardless of what some politicians think.”

“So if these are Kozlov’s things, my finely honed detective instincts are telling me that could be a big problem.”

Devine was still digging through the luggage. He pulled out three passports: Russian, American, and British. All under different names but each with Kozlov’s photo. He took pictures of all three before putting all the items back exactly where they had previously been.

“And this guy, who’s probably a killer, is riding in the car of one of the world’s richest men?” said Jones.

“Didn’t you know? A lot of billionaires are dicks who only care about themselves.”

In the distance they heard a vehicle. They rushed to a window and looked out. In the distance they watched as a vehicle’s headlights cleaved through the dark.

“Can you see who it is?” said Jones.

“No, not even with the goggles. It might be Malcolm Jarvis. But we should move on regardless. We can take up a sight line and see if it is Kozlov. If so, he might come to the cottage.”

Devine placed the matchstick back before closing the door.

They moved off about a hundred feet away and waited, crouching down behind a low, crumbling stone wall. A fine, gentle mist had developed, and a few drops of rain hit them.

“I could definitely use a hot cuppa right about now,” commented Jones as she shivered in her light jacket.

Devine had his night-vision–aided gaze on the Russian’s cottage. A minute or so later a man appeared out of the darkness, walking along a path that wound all the way from the main house.

Through his goggles Devine could see that the man was indeed Kozlov. He was Devine’s height and build, although about twenty years older, and he walked with a confident pitch to his body. The man had at least three pistols; Devine knew a man like Kozlov would never leave home without at least one firearm on him. Devine knew this because he wouldn’t, either. It would be like forgetting your underwear.

For men like him. And men like me.

“Kozlov?” Jones breathed into his ear. He nodded.

The Russian unlocked the door to his digs. Devine watched the man kneel and pick up the matchstick that had fallen when the door opened.

When the door closed Devine said, “I wonder what they have on Carlton Woolwine.”

“Billions of dollars in business,” replied Jones. “That’s enough if all you care about is money.”

“They bombed his tobacco shops, killed his wife and son-in-law and two of his loyal employees. Is that really all worth the additional money he doesn’t even need?”

“Everyone has different priorities, Travis. And maybe he ranks wealth above all else.”

“Okay, let’s keep looking for the vehicles.”

She nodded, and they started searching until they came to a barnlike structure that was large enough to house the vehicles, and was as far away from the main house as it was possible to be.

Devine’s pick gun could not beat the double lock. But he’d seen a crowbar in a nearby building. He hustled back to get it, and the tool did just fine in defeating the locked door.

The barn was cold and uninviting, even though it allowed them to be out of the rain.

And that was when they hit paydirt.

The two SUVs were covered with tarps, and large bales of hay had been placed around them, probably in case anyone peeked through the barn's dirt-streaked windows.

They took pictures of the vehicles' exteriors and interiors.

Jones looked at the blood on the front seats and windshield and paled. "God, doesn't look like they all made it out alive."

"Not something that will keep me up at night," replied Devine. "Since they were trying to do the very same thing to us."

"I think we've seen all we can see," noted Jones. "Let's get out of here before I lose my warrant card."

And that's when they heard approaching footsteps.

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DEVINE MOTIONED TO JONES FOR them to get behind one of the hay bales.

They moved as quietly as they could, and sunk down as low as possible.

Devine slowed his breathing, taking full, measured breaths so he would be ready for what was coming. He closed his eyes for a second, envisioning the different possible scenarios. He doubted he would be right.

The footsteps stopped.

A few moments later Devine heard something and the sound was suddenly familiar to him.

He grabbed Jones by the arm and yanked her flat to the floor, thrust her under one of the SUVs, and then slid next to her with his body half over hers.

“What the hell—?” she began but fell silent when the gunfire started.

And it was not normal gunfire. It was automatic weapons fire that ripped through the slender wood of the barn’s walls and strafed the interior. Chunks of the hay bales were blown off. Equipment parked on the floor was struck, lethal metal fragments flew around along with the bullets. Cans and bottles and other items fell off shelves that had been ripped off the walls. Swirls of dust kicked up by the streams of gunfire swept across the space. It was like a million metal hornets had been released all around Devine and Jones, only moving at unfathomable speeds and landing with stunning power.

The firing went on for a minute that felt like a year, before it stopped.

Devine did not fire his Glock because it would not have made a damn bit of difference. Right now their best bet was to make it seem that either no one was in the barn or they had been killed by the incoming rounds.

“Jesus,” hissed Jones. “Is it a bloody army out there, or what?”

What came next might have been more terrifying than the gunfire.

The smell of something burning, then a whoosh, and then flames shot up the exterior walls of the barn. Smoke rapidly filled the space.

“They’re going to burn us alive!” exclaimed Jones.

Devine was thinking that the fire was being used as a way to flush them out like beaters did to birds, so that they then could be finished off.

He slid out from under the SUV and helped Jones up. He looked the vehicle over and then raced to the other one, which he deemed to be in better shape. He opened the driver’s side door and leaned inside. He mouthed a thank-you when he saw the keys on the front seat. He ran over to Jones and led her to the back of the barn, where there was another window.

“They must have the rear covered, Travis. But if we stay here we’re going to be incinerated.”

“Working on it,” said Devine.

He hustled back over and managed to roll two of the hay bales farther apart, leaving a gap in the middle. As the flames licked up the sides of the walls and rose to the beamed ceiling of the barn, Devine grabbed a full can of paint from a fallen shelf and sprinted back over to the SUV. He opened the door and started the engine. He put the can of paint on the gas pedal, and the engine began to rev. Devine eyeballed the gap between the hay bales, adjusted the steering wheel slightly, gripped the gearshift, said a prayer, and put the SUV in drive as he leapt back and slammed the door shut.

The SUV shot forward, cleared the hay bale gap with two inches to spare on either side, and smashed right through the front barn doors.

As soon as he heard people running and yelling and the gunfire commencing once more, he raced back to Jones. He did a turkey peek out the window with his goggles, saw no one there, threw a bench against the window and shattered it, then hoisted her through the opening.

“Come on!” she cried out, grabbing his arm and helping him out.

They sprinted into the woods and kept running until they were both breathless.

“You’re . . . in good shape, Anais,” said Devine as he bent over, sucking in air.

“I run marathons. As a cop you never know when it might save your life.”

He and Jones made a wide arc around the Woolwine property and finally reached a road, where they kept to the shadows of the tree line. Eventually they made their way back to Jones's Passat. Devine drove while Jones kept a lookout for anyone following them, her service pistol in hand and an angry gleam in her eyes.

She looked at him. "How did you know they were going to open fire back there? You pushed me down and under the SUV just in time."

"The *clack*."

"The what?"

"Russian AK-47. It's got a heavy bolt action. They use stamped metal instead of milled steel in its manufacture. It creates an echo, like a rattle. And it has loose tolerance specs so it won't jam in shitty conditions. To achieve that parts have to have more room to move, and those gaps cause noises. We were trained to listen for that in combat. Lots of Russian-made weapons ended up in the Middle East. And all of them were pointed at us."

"Well, thank God for your training. We wouldn't be here otherwise."

"They must have spotted us somehow."

"That's a bloody understatement," said Jones. "And I'm not sure I can report this to my superiors since we *were* committing multiple *indictable offenses*. The explanations would be . . . awkward, like in career-ending awkward. And they could just claim they were defending themselves against burglars or something."

"But now we do know Kozlov is at the Woolwine estate."

"They must have something huge on Carlton Woolwine, Travis."

"Kompromat," he said. "The Russians specialize in that. And he's done business with them and maybe some of it was not legal and they've got him over a barrel."

"You think this is in retaliation for him not going along with what they wanted the tobacconist shop business for?"

"Maybe. He wouldn't play ball and now he's paying the price. The Kremlin never forgets a slight."

"The Kremlin?" she said slowly.

"Yeah, you know, *Putin's* HQ."

"Oh my God. Putin."

"What?"

She stared at him. "A *crooked hat*?"

"What?" he said, looking confused.

“The coded name you partially figured out? From what you thought before was a Ukrainian name?”

“Right, yeah, so?”

“You just mentioned Putin.”

“Again, so what?” exclaimed an impatient Devine.

“He’s the head of Russia, right, the *head* of a petrostate.”

Devine flinched, but said nothing.

She continued, “Where is a hat worn, Travis?”

Devine shook his head in amazement as realization spread over his features. “On the *head*.”

“Exactly.”

Devine said, “So Petrykha Kryvoshapka translates to the *crooked or criminal head* of a petrostate, like Putin clearly is?”

“I think it does, yeah.”

He smiled wearily. “Anais, I’m an idiot and you’re a genius.”

“No, it took a team effort to figure it out.” She paused and suddenly looked apprehensive. “Jesus, so now we’re fighting the Russians?”

He glanced at her. “When the hell have we *not* been fighting the Russians?”

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DEVINE WAS HAVING BREAKFAST DOWN at the harbor and looking at the feed on his phone. There was nothing in the news about gunshots or a fire at the Woolwine property. The billionaire still seemed to have a firm hand on the media, he thought.

He had gotten texts about Campbell. His improvement had hit a wall and he seemed to be relapsing. Theresa Lee's youth seemed to be helping her turn the tide and recover. Campbell, while a tough man built of iron, did not have that asset on his side.

And neither does my father.

He had thought about calling his mother back, but decided he wasn't ready to go there. He was still stunned by the revelations about his father, his Army vet father! He shook his head in the face of all of it, most especially that his dad had been scared for his son while he was fighting in the Middle East. That, maybe, he loved him.

I find out all of this at the same time my father might be dying.

Talk about the lousiest timing in history.

All those years we could have had . . . something.

While he was sitting there he shot off a text to both his siblings asking if they knew about their father's military service. He didn't expect to hear back soon, if at all. Claire was always very deliberate in everything she did, while his brother had his hands full taking care of their father.

I haven't figured out this case, and I sure as hell haven't figured out my family. So what am I even doing with my life?

He was taking a sip of coffee when his phone buzzed.

It was Jones. A part of Devine didn't even want to answer. A part of him, and not a small one, wanted to jump on a plane and head back to

Connecticut and sort out all the shit in his family, hopefully before his father died.

But being the good soldier that he was, he said, “Hey, Anais.”

“Carlton Woolwine wants to meet.”

Devine stiffened. “When and where?”

“His daughter’s home at Darling Point. And as soon as we can get there.”

“And the purpose of the meeting?”

“He didn’t offer and I didn’t push. Stay put and I’ll meet you in ten minutes.”

“So you know where I am?”

“I *always* know where you are, Travis Devine,” she said before clicking off.

They took a ferry to Darling Point and walked to Charlotte Woolwine’s home from there. They showed their creds to the camera at the gate and were allowed through. A tall, young woman with dark hair met them at the front door and escorted them to a small room that was set up as a library. It was dark and cozy with a small gas fire burning in the fireplace. Devine could see someone easily dozing off in here with a book in hand.

Both the Woolwines were waiting for them.

Carlton was dressed in a suit and white shirt with silver cuff links, while his daughter had on a warmup suit with sneakers. They both looked anxious.

After they declined refreshments and took their seats, Jones said, “You wanted to see us?”

Charlotte side-eyed her father and said, “There was a disturbance at the estate in Canberra last night. My father was concerned that someone might have been trying to break into one of the buildings out there.”

“Why would someone do that?” asked Jones smoothly. “Was there something valuable there?”

Charlotte glanced at her father again. He said, “Not to my knowledge, no. But I don’t like the fact that there was someone on my property who shouldn’t have been. Especially after what happened there to my wife and house manager.”

“Understandable. Were the person or persons seen?” asked Jones.

“Not to my knowledge, no.”

“Anything taken?” asked Devine.

“The building was burned to the ground. I’m not sure we’d be able to tell.”

“What sort of building are we talking about?” asked Jones.

“A barn. They might have chosen it because it’s the farthest away from the main house.”

“But you have no idea if there was something valuable, even though it was simply a barn?” said Devine.

“Like I said, I don’t know. The estate manager, Malcolm Jarvis, alerted us. And I don’t care what they were doing there, really. I care about them being there in the first place.”

“Did your security team note anything unusual or see anything suspicious?” asked Jones.

“Not that I know of.”

“Have you reported this to the police down there?” asked Jones. “I’m reporting it to you.”

“I will report this up the line and you can expect ACT to make a thorough investigation, sir,” said Jones politely.

“I’m not sure I want *them* on my property,” he replied.

“Dad,” said Charlotte. “What do you expect her to do, then?”

He shot her an icy look and she glanced away, but Devine saw her angry expression.

“If you don’t want the police to investigate this incident, Mr. Woolwine, I’m not sure what we can do to assist you.”

“So that’s it?” said Carlton.

“I’m not sure what else you expect. Canberra is *not* my jurisdiction. I can report it to them, but you apparently don’t want that to happen.”

“Were you there last night?” interjected Devine abruptly.

“Why?” Carlton asked sharply.

“Well, if you were, the target might have been you. They killed your wife and one of your employees there, so we have to look at all possible angles.”

“I was *not* there, as a matter of fact. The incident was reported to me, as I already said.”

Devine glanced at Charlotte again. She looked surprised by this answer, but when she saw Devine staring at her she looked away.

Jones said, “I assume you didn’t call this meeting simply to tell us about the incident at your estate in Canberra?”

Carlton appraised her for a few moments. “Dennis Mueller.”

“What about him?”

“Have you found out who killed him? Because that *is* your jurisdiction, correct?”

“The investigation is ongoing. I can’t comment on it other than to say we are following up every lead.”

“Do you have any idea why someone would target him?” asked Carlton.

“Well, now that we have you here, I was going to ask you the same question,” said Jones. “Do *you* have any ideas?”

“No. He worked for me, as did his father for many years. He had no enemies that I know of.”

“But *you* have enemies,” said Devine. “And that was no random attack. It was a long-range sniper round. This was planned.”

Carlton eyed him. “And I understand that he was meeting with you right before he was killed?”

Devine stared back. “And how did you come by that information?”

“I have resources, Agent Devine. So what did he say to you? Maybe *that’s* why he was killed.”

“That is part of the investigation,” asserted Jones. “And cannot be disclosed at the present time.”

“Of course,” said Carlton. “Police circling the wagons. By chance could it have been an *American* sniper who did this? You blokes are awfully good with the guns, after all, you have so many.”

Devine just stared at the man with a blank expression.

Jones said, “We have no reason to believe that is the case, Mr. Woolwine. But the identities of the men who nearly killed Agent Devine might help point us in the right direction.”

“And where were these men from?” asked Carlton.

“Again, it’s an ongoing investigation.”

“And my wife’s murder? And that of Emily Roylott? All ongoing and none of them solved. What do I pay my *enormous* taxes for?”

Jones stared silently back at him for a few moments. “Have you had any visitors at your estate in Canberra?”

“Visitors?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Now.”

“Not to my knowledge, no. But as I said, I haven’t been there in a while, a long while.”

“Would you know if someone was visiting there?” asked Devine.

“I would expect to, but I have staff who handles those sorts of tasks.”

Devine looked at Charlotte. “Would you have any idea if someone was staying there?”

She glanced at her father, whose features were impassive. “I . . . I haven’t been there in a while, either, so no, I wouldn’t know.”

“Okay, well, unless there’s anything else?” said Devine. He rose, and Jones, looking slightly surprised, did the same.

Charlotte said, “I can have someone show you out.”

“No problem, we can find our way,” said Devine quickly.

They left the room, but once they were out of sight and still within earshot, Devine put a hand out to stop Jones.

A few moments later they could hear Charlotte say, “What is going on, Dad?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Why are they asking about someone at the Canberra estate?”

“I have no idea. I wasn’t there. But I will check into it.”

“No, I think *I* will. That place is really mine, you know. And if some shit is going on there I need to know about it. And, by the way, what were you doing in China?”

“That is *none* of your concern.”

“My husband is *dead*. That *is* my concern.”

“He was soon to be your *ex*-husband.”

“You arsehole!” exclaimed Charlotte.

The same tall woman with dark hair and a piercing expression walked up to Devine and Jones in the corridor. She said politely but firmly, “May I show you out *now*?”

Devine nodded and smiled. “Place is like a labyrinth, thanks.”

Outside, they stood next to Jones’s Passat.

She said, “Well, the formal interview wasn’t all that enlightening, but what came after definitely was.”

Devine nodded. “Father is hiding the truth, and daughter is running out of patience. But we’re a long way from getting to the bottom of it all. And like I told Drury, I definitely feel like we’re running out of time.”

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CHAPTER

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AGENT DEVINE?”

The soft-bellied man came at Devine from a corner of his hotel lobby. Devine’s recognition was immediate, though his expression showed his surprise.

“Mr. Peeters?”

Carl Peeters, the managing director of AIPC in New York, and the employer of the late Bill Walker, did not look his dapper self. Unlike his fastidious clothing and serene calm back in New York, he appeared disheveled, his pants, shirt, and jacket wrinkled, and his features jumpy.

Devine drew close to him. “What are you doing here?”

“I . . . I heard about your superior, Agent Campbell. He was attacked, stabbed.”

“Yes, he was.”

“I spoke with him before . . . that attack. And promised some follow-up. Since he’s not available . . . ”

“You flew halfway around the world? Must be some follow-up.”

“Can we . . . talk somewhere private?”

Devine led him up to his room. He leaned against the wall, his arms crossed, while Peeters perched in the only chair. He absently rubbed at a stain on his suit jacket.

“Did you just get in?” asked Devine, who was thinking that the Qantas flight from LA arrived at the crack of dawn and it was the afternoon now. But there were other flights, of course, to Sydney, depending on where you were coming in from.

“A bit earlier” was all that Peeters would admit to.

“And you came to see me to provide follow-up?”

“Yes.”

“And how did you know where I was?”

Peeters looked up at him, his expression one of deep resignation. “There is no more privacy, Agent Devine. People with the right resources can find out anything. I thought you would have known that.” He glanced out the window, seemed startled by something, and then lifted his chair and moved it out of the sight line of the window.

Devine watched him do this and said, “Afraid of snipers?”

“I’m afraid of many things, Agent Devine. And you?”

“The unknown has always troubled me. Give me a target and I can take it out. But murkiness is not my sweet spot. Hopefully, you’ve come here to address that.”

Peeters nodded. “What I told you back in New York was a lie.”

“What part?”

“All parts?”

“And why would you lie?”

“I was ordered to.”

“By whom? The Russians?”

“No, Agent Devine!” he said sharply.

“Then who? Because lying to a federal agent can be a serious matter.”

“I was ordered to by . . . your country.” Peeters looked relieved that he had finally made this admission.

“Can you drill down a little more? That covers a wide range of possibilities and I really need to know.”

“*Your* intelligence community, of which Bill Walker was a part.”

“*My* agency is, or at least is supposed to be, part of that very same intelligence community.”

“Spies do not give up their secrets easily or often,” replied Peeters. “And certain of your agencies have . . . many secrets.”

Devine looked him over. “I figure something has spooked you into flying all this way to see me in person. And while I know you’re in a field that is not known for straight talk, I would really appreciate some right now.”

“I will be as *straight* as I can. First, you must understand that Bill’s death *spooked* me, although I was assured that they had matters under control. When your superior was attacked, I concluded that they did not have matters under control. I left New York and made my way circuitously here. To see you. I hope that if I’m candid, you will be in return.”

Devine was already shaking his head. “I can’t do that, Mr. Peeters. Because I have no proof that I can trust you.”

“I anticipated that. Call your handler.”

“What?”

“Call your current handler. The one who took over for Agent Campbell. I made arrangements, you see, before I came to meet you. It is best to.”

Devine took out his phone and made the call.

This was new territory for him because he’d never had a handler other than Campbell. But, just like every other government agency, there were protocols to follow when the hierarchy changed, either due to retirement, termination or, as was Campbell’s case, a knife in the gut. Devine had been given names and codes in case he had to communicate with someone other than Campbell at OSP. That would verify that whoever he was in touch with was who they said they were.

He went through this protocol and then listened for about a minute before saying, “Understood.”

He clicked off and said to Peeters, “Okay, I’m listening.”

Peeters smoothed out a crease in his pants. “I have been in the intelligence business all of my adult life. We have worked with the Americans on many matters. Matters that were never made public because, well, it is not a good practice to either outrage or terrify the public, is it?”

“So what is terrifying and/or outrageous about this matter?”

“Bill Walker was a good man. A friend. A good friend. He loved his work and he loved his country.”

“I’ve heard the same from a number of people.”

“First, you must understand that we did not recruit him. Bill came to us.”

“Why? And what is your company? No one seems to know, other than it has no real history.”

“I have been involved with many such *companies* over the decades. You see, we create these entities to deal with specific problems. Once those problems are resolved, we shut them down and start anew when the need arises.”

“And the need arose here?”

“Most definitely, and Bill was directly involved in it.”

“How?”

“Bill became aware of activity in certain fields of intelligence that caused him worry.”

“Specifically, what?”

“Specifically, I don’t know for certain, Agent Devine.”

“ ‘I don’t know for certain’ is not much I can work with,” replied Devine evenly.

“It has to do with information.”

“What sort of information?”

“All of it.”

“Not sure I’m getting your point.”

“Specifically the flow of data online and in private and where those lines are blurred, which is at innumerable points. Information taken is information controlled, and information controlled is the most valuable commodity on earth. We used to be a global fossil fuel economy. But now that data can be monetized and weaponized, it has left the energy business in the proverbial dust. The market value of Nvidia or Apple pretty much equals the market value of just about every oil and gas company on earth *combined*.”

“You’re talking deepfakes and creating reality? You missed the boat on that. It’s everywhere.”

“No, I don’t mean that. As you say, *that* Pandora’s box is open and nothing can close it. No, I mean knowing everything, even the most closely guarded secrets, when no one knows you have even stolen them, and then using that to enrich or empower yourself and destroy your enemies.”

Devine pushed off the wall and drew closer. “How?”

“That is what Bill came to us to try to figure out. We had heard rumors of . . . things happening in certain places around the world that gave us pause.”

“Again, can you give me something more specific?”

“Everyone is working as hard and as fast as possible to create a brand-new world order using AI. When you are putting all of your eggs in that one basket and racing as fast as possible to be the first to the finish line, mistakes can and have occurred.”

“And certain people will take advantage of those mistakes,” noted Devine.

“They already are.”

“But how?”

“That is the dilemma, Agent Devine. We do not know precisely how. When you have a concentration of data, as is the case today, but that data is dispersed throughout many different sources, countries, the world, the target is temptingly enormous—but how does one know where to aim in order to reap the rewards?”

“Meaning data is centralized but also decentralized.”

“Precisely.”

“But then how do you know it’s being targeted?”

“Bill believed deeply that it was. He was very good at keeping his ear to the ground. Ferreting out intelligence where no one else saw anything of value.”

“Rumint.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, Walker was dying, so whatever he was going to do, he didn’t have much time in which to do it.”

“Correct. He left his job and his family behind to try to solve this.”

“I can see him leaving his job and getting on board with your effort, but why file for divorce from a wife he loved?”

“That I do not know, Agent Devine. Bill never volunteered and I never asked.”

“How was he going to go about it, then?”

“Specifically, he was building a software program for us that would track internet traffic, surveil information flow from data centers and farms—the cloud, as it were—and any other sources that he deemed viable in order to pinpoint what exactly was going on presently and what was being planned for the future.”

“That is a big undertaking.”

“It was an exceptionally big problem,” replied Peeters. “So any attempted resolution must be large in scope as well.”

“Sixty-four-thousand-dollar question: Did he suspect that Carlton Woolwine was involved?”

“I suspect that he suspected that. But Bill did not make accusations, not without hard proof. It was simply not his way.”

“Woolwine pretty much tripled his net worth fairly recently with big bets on AI and crypto mining.”

“We know this. And Bill certainly knew it. Carlton Woolwine is a successful businessman with a reputation for being ruthlessly efficient and

with a good eye for what the world will require in the future. But he was more ‘meat and potatoes,’ I think you would call it, at least with his investments. AI and crypto mining were not in his wheelhouse before.”

“Any idea what changed in that regard?”

Peeters looked uncomfortable. “Many of the world’s richest people and companies are desperately trying to gain control of or at least build a substantial presence in the world of AI. In your country the construction of data centers is really the only growth you have. There are other players out there trying to control the flow and ownership and . . . validation of crypto, such that it will both enhance its worth, making them even richer, and also allow them to have enormous influence on the flow of wealth around the globe. And by the nature of crypto that flow can be completely hidden, or so its owners think, but with the blockchain, secrecy is not really possible. And with leaps in AI’s ability to break through any firewall, the privacy of crypto transactions is in serious doubt. Woolwine may naturally have seen all this happening and decided to take the leap, too. But he has forged ahead at an *alarming* clip.”

“Inside help?” asked Devine.

“It could be, yes. But from where I do not know.”

“To be perfectly frank, Woolwine had or still may have business relations with the Russians. There’s one out at his Canberra estate right now who we suspect murdered Woolwine’s wife as well as the only witness who saw the killing.”

“My God.”

“The Russians bombed a bunch of Woolwine’s businesses and planted a bomb under his daughter’s car. We tried to speak to some of the bombers, but Woolwine, who owns the prisons where they’re situated, had them moved before we could. He apparently is in thick with Moscow, or else he’s being blackmailed by them. And his wife suspected that he was trying to get Australia to join BRICS, or maybe even work with them on the sly and maintain their Five Eyes membership, sharing any intel with the BRICS members.”

“That would be seen as an act of the deepest treachery, and also an act of war,” said Peeters, shaking his head. “I doubt Australia would risk that, whether a billionaire wanted it or not.”

“Which is why I think that was just bullshit, a red herring to distract us.”

Peeters nodded. “And it greatly pains me to say so, but it is clear that Bill was killed because of his involvement with our operation.”

“I think he was killed for multiple reasons, actually. The journalist who was shot with him? They tried to make it seem like they had a romantic thing going on. But she was working on a story that I think Walker was also connected to somehow. They had a back-and-forth during their last encounter, and it seemed like he was fessing up to her for having gotten her to drop the story under false pretenses.”

“And what was the story?”

“Not sure exactly, but now we believe it has to do with the crooked head of a petrostate.”

Peeters’s eyes widened in alarm. “The crooked head of a petrostate? How do you figure that?”

“From a coded name that we just deciphered.”

“That narrows it down significantly,” noted Peeters.

“It may narrow it down to *one*, if we throw in Woolwine’s penchant for doing business with Moscow.”

“Forgive me, but I do not understand. Woolwine is doing business with the Russians and yet they destroy his shops?”

“Either leverage in case it’s needed, or plausible deniability of any relationship if people start to suspect them being in cahoots,” replied Devine.

Peeters smiled appreciatively. “That is good, Agent Devine. Very good. You would make a fine intelligence operative.”

“Right now I just want to be a fine *investigator* and figure out who killed a lot of people.”

“I am also one who wants that to happen.”

“Is Walker’s program up and running?”

“No, he was unable to finish it before he was killed. But we are having others striving to do that.”

“Do you have anything I can use to help me get to the truth?”

“There is a name that keeps popping up in our research for one reason or another.”

“And that name?”

“Sergei Kozlov.”

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CHAPTER

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DEVINE RODE THE FERRY WHILE he stared at his phone. It was drizzly, but the sun was making an attempt to dispense with the gloom. It was anyone's guess whether it would be successful before nightfall. But the gloom certainly matched Devine's mood.

On his phone Devine was looking at a briefing on Sergei Kozlov that he'd requested from his DHS colleagues. Kozlov was fifty-three years old, a military officer and combat veteran of the current Russia-Ukraine war. For the first year of the war he had served valiantly and courageously, by all accounts, before disappearing from the ranks. The weaponry that Devine had found in his cottage in Canberra made him believe that Kozlov was now with Spetsnaz, or Russian Special Forces. What he was doing here in Australia under an alias was highly problematic. What he was doing at Woolwine's home was even more troubling.

Only neither he nor Jones had a lawful right to be on that property. And disclosing that they had been there could seriously damage Jones's career, if not outright end it, considering the higher-ups that Carlton Woolwine probably had in his pocket. What was the cost of a single DS's career in the face of that?

Not much, thought Devine. And he'd be persona non grata to the Australians and on a flight back to America.

A rock and a hard place for sure.

Peeters had given Devine a lot to think about. Devine apparently had been wrong about Walker; he hadn't been forced to go to work for Peeters's company. And he wasn't working with nefarious forces in the world of AI and crypto, he was apparently trying to bring them down. And his father-in-law was squarely in those worlds. Devine still didn't know why Walker had

filed for divorce from the woman he presumably loved, other than to try to protect her somehow.

And what was Sergei Kozlov's role in all this? Why had the combat vet turned Spetsnaz grunt traveled from Russia to Canberra to stay at Woolwine's estate? And had he killed Martha Woolwine and, later, Emily Roylott? That seemed likely. And that theory seemed to solidify the notion that Carlton Woolwine was up to his armpits with Moscow.

He got off the ferry at Darling Point and stared down at the place where Bill Walker's body had turned up. As the ferry pulled away Devine kept his gaze on the choppy water, imagining Walker's body being tethered there.

He then trudged up the hill and kept going until he reached the gate and hit the button on the call box.

A few moments later the gate opened and he walked up to Charlotte Woolwine's front door and knocked. The same woman who had escorted him and Jones out last time stood there staring at him. She was tall, about five ten, lean, olive skin, dark hair, wiry, and dressed all in black. And quite lovely. But with an exterior that was oak hard, he judged.

He had not really noticed her before. Now he did.

"I'm here to speak to Mrs. Woolwine."

"She is not here presently."

Devine was surprised. "Her office phoned and asked to meet with me. In fact, it was you I spoke to, I recognize the voice, Ms . . . . ?"

"Anna, Anna Cipolla."

"And you work for Mrs. Woolwine as . . . ?"

"I work for *both* the Woolwines, as one of their personal assistants."

"So why am I here if Ms. Woolwine isn't?"

"Will you step in here, please, and I will explain?"

Devine went inside the foyer and looked around.

"You overheard certain things the last time you were here," said Cipolla. "With the policewoman. Things having to do with *Mr.* Woolwine."

"Is that what you wanted to talk about?"

The answer came in the form of a gun muzzle next to Devine's right temple.

A man's deep voice said, "We wish to speak with you about many things, Agent Devine."

Devine was so focused on the gun against his skin that he reacted too slowly to what Cipolla was doing. The jab in his arm didn't really hurt.

After that Devine had no more thoughts.

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CHAPTER

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IT WAS A FAMILIAR SCENARIO for Devine. Tied to a chair in a crappy room presumably in the middle of nowhere. He awoke slowly, taking his time to make sure all parts of him were functioning before revealing that he was conscious. And with all that he waited a few moments longer. Intelligence gathering never really stopped for people like him.

"Americans enjoy their naps," said the deep voice. "They do not have to hurry. Because the world always comes to them."

"That is changing," said the voice that belonged to the woman calling herself Anna Cipolla.

"But they will not go willingly. They are insufferably arrogant. But they must be taken seriously."

"They must be made to go home and stay there instead of doing what they do about things that do not concern them."

The two fell silent and that was when Devine raised his head and eyed them both.

Cipolla.

And Sergei Kozlov.

The Russian held the gun that had earlier pressed against Devine's skin. The man looked even more impassively lethal in person. And Devine wondered if he was the man who had been waiting for him at the house when Devine had been abducted. Boris Semenov had been the name given by the driver of the SUV. But it could have been Kozlov. In fact it probably was, since his fingerprint had been found inside the house. That fact didn't help Devine right now, but it could down the road, if he survived this little encounter.

"I would have been fine talking back at Woolwine's place." He eyed the grimy room. "A bit cleaner than here. We all might catch something."

Kozlov drew up a wooden stool and sat a few feet away while Cipolla hovered off to the side. *Three feet* off to the side, Devine estimated. That might be important, later.

He knew they had taken his gun, because the weight of it against his chest was missing. But he felt something else where he had put it, which meant they had not been as thorough as they should have been.

Talk about arrogant.

Kozlov ran his gaze over Devine. “You are a soldier. You work for your government. We share that.”

“Good to know, Mr . . . . ?”

Kozlov said, “You have done good work. You and the policewoman. You have inserted yourselves in this matter with force. I would do the same in your situation.”

“Maybe we can work together, then,” suggested Devine.

“But it will end now.”

“I thought you wanted to talk,” said Devine.

“I don’t think we have all that much to talk about, actually.”

“They’ll just send somebody else, maybe more than one.”

“And maybe they won’t because good money after bad . . . your people are capitalists. They care about such things. Return on investments and such. You know, the bullshit that drives your country on every fucking thing.”

“You killed one of our intel guys. You tried to kill a two-star. You crossed the Rubicon. The hammer is coming. And it’s bigger than the one on your flag.”

“You make assumptions. My colleague here is Italian, not Russian.”

“I doubt Rome is doing this. She’s clearly a mercenary, open for hire.” He glanced at Cipolla. “We hire off the books, too. You could have looked for employment with us. Our benefits are better. Unfortunately for you, you picked the wrong side.”

His words were met by only a dull stare from her. He turned to Kozlov and said, “Look, this is going to be a long, hard slog, just like Ukraine. And, just like Ukraine, it’s not going to end well for anyone.”

“It certainly will not end well for *you*.”

“Okay, if we have nothing to talk about, and you’re going to kill me anyway, I suggest we get on with it.”

“You hurry to your death?” said Kozlov grimly.

“I wasn’t talking about my death. And it would have been better if you’d just killed me back at Woolwine’s place and made your escape then.”

Cipolla laughed at this, but Kozlov did not laugh. He suddenly looked to his left and then to his right. He seemed to be listening, or imagining.

He spoke in Russian and Cipolla answered in Russian. Her response did not seem to please him. He said something again and they began a heated discussion. They took their eyes off Devine only for about thirty seconds, but that was all he needed.

They had not bound his ankles to the chair legs, but they should have. He bent one leg so that his ankle drew next to his bound hand. Devine was very flexible for a muscular man. His long fingers inched up his pants leg, gripped the handle of his Army K-bar knife, and pulled it out.

He put his leg back down and held the knife behind his arm, his hand moving up and down in quick motions as the blade rested against the binding. By the time they looked back at him, Devine’s hand was free and now still.

“You are boastful but all Americans are boastful,” said Kozlov. “But sometimes boasts have—”

He could not finish because the windows shattered and smoke filled the room.

Kozlov fired at Devine, but he was no longer there, having toppled his chair onto its side.

He drew his arm back, looked for movement in the smoke, saw it, and hurled the knife. The scream was satisfying as the knife point found a landing spot, he hoped in center mass.

The thud of the body hitting the floor was even more satisfying.

Now Devine could see nothing, which meant neither could whoever else was alive out there.

A door opened and closed and he heard feet running. He gagged and put his face against the floor. He jerked as shots were fired, there were more screams, more running feet. A car started up and he heard its engine whine and then roar and more screams and shots fired. And then—

Silence. Except for his gasps for breath. And moaning, but not from him.

The smoke cleared as air from the shattered windows blew in. He turned to look around, still half bound to the chair.

He sat up, saw the person on the floor, the neck bloodied from where his knife was sticking out of it.

Anna Cipolla started taking her last few breaths as Devine managed to sit up. There was no sign of Kozlov.

He untied his other hand and crawled over to Cipolla, whose chest was rising and falling fast as her heart hammered to try to keep the body alive. But with each pump it was actually sending geysers of blood out of her severed carotid sheath, hastening the woman's end.

He looked down at her as she looked up at him. Devine had killed people. He assumed that Cipolla had also taken lives. But though he had beaten her and stopped his own death from occurring, Devine felt no sense of triumph. He never did. He felt fortunate to be alive; yet he felt no elation, no glory in ending the life of another, even if it was an enemy.

She gasped and flinched as the end came. Tears streaking her face, she gripped his shoulder, said something he could not understand. Italian, maybe Russian, he was not conversant in either, only able to pick out words and phrases here and there.

"I'm sorry," said Devine. And he was. She was in her mid-twenties. That was as old as she would ever be. A young, capable woman with skills. But even with that, no guarantees. Just like for Devine. No assurances of another sunrise or sunset.

She lurched up, like she was performing a bridge exercise. And then gravity slammed her back to the dirty floor. And she grew still, let go of his arm, and exhaled one more rattling breath and her life expired. Just like that. Nothing fancy, or memorable, or drawn out.

Just like that.

Just like mine will be one day. But I hope a little more peacefully. But what are the odds of that? Don't really want to think about it.

He turned as he heard the door open.

Anais Jones stood there with two uniforms behind her, service weapons drawn.

She said, "Well, it worked out like we thought, only the damn guest of honor got away in one of our police cars."

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CHAPTER

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WHILE THE CRIME SCENE WAS being processed, Devine sat in the back of Jones's Passat and sipped on a cup of coffee Jones had poured from a thermos. He had gotten most of the smoke out of his lungs and eyes, but the effects of whatever Cipolla had shot him up with still lingered.

Cipolla had been pronounced dead. They had found the stolen police car abandoned two miles away and no sign of Kozlov. His failsafe plan, no doubt. He'd been picked up and taken away by his allies.

The Woolwines had been notified, a search warrant was issued, and Cipolla's room at Charlotte Woolwine's home was being gone over with the finest of toothcombs.

Jones opened the car door and sat down next to him, closing the door so the warmth of the running car wouldn't seep out.

"You doing okay?" she asked.

He turned to look at her. "I killed a young woman, so no, not all that good."

"It was clearly her or you, Travis. And they kidnapped you."

"That does not make me feel any better."

She touched his shoulder. "Because you're a good person. Kozlov wouldn't have thought about it for even a second if you'd gone down."

"Well, that does make me feel a bit better." He eyed her keenly. "Good thing when I got the call to meet with Woolwine *alone* I got in touch with you."

"Right. We decided it might be a trap, so we had eyes on you the whole way."

"It's a good thing you always have eyes on me, Anais."

"But I was on pins and needles the whole time. Part of me wanted to get you out right away. I'm . . . I'm just glad you're okay."

“Yeah, thanks to you, I am.”

“We took her prints and are running them now. What did Kozlov say to you?”

“Not much. Initially said he wanted to talk, but then apparently decided I had nothing of value to tell them. So how did Kozlov get away, exactly?” he added.

Her face crinkled into a frown. “Overpowered two of my men, wounded a third, and was gone before we could even realize what had happened. He must have had a gas mask stashed in the house.”

“What do the Woolwines say about the woman, and Kozlov, being in Charlotte’s house?”

“We talked to Charlotte’s people. They said Cipolla was hired eight months ago, great references. They say Charlotte’s never heard of Kozlov. And I can’t exactly say he was at the Canberra estate, can I?”

“Ned Blair saw him and gave a positive ID,” Devine pointed out.

“And do you want Ned Blair to get a bullet between his eyes? Which he probably will if we reveal he’s a witness.”

“A good if depressing point. On the bright side Theresa Lee is getting better by the hour, I was told. She might be available to give a statement soon.”

“She could clear up a lot for us.”

“But not the most important questions, Anais. Those are up to us.”

“I better get back out there and see to the search. You okay here or do you want someone to drive you back to your hotel?”

“I’m good. I’ve got your great Australian coffee and I can think about things.”

“Well, here’s to good thinking, mate.”

After she left, Devine settled back into the seat and pulled out his phone, on which he had been taking notes on the case throughout.

He decided to take a different tack now. Carl Peeters had said that he and Bill Walker had thought this whole thing was about information, the new gold of this century. The cloud, the internet, AI, the works. Devine thought about the data centers he had seen on the way to Melbourne. And what Charlotte had told him about her father’s investments in AI and crypto mining.

Drawing on his training during his time on Wall Street, Devine went online to several business sites, podcasts, newsletters, and financial

analyses, specifically of the Woolwine companies and generally of the data center industry.

As Charlotte had previously told them, he confirmed that more of the biggest players in AI and crypto were not building their own data centers, but leasing them from companies like Woolwine's. It was those companies that constructed the physical infrastructure and also provided the hardware and software guts of the cloud, allowing the tech behemoths to avoid the capital expenditures required in putting up such colossal spaces. It was outsourcing on a grand and smart scale, the former businessman Devine deemed.

Then the tech and crypto companies inserted their information flow through these pipelines and they were off and running. And it was, right now, the fastest-growing segment of the world economy, and Woolwine was cashing in big on it.

These were complicated structures to build, outfit, run, manage, and protect. There was the whole physical side of the space which, depending on its size, could take years to build and get into operation. Then there were the software packages that monitored the power and cooling, the latter of which was critical. If you lost power for even a few seconds, the GPU chips used in data centers would overheat and become inoperable. And since many of them could cost more than thirty grand each and there were enormous numbers of them in every center, if the AC failed you could lose billions of dollars in the time it took to draw a few breaths.

You also had to deploy other software to monitor security, both physical and digital, humidity, smoke, water leaks; then there were processes to manage the staff, and troubleshooting procedures for the inevitable what-if scenarios. And for large-scale colocation facilities, you needed to track and monetize every inch of the facility and account for every pulse of power.

Then there was the actual information flow that needed to be monitored, monetized, and secured every second of every day. Hackers, terrorists, and competitors launched assaults against the centers 24/7 probing for any weaknesses, and thousands of companies provided services and products to fight back against these attacks, creating a sort of endless world war in the digital field.

There were foreign agents trying to gain admin creds, bypass passwords, fake out trusted vendor status; hack temperature trends, power consumption, and camera feeds to provide intel for physical or supply chain

digital attacks; or spy on transmission rates and trends to get blueprints of the facility's operations. Tactics changed every day and thus so did defenses. It was a race that sometimes one side or the other won.

It was bewilderingly complex, and one could spend their entire career becoming expert in only a sliver of it.

As Devine dug even deeper into the weeds of the industry and how exactly these pods and chains of information flow were put together and run across the globe, he saw some things that were familiar to him, just in a different context.

FNT and RMM. The initials from Theresa Lee's files.

Maybe they weren't someone's initials, as he and Jones had originally thought. And it turned out, they probably weren't.

In the screen he was looking at, *FNT* referred to a command-process-oriented tool used to build a "digital doppelganger" to help the facility run more efficiently.

RMM stood for "remote monitoring and management."

He read some more and stumbled onto a reference to Palo Alto. It wasn't alluding to the city, it was the Palo Alto Networks' antispyware software. Again, something routinely used in data centers. Then he remembered he'd seen a Palo Alto van that appeared to be going out to several data centers under construction when he and Jones were headed to Melbourne.

Along with a Woolwine Construction company vehicle.

Devine paused his reading and looked out the car window, where Jones was overseeing the crime scene team in their collection and interpretation of evidence. A lot still didn't make sense to him. But if Lee had been researching all of this, she had to have had a reason, a good one. And it would make perfect sense that certain threat actors were consumed with trying to control, impede, capture, or otherwise take advantage somehow of the most valuable commodity on earth.

And if Woolwine and his companies were involved, and with the Russians backing him and them, that would be a motive to commit pretty much any crime, including murder.

Why does this sound like World War III without bombs, guns, and soldiers? And we'll only know we lost the war when everything simply . . . stops?

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CHAPTER

69

"I CAN'T BELIEVE IT," SAID CHARLOTTE Woolwine.

Jones and Devine were seated across from the woman at her home in Darling Point.

She was dressed in a business suit, but there was nothing about her that looked businesslike. Her face was tear streaked, her hair was in disarray, and her trembling fingers clutched at a tissue. She blew her nose into it.

"I'm not sure how much more of this I can take," she said in a desperate tone.

Jones said quietly, "The man who kidnapped Agent Devine has been identified as a former Russian soldier, Sergei Kozlov. Have you ever heard of him?"

Woolwine looked up at her, incredulity seared over her features. "Why do I have Russian soldiers in my house?"

"And Anna Cipolla? Who hired her?" asked Devine.

"After . . . after my mother died my father cleaned house with a lot of the staff. I don't know why, he would never say. He continued to do so, and a number of months ago an Italian named Anna Cipolla became one of our PAs. She had excellent references. I saw them myself."

"We have run her prints and her real name is Anastasia Morozov. She's also Russian," said Jones.

"But my father . . . " She fell silent and looked at her knees.

"Where is he now?" asked Jones.

"I don't know. He does not tell me his schedule. If I had to guess he's at forty thousand feet on the way to some new financial conquest."

"Do you go to the Canberra estate often?" asked Jones.

"I did before my mother was killed there. I would take my daughters and we would just ride our horses together. It was glorious. My son has

never been into the equestrian thing. But now . . . I avoid the place. I wish my father would sell it." She looked at Devine. "I . . . I'm sorry. I didn't even ask, Agent Devine. Were you hurt? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." He paused and added, "I was the one who killed Morozov. I had no choice."

She shivered in response to this and hugged her knees, pressing her torso against her thighs. "My God, this is the mother of all nightmares." She sobbed for a few moments before regaining her composure. "I . . . spoke with my children last night. I want to bring them here, or I want to go to them. But I still feel like either way I'd be putting them in danger."

"I think it best to leave them right where they are. If you want we can provide additional security for your daughters."

"And we can do the same for your son at his college in California," added Devine.

She nodded. "That would actually be very helpful, thank you."

"We'll arrange it," said Jones. "Please take that off your worry list."

Woolwine looked at her and said, "A mother never stops worrying about her children."

"Of course, yes, ma'am, I didn't mean . . . " Jones said hastily before her voice trailed off.

Devine interjected, "We know your father had business in Russia, but he also had recently visited China. Does he have business there as well?"

"China is a manufacturing powerhouse. Quite simply, they can build anything better, faster, and cheaper than the rest of the world. My father would love to bring that skill set to this country, to help make *us* a manufacturing and engineering powerhouse. But dealing with Beijing is not easy."

"Well, he guessed right on AI and crypto," said Devine. "I mean, being in the data center business right now is pure gold."

"And the Chinese are well aware of that," said Woolwine. "They have their own unique approaches to developing AI that might be better than even what the Americans are doing."

"How so?" asked Devine.

"The big American tech companies use large language models in which they feed enormous amounts of data to train the platforms in answering prompts. That's why you have all the data centers sucking up water, power, and land. A very expensive and maybe unsustainable approach."

“And the Chinese approach?” asked Devine.

“Well, like all Chinese endeavors, there is state support, centralized planning, and integrated facilities instead of numerous competing entities. And they built a virtual society with millions of participants through something called ‘multidimensional data fusion and dynamic interactive modeling.’ You see, the Chinese don’t want to simply create AI for work purposes; they also want to integrate their political values and sensibilities into it. Their approach requires far less energy and chips, and they don’t have to build these gargantuan facilities that will, at some point, become white elephants that no one will want to pay to maintain. Last year China released Manus, the first fully autonomous AI application generated from this philosophy of embedded multidimensional AI. Manus is not a single player; it oversees coordinated groups of subagents that execute highly specialized facets of enormous tasks with this spider in the middle of the web directing all of these activities.”

“Like a quarterback in American football,” said Devine.

Both women looked at him curiously.

He added, “Never mind. I think the Chinese might have the better approach.”

“Manus’s capabilities rocked the rest of the tech world. You can actually give Manus a task, and it will interact directly with the external world to accomplish that task, instead of searching through databases. You can even log off and do other tasks, and then Manus will let you know when the task is complete.”

“Talk about a bold new world,” noted Jones.

“An unsettled, sometimes frightening new world,” replied Woolwine. “Getting back to my father, I just worry that he’s getting into situations he’s not going to be able to get out of. I know that my mother felt the same way.”

Devine was looking around the room and then brought his gaze back to her. “Cipolla, or this Morozov person, called me and said you wanted to meet.”

“That was a lie.” She swept a hand over her business clothes. “I was attending an all-day business retreat in the Blue Mountains.”

“Obviously she did it on her own initiative as a setup to capture me.”

Woolwine involuntarily shivered. “I feel like I’m smack in the middle of a spy novel.”

You’re not alone there, thought Devine.

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CHAPTER

70

THE NEXT DAY JONES AND Devine had breakfast in the old Queen Victoria building housing both a light-rail station and high-end dining and shopping on George Street.

"I used to come here with my mother when I was a little girl," said Jones. "I loved running up and down the escalators and along the different floors. We'd get the best croissants or scones, and she'd have tea and me hot cocoa."

"And your brothers and sisters?"

"Like I said, I was the youngest by a lot. I was probably an accident, if you want to know the truth. I think she was tired from having raised five kids before me. So I got away with a lot. I mean a lot." She smiled. "It was great."

"I was also probably an accident, Anais. So we have that in common." Devine paused, "But my . . . well, my father didn't like the fact that I went into the Army. He thought it was stupid."

She looked stunned. "But you fought and risked your life for your country. What could be more honorable and esteemed than that?"

"My dad has a different yardstick for success, I guess. Doesn't matter."

"Well, it should matter, Travis. I saw your wounds. That *does* matter. At least to me."

Devine said, "But I just found out from my mother that my dad fought in Vietnam."

"Then I really don't get it. As a former soldier, why was he upset you joined up?"

"Vietnam did a number on a lot of people of my dad's generation. He never trusted the government after that, apparently, and he didn't want them

in my life, I guess. Bottom line, I guess he cared about me a lot more than I thought."

"Well, better you learn that later than never. Right?"

He said wearily, "Right. What did your parents think about you joining the force?"

"My mom was actually fine with it. It was my copper father who gave me the hard time."

"He didn't want his little girl to get hurt?"

"Something like that."

"But he lived long enough to see you flourish in the role."

"He was proud of me, yes. He told me so before he died, in fact."

"Maybe my dad and I will get to have that sort of discussion."

"I think that would be good, for *both* of you."

They fell silent for a few moments until Jones said, "Our last meeting with Charlotte was instructive. But we still don't know exactly what her father's involved in."

"Theresa Lee apparently thought it had something to do with the crooked head of a petrostate."

"Has to be Putin, what with all the Russians running around."

"Russians *and* Middle Easterners, Anais. Two of the guys who jumped me were from Saudi Arabia."

"And it's also a petrostate."

"The Middle East is also getting in on the AI craze. I read an article where they're building a slew of data centers there."

"So a collaboration then, Middle East and Mother Russia?" said Jones. "With what endgame?"

"That will require more digging on our part."

"Do we even know where to dig? AI and data centers and all this tech stuff is not exactly my expertise."

"It's not really mine, either. I just did a little bit of research and—" He grew silent.

"What?"

"Maybe I can approach it from the other side," he said.

"What sides are we talking about?"

"There's the tech side. And then there's the business side. I can tackle the business side by using some of my old Wall Street contacts."

“Okay, you go for it. I want to talk to Drury and see what he’s come up with.”

“Will you tell him about our involvement at the estate in Canberra?”

“No, I don’t trust him. The only person I really trust is . . . well, you.”

“I feel the same.”

They exchanged a smile.

“Kozlov is still out there, so watch your back,” she warned.

“And you do the same. In fact, keep an eye on all flanks.”

“Spoken like the soldier you used to be.”

And maybe still am, thought Devine.

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CHAPTER

71

DEVINE TOOK THE METRO BACK to his hotel, grabbed his laptop, and walked to Circular Quay. There he sat, had another cup of coffee, checked his watch, calculated the time difference, and typed out his lengthy email.

He waited for five minutes and then his phone rang. He answered it.

"Caught your attention, Lydia?" he said.

Lydia White had worked with him at Cowl and Comely in New York. She was now with Morgan Stanley as an analyst, and, Devine knew, she was an exceptional one.

"Woolwine Enterprises will catch anyone's attention. Where are you, by the way?"

"Down under, smack in Woolwine's breadbasket."

"And you're doing what down under, exactly?"

"I work for the State Department now."

"Are you joking?"

"People *do* work for the State Department. And the public sector just suits me better. Shorter hours, you know."

White said, "I'll give you that. It's seven p.m. here and I've only got five more hours of work to do before I lay my weary head down. So what do you need, Mr. State Department?"

"Woolwine's crypto and AI business. Can you do a down and dirty on them for me?"

"How down and how dirty?"

"Just want to know how all in he is. National security matters."

"You wouldn't be withholding anything, would you? I mean, the stuff that happened at Cowl? You pretty much brought the whole place down."

"But I did give you fair warning to get out."

“Yes, you did. And for that I will be forever grateful. Okay, I’ll see what I can dig up.”

“Thanks, Lydia, I owe you.”

“No, Travis, I think this makes us even.”

As Devine finished his coffee his phone buzzed. It was Jones.

“Hey, how did it go with Drury?”

“It didn’t,” she replied.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean the man has gone missing.”

* * *

“He was last seen driving away from his office last night around six. No one has seen or heard from him since, and his phone’s been turned off.”

Jones and Devine were standing outside the AFP Office in Sydney.

“His car?”

“It was found near the Bondi-to-Coogee coastal walk; keys were still in it.”

“Did anyone see anything suspicious?”

“It’s a seven-kilometer walk with lots of scenic sights and beaches and people, but part of it is quite isolated, Travis.”

“And that’s where they found his car?”

“Yep. It rained very late last night but it was dry under the car, so it was there before the rain started, which was around one this morning.”

“Well, that narrows it down some.”

“But we have no way of knowing if he drove his car there. He could have been taken and his car left there by whoever abducted him.”

“You’re thinking it’s Kozlov?”

“He’d be near the top of my list,” said Jones glumly.

“Well, let’s go see where the car was found.”

Thirty minutes later they arrived where Drury’s official ride sat. There was police tape around poles driven into the ground to keep onlookers at bay. As they approached the crime scene Devine saw NSW police officers, as well as AFP personnel with their platypus-crested uniforms.

Jones checked in with her people to get an update on the search. She rejoined Devine, who was looking around the area.

“No blood or any signs of a fight in the car,” she said. “But there was the smell of cigarette smoke, and I confirmed that Drury did not smoke.”

“A lot of Russians smoke,” Devine pointed out.

“Yeah, that really culls the suspect list down,” she quipped.

“I thought you were hell-bent on Kozlov,” he noted.

“I’m hell-bent on finding Drury, hopefully still breathing.”

“Anything of interest around here?”

She thought for a moment. “Waverly Cemetery. It’s a short walk from here.”

He looked at her and Jones looked back at him.

“You’re not thinking . . . ” she began.

“Let’s go find out.”

Waverly Cemetery was set on gently rising ground with broad ocean views. Ancient and more modern headstones and grandiose statuary were neatly laid out in rows of burial plots with grassy strips laid in between.

Devine looked at some of the towering statues and sculptures and said, “All that must have cost the families a pretty penny.”

“Waverly’s been around since the 1870s. A lot of the people who built Australia were laid to rest here. It’s quite historic and important to the country’s history. So why are we here again? Looking for some freshly dug dirt, or his body neatly laid on top of a grave?”

“They might have left his car near here for a reason, Anais.”

“I can have a team scour the cemetery for some clue.”

Devine went back down to the entrance to the cemetery and looked around at the few passersby before settling his gaze on the broad waters splayed in front of him.

He turned back around and ran his gaze over a public notice board that was set up along the path. It was mostly information about the rules of usage around the cemetery and the coastal walking path. But then his eyes were riveted on one spot on the board.

“Anais!”

She rushed to join him.

“What?”

He pointed to the notice board.

She turned to look at it and gasped.

A photo of Lewis Drury was posted there with a number to call if the person had any information about the “missing man.”

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CHAPTER

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JONES MADE THE CALL TO the number. It was answered on the second ring.

She put it on speaker so Devine could hear as well.

“Well, DS Jones, you are on top of things, but maybe it is your American friend who has done this?”

Devine looked at her and mouthed *Kozlov*.

“This is getting quite serious, Sergei,” said Jones. “Abducting an AFP officer? You won’t be leaving Australia for some time now, if ever.”

“We have business to discuss. May we get down to it?”

“By all means, continue to add to your indictable offenses,” said Jones. She had already started recording the call.

“We have something you want. You have something I want.”

“I know what you have that we want, but just to confirm, Sergeant Lewis Drury?”

“Of course.”

“And what do you want?” she asked.

“Your American friend does not want to jump in on the conversation?”

Devine started gazing all around them. He pulled Jones behind a large tree.

“Smart move, Agent Devine,” said Kozlov. “Sight lines are so very important.”

While he was talking Jones sent off a text to her team to immediately shut down the area around the cemetery and commence a search.

“What do you want from us?” asked Devine.

“The two men whom you arrested after their encounter with you.”

“You mean Ayad and Petrov. And would that make you Boris Semenov?”

“Ayad and Petrov for Sergeant Lewis.”

“And if I tell you that the official policy of the NSW Police is not to negotiate with terrorists?” said Jones.

“Then the AFP will be down one sergeant. And perhaps you should ask the AFP first before you refuse my offer.”

“I need irrefutable proof that you have Drury and that he’s still alive,” said Jones. “Absent that, there’s nothing I can do.”

“Since I anticipated that request a text is coming through now.”

A text with a picture attached popped onto her phone. In the image was Drury, looking bruised and beaten, holding up an iPhone with the current date and time on it.

“What the hell did you do to him?” asked Jones.

“He was uncooperative.”

“And how do you propose to make this swap of people? Even if I can get Ayad and Petrov out of prison, which is a very big if.”

“Do not take a defeatist attitude, Sergeant. Your friend is an American.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Americans can do anything. Just ask Agent Devine. He’ll tell you.”

“Look—”

“You get things right on your end and then you will call me back on this number. And please do not bother trying to trace it.”

“Because it’s untraceable?”

“Because if you find me, your little friend will already be dead. Now, pass the phone to your American friend and turn off the speaker. This is for his ears only.”

Jones looked at Devine, who shrugged and nodded. She turned off the speaker and handed it to him.

“Agent Devine?”

“Yes?”

“Or should I say Captain Devine? Once in the military you never really leave it.”

“Just like you.”

“I feel respected that you know this about me.”

“Is that all you wanted?” said Devine. “To find out if I’d *googled* you?”

“No. I wanted you to know something about the woman you murdered.”

“You mean the person who was trying to kill me? And we know her name wasn’t Anna Cipolla. And she wasn’t Italian.”

“Incorrect. She is half-Italian because that is what her mother was. Her name is . . . was Anastasia Morozov. She meant a great deal to me.”

“If you hadn’t kidnapped me, she’d still be alive.”

“What I also wanted you to know is that she was my *daughter*, Captain Devine. And fathers avenge their daughters. And Russian fathers avenge their daughters in the most painful ways possible. To honor her memory you cannot even imagine what I am going to do to you.”

Devine said nothing to this because what would have been the point. The call was ended, and he handed Jones back her phone.

“What did he say?”

“Nothing important.”

“He seemed very sure of himself,” she noted.

“He doesn’t strike me as a man who takes unnecessary risks, or at least poorly thought-out ones.”

“He evidently thinks the world of Americans,” she said dryly.

“Yeah, he seems to love us.”

“What does he really want, though? It can’t be the two arseholes who screwed up with you. Why would they matter?”

“I don’t know. What can you do about his request?”

“Tap-dance really fast and call in some favors.”

“I would think the AFP would want their man back safe and sound,” noted Devine.

“I’m not saying otherwise. But you give in to one and then everyone will be trying this angle, and then where are you?”

“Well, do what you can because we need something to offer him if we’re going to eventually nail him.”

“Kozlov’s already tried to kill you, twice. You’ll have to tread cautiously.”

Oh, you have no idea, thought Devine.

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CHAPTER

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JONES WORKED HER MAGIC, AND the AFP, wanting Lewis returned safely, agreed to facilitate the release of Ayad and Petrov. The two prisoners appeared cocky and were grinning maliciously in the faces of Devine and Jones as they rode with them in the back of an NSW Police transport van.

Ayad said to Jones, “We had great visit to your beautiful country. It was really cool, lots of fun. Come to see me in my country and I will show you good time. But only one time. You will not be going home.”

She replied, “Do you understand the phrase ‘Go fuck yourself’? Or maybe you know sign language?” She flipped the man off.

Petrov laughed and playfully elbowed Ayad. “She got you on that one, bro.”

Devine said, “Sergei Kozlov?”

Both men stopped grinning.

Petrov said nervously, “Who?”

“The man who has requested the pleasure of your company. What can you tell us about him?”

“Never heard of the dude,” said Petrov. He looked at Ayad. “You?”

“Not me, man.” He pointed his manacled hands at Petrov. “He is only communist I know.” Then he laughed but it never got to his eyes.

The man was definitely scared, thought Devine.

Petrov said, “But if I were you, my friend, I would keep looking behind you for the rest of your days.”

“That’s funny,” said Devine.

“What is funny about my words?” said Petrov grimly.

“I was about to say the same thing to you.”

“You think you can get to me where I am going?” said Petrov, grinning again.

Devine leaned forward. “There is no place on this earth that I can’t *get* to you.”

Petrov laughed until Devine gripped the median nerve in Petrov’s hand and started to squeeze. At first the man tried to shrug off the increasing pressure, but then he started to tremble and his features convulsed and his body arched. He moaned and gasped and his heart was no doubt hammering in his temples.

He looked imploringly at Jones, who just stared silently back at him.

“Stop!” he finally shrieked. “Stop! Please!”

Devine held on for another couple of seconds before very slowly releasing the pressure and sitting back.

“Why do I think that Kozlov would have let himself die before he would have asked me to stop? Or say *please* to his captors? Which makes me wonder why he gives a shit about getting back two pathetic assholes who botched a simple mission.”

A gasping Petrov, his body still jerky and his lips trembling, said nothing, but it seemed that he was now thinking the same thing.

When Devine looked over at Ayad, the man quickly stared down at his shoes.

Devine glanced at Jones, who only answered with an impressive hike of her eyebrows. Then he sat back against the wall of the van thinking about . . . everything.

* * *

The exchange spot had been emailed to them from a walled-off account that they had been unable to trace.

It was not in the middle of nowhere. Surprisingly, it was on the steps of the Sydney Opera House, one of the busiest places in the city. The van had dropped them off, and Jones and Devine had escorted the manacled Ayad and Petrov to the designated spot. Camera-toting tourists stared at the two chained men, and several of them hurried away, while others snapped pictures with their phones. Jones had wanted to cordon off the area, but her superiors thought that logistically too difficult.

“Is this a movie?” one of them asked excitedly.

Devine looked at the person, flashed his badge, and barked, “No. Get the fuck out of here. Now!”

The man fled.

They reached the spot directly in front of the Opera House, but on the lower level of stairs. They stopped and looked around.

Devine gazed in all directions, even as he kept a firm hand on Ayad, while Jones did the same for Petrov. They had teams of NSW and AFP officers arrayed around the area. Choppers passed overhead looking for any sign of Drury or his captors.

Jones said, “Don’t like this at all, Travis.”

Devine didn’t answer, but he probably liked it even less than Jones.

She spoke into her mic to confirm that all teams were in place and that there had been no sign of Drury or anyone suspicious.

“We are sitting ducks out here,” said Jones.

“I know.”

They were both wearing body and leg armor, but not on their heads.

“I just hope our guys spot anyone out there before it’s too late,” said Jones.

Ayad and Petrov were looking around, too. Ayad said, “You think you will outsmart him? I do not believe you will.”

“He doesn’t get you until we get our guy back,” said Jones.

Petrov said, “He will get all he wants and you will get nothing of what you want.”

“Thought you didn’t know him,” said Devine. That shut Petrov up. Devine gazed higher and higher, to elevations where he knew something might be brewing—why else request such a public spot?

And then he saw it. A glint of light reflecting off something. Third building to his left, top floor.

Devine dove and tackled Jones to the ground.

But nothing happened. He looked up and the reflected light was gone. But then he heard it.

“Shit!”

Before he could do anything the drone shot up from behind a stand of bushes, zipped across the steps, and rapidly fired two shots, one into the head of Petrov and the other into Ayad.

Both men dropped dead to the pavement.

Devine pulled his gun and fired at the drone as it flashed away, but missed. In seconds, it was out of sight.

Now people were shouting and running away, while a few started filming with their phones. Devine heard smatterings of at least a dozen

languages as people fled the scene or else provided commentary into their phones, probably for their social media posts.

They checked Petrov and Ayad, but both men were beyond any help.

“He never had any intention of doing a swap,” said Jones.

“We didn’t have much choice, Anais.”

“My superiors will hardly see it that way, Travis.” She looked around. “And Sergeant Drury?”

“Either still a prisoner or more likely dead.”

“This round to Kozlov,” she said dejectedly.

“Yep” was all Devine could bring himself to say.

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CHAPTER

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AFTER HOURS OF FILLING OUT reports followed by more hours of oral grilling, Devine and Jones left AFP headquarters.

"Well, that was pleasant," said Devine as they reached Jones's Passat. When she didn't react to this he said, "You okay?"

Her hand on the car door, Jones said, "I've been taken off the case."

"What? Since when?"

She held up her phone. "Since I got this text thirty seconds ago."

"And their reasoning?"

"Do you really have to ask, or, more painfully, make me say it?"

"You got approvals for what we did. They didn't have any better ideas."

"But there's always a scapegoat when things go sideways. I'm sure it's the same in America."

"So what does that exactly mean, off the case?"

"It means I can no longer *officially* work it. I've been given other matters to pursue during my *official* hours on duty."

She stared him down.

He said, "If you're saying what I think you're saying, do you want to *officially* torpedo your career over this by going against orders?"

"I can't just leave it like this, Travis. And I can't leave *you* to shoulder this alone."

They both leaned against the fender of the Passat and stared gloomily out at the darkness.

Jones said, "What I don't get is, why kill Ayad and Petrov? They could have had them killed in prison easy enough. Why this elaborate charade with Drury?"

"It doesn't make much sense," admitted Devine. "But Kozlov is no dummy. He must have gotten something out of it. Maybe he just wanted to

show us that he's holding all the cards."

"And made us look stupid," added Jones glumly.

A thought struck Devine. "If Carlton Woolwine is working with Kozlov, he might have known what was going to happen here today."

"Okay, so?"

"So let's go on the offensive and rattle a billionaire's cage. Or I will."

She looked at her watch. "And two minutes ago I was off the official clock. So this is my personal capacity."

"You sure, Anais? I mean, really sure?"

"Never been surer about anything."

*** * ***

Jones dropped him off at his hotel. She told Devine she would do her best to arrange another meeting with Carlton Woolwine as quickly as possible.

Devine wasn't hungry, so he settled himself down in front of his laptop at the small desk set up in his room. He had just been provided a tranche of information from stateside that he wanted to go over.

He opened the first screen and was staring at a photo of Sergei Kozlov.

The picture was dated from ten years ago, although the man had not changed all that much. He had been born into relative wealth and status. His parents had been academics, teachers at private schools around Europe. Because of that Kozlov was highly educated, although he had chosen the military as his career, and his record was stellar. Rising to a colonel in the Russian Army, he had earned all the medals and commendations possible. He had also been trained at the Combined Arms Academy of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. He had left the military during the Ukraine war and, as Devine already knew from his discoveries among the man's luggage, Kozlov had gone over to the Spetsnaz, which meant he was highly trained and sharply focused on wreaking as much damage as possible on Mother Russia's enemies, chief of which was America. He was also a widower, his Italian wife having died in childbirth.

Next up was Anastasia Morozov, Kozlov's daughter. Born in St. Petersburg, she had attended a youth academy that had taught her everything from using assault weapons to flying drones.

Drones?

Now Devine wondered if she'd had a hand in the tobacco shop bombings, which Jones had told him had involved drones carrying the

explosive devices.

Anastasia had married Anatoly Morozov, an agent in the FSB, the successor to the KGB. She had originally also been with the FSB but then had joined the SVR, which was the foreign intelligence successor to the KGB's First Directorate. That meant she was a spy operating outside of the Russian Federation. How she and her father had gotten into Australia undetected would cost some folks their jobs, he figured.

And she was Kozlov's daughter. And he wants my head on a stick.

Men like Kozlov didn't necessarily frighten men like Devine. But he would never underestimate the Russian, either. Devine didn't have to like Kozlov, but he had to respect him.

And knowing that Carlton Woolwine was likely in league with the man was both troubling and curious. The Russians certainly had Woolwine over a barrel. It just showed how money couldn't fully protect you, no matter how much you had.

His phone buzzed. He answered and Jones said, "I called Carlton Woolwine and asked to meet. He agreed to do so tonight."

"Where? Not a chopper ride out to the family resort?"

"He has an apartment in Sydney. He told me it was his hidey-hole."

"Okay," said Devine.

"I think he's feeling vulnerable and maybe doesn't know who to trust. Which could be an opportunity for us."

"Did you tell him what we wanted to meet about?"

"No, because I don't know the reason. You decided it was time for a frontal assault on enemy lines, so I'll let you take the lead. But sometimes those assaults end up disastrously."

"And sometimes they win the war. Give me the address and I'll meet you there in twenty."

Devine closed his laptop, gunned up, and headed out to meet one of the world's richest men in his personal hidey-hole.

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CHAPTER

75

A MAN MET THEM AT THE front entrance to a ten-story building that looked like it dated back to the early 1900s. He was built like a walk-in fridge and was armed. He checked their IDs and wanted to confiscate their weapons, but both Devine and Jones told him that was not possible.

"We are both legally required to keep our weapons in our possession at all times. If that's not good enough for your boss, so be it," said Jones.

The man phoned up to Woolwine's flat for the okay and then rode up in a private elevator with them.

"Funny that a billionaire is sharing space with the rank and file in an apartment building," Devine said.

The man glanced at him. "He isn't. He owns the building and mostly uses it for accommodations for out-of-town guests and business associates who prefer to stay in town," he added matter-of-factly.

The man led them to the end of the hall on the top floor and tapped on a set of double doors.

Devine noted the camera hung right outside the doors. He heard a buzzing sound a moment later. The man opened one of the doors and motioned them through. He closed the door after them, but Devine did not hear him walk away. Apparently the walk-in fridge had been ordered to stay nearby.

Carlton Woolwine met them at the door and walked them back to a small interior room that was shrouded in darkness. Devine could see an array of photos set on the built-in shelving that lined three of the walls. And there were other photos on the fourth wall. Below that a small gas fire illuminated the room and provided some warmth.

Woolwine sat on a low couch and motioned them to sit in chairs across from him.

He looked older, even more disheveled than the first time Devine had met him, and there was a hunted look in his eyes that Devine could appreciate.

“You wanted to meet?” asked Woolwine in a tight voice.

“Yes,” said Jones, sitting up straighter and assuming a confident look. “You may have heard about the shootings at the Opera House today.”

“Yes, I heard about it along with everyone else.”

Devine said, “The two men were being held without bail after being charged with my abduction. Earlier, we went to speak to two other prisoners housed in one of *your* facilities. They were two Russians who had been convicted of blowing up some of your tobacconist shops. We spoke with them and they agreed to meet with us again to cooperate in our investigation. Only before that could happen they were transferred out to who knows where. The same thing happened when we went to interview two other men involved in the bombings and who were housed at another prison owned by *you*.”

“And why are you raising this with me?”

“We were told at that time that the orders to transfer all these men had come from the highest possible source.”

“So you think that I ordered them to be moved so they couldn’t talk to you?” said Woolwine.

“Did you?” asked Jones.

“I do not micromanage the prison facilities, DS Jones. I have people to do that for me.”

“So you had no involvement in that at all?”

“None. And why would I do such a thing? These men blew up some of my businesses. They injured my employees, some of them severely. Why would I shield them in any way?”

“You had a lot of business with Russia in the past,” said Devine. “Lucrative business.”

“I have far more lucrative business to take the place of any I lost when the Russians were sanctioned, Agent Devine. My net worth has boomed in the last five years. So if you’re intimating that I am somehow still doing business with Russia, you are sorely mistaken.”

“And BRICS?” asked Jones.

“What about it?”

“Are you in favor of this country joining it?”

“It is a matter that I have evolving opinions about. Similar debates are taking place in Canberra and in pretty much every capital around the globe. The world order has changed, and we have to change along with it. And I don’t see what any of that has to do with the crimes you are investigating.”

“Did Bill Walker know of your interest in Australia perhaps joining BRICS?” asked Jones.

A look of enlightenment came across Woolwine’s features. “Ah, I see. You think I had Bill killed because he found out I was thinking about the potential for my businesses if Australia were to join BRICS?”

“Your words, not mine,” said Jones.

“Well, let me tell you, in *my* words, DS, that I did have a conversation with Bill about that very matter perhaps a month before I discovered he was divorcing my daughter.”

“You never mentioned that to us before,” said Jones.

“Because it had no possible relevancy to what happened to the man,” Woolwine shot back.

“And what was the substance of the conversation?” asked Devine.

“I asked him what he thought about BRICS. Just his perspective, based on his experience and worldview as an American living here.”

“And his answer?”

“He thought this country should at least seriously consider joining BRICS outright.”

Devine and Jones exchanged a surprised glance. Devine said, “Even though it would mean giving up membership in Five Eyes?”

“Quite frankly, Bill thought that Five Eyes had lost much of its importance. He believed with AI and the change in relations with America, and China fast emerging as the dominant power over much of the globe, that a membership in Five Eyes was not all that important. He felt that intelligence gathering was entering a whole new dynamic, a new era, he called it. That it would be the *private* sector that would be dominant in that realm, as opposed to any government, or collection of governments, whether the Americans were involved or not. After all, companies like Google and Meta collect what amounts to enormously valuable intelligence on billions of people every day all over the world.”

“Pretty extraordinary commentary from a man who had worked for Five Eyes his entire career,” noted Devine.

“I now know that Bill was terminal with cancer at the time we spoke, Agent Devine. Maybe his coming mortality made him more loquacious and forthright than he otherwise would have been. Regardless, I thanked him for his analysis, I didn’t act on it. And while it’s true that I have friends in high places here, I will not be the deciding factor in whether we join BRICS or not.”

“Do you know a man named Sergei Kozlov?” asked Jones.

He glanced sharply at her. “Kozlov? No, never heard of him. Who is he?”

“The man who had Sergeant Drury abducted,” she replied.

“Good God.”

“He had a woman working with him, an Anastasia Morozov. She went by the name Anna Cipolla.”

Woolwine looked at her in surprise. “Wait, Anna Cipolla. She was one of my daughter’s assistants. You’re saying that *she* was working with this Kozlov person?”

“Yes,” said Devine. “I was invited to your daughter’s house. Cipolla met me at the door. But your daughter wasn’t there. Cipolla had arranged the meeting and that’s when Kozlov put a gun to the back of my head.”

Woolwine looked stunned. “You were . . . you were abducted from Charlotte’s home?”

“Yes. You haven’t spoken to your daughter?”

“No. We don’t talk all that much, really. But I would have thought she would have let me know about something like that!”

Devine ran his gaze over the man, attempting to see if he was being genuine or not. It was hard to tell. He saw nothing conclusive one way or the other.

His gaze drifted to the photos on the shelves. “Your family?” he said.

“What?” Then he saw what Devine was staring at and looked behind him. “Oh, yes.”

Devine rose and drew closer to the photos. He eyed a photo of an infant and a young woman. “Charlotte and your wife?” he said.

Woolwine went over to stand next to Devine. “Charlotte was about four months old then. A very sweet little girl.”

“I’m sure you miss your wife very much,” said Jones, who had also joined them.

“I do, every day. She . . . well, she provided a lot of light and clarification in my life.” He glanced at Jones. “People like me tend to go overboard in various ways. Martha was constantly tugging on my sleeve, trying to make me slow down.”

Devine looked at some other photos, including one of the much younger Martha Woolwine.

“Where did you meet your wife?” asked Jones.

Devine added, “We were told that she was an art consultant and you wanted to start a collection.”

A smile graced his face. “Actually, Martha, she was Martha Dugan then, approached me. She had attended university in Prague and had started her career as both an artist and a consultant. I was at a business meeting in Switzerland when she just walked up to me and said, ‘You have reached the point in your life where you need a serious art collection, Mr. Woolwine. And I’m the person to help you build it.’ ” He smiled more broadly. “She was so confident, so infectious in her enthusiasm. So, I hired her on the spot. And for two years we traveled the world purchasing some world-class artwork. She knew her field and she was a fierce negotiator. Probably saved me hundreds of millions of dollars over the years. Then we both discovered we were in love with one another. And that was that.”

Devine continued to look at the photos and saw one of Martha and Charlotte Woolwine, where Charlotte was in a school uniform and looked to be around fifteen. “We were told that Charlotte attended the same academy as her mother.”

“Yes, the Institut Le Harpyie in Zurich. Martha had a wonderful time there and wanted Charlotte to have a similar experience. Martha then went on to a prestigious art school in Prague.”

“I understand Charlotte went to a different university?” said Devine.

“We sent Charlotte to a very fine university in Berlin. She was a business major. I sort of insisted on that. She was our only child and she had responsibilities going forward.” He smiled sadly. “Martha didn’t really want that, so, as a compromise, I let her pick the university in Germany where Charlotte ended up going.” He glanced at Jones. “One has to do what one can to keep the peace.”

“I’m sure,” Jones said.

He settled wearily back down in his seat and clasped his hands in front of him. He stared into the flames as Devine and Jones retook their seats.

Finally Woolwine said, “You know, I have more wealth than I can possibly spend. I have fabulous homes all over the world. Anything I want I can purchase a hundred times over.” He fell silent.

Devine was not going to break that silence. He wanted Woolwine to keep going.

“And then I lost the love of my life. And then Bill, who, well, even though I know what I told you previously, I liked and respected Bill. But when he filed for divorce I wrote him off. If my daughter wasn’t good enough for him, then why should I give him a second thought? But now that I know he was dying of cancer? You see, even with all my money, I, too, will of course die one day. Bill thought he knew how he was going to die. Only it didn’t work out that way. And . . . well, he didn’t deserve that. Not that anyone does.” He looked up at them, keenly. “There is much going on around me right now. Much that I don’t understand.” He looked at Devine. “Why did you ask about this fellow, what was his name, Koz . . . ?”

“Sergei Kozlov. I asked about him because up until a few days ago he was staying in a cottage at your estate in Canberra.”

Woolwine nearly came out of his seat. “What! At *my* estate?”

“We think he killed your wife, Mr. Woolwine,” said Jones. “And we think when he came back Emily Roylott saw him and recognized him, and she had to die, too.”

Woolwine collapsed back against the sofa cushions. “Will someone please tell me what the hell is going on?”

“You had no idea he was staying there?” said Jones.

“Of course not. I almost never go there anymore. It’s where . . . where Martha died. I should have sold it. But . . . she loved that place. And so does Charlotte. So . . . I kept it.”

“But you were there *recently*. One of your neighbors saw you.”

Woolwine’s features turned grim. “When exactly was this, did the *neighbor* say?”

Devine gave him the date.

Woolwine took out his phone and pulled up his calendar. He showed it to Jones and Devine.

“I could hardly be in Canberra when I was in Adelaide at that same time. And if you don’t want to rely on my calendar.” He pulled up another screen. “I gave a speech there. Here I am on the video. You can see the time and date stamp.”

Devine glanced at Jones to see her open-mouthed. He turned back to Woolwine. “Mr. Woolwine, we would like you to be kept safe. And to do so we would like you to allow the NSW Police to protect you.”

“I have ample security, Agent—”

“With all due respect, sir, it seems to me that you are surrounded by people who do not have your best interests at heart. The fellow who let us up here, who is he and how long has he been with you?”

“His name is Ion Radu. He’s been with me ever since Frank Mueller, Dennis’s father, got sick. He’s a good man. He manages the rest of the security team. And you need not worry about him. I trust him implicitly.”

“Where did he work before?” asked Jones.

“Company called PrecisionX. For their CEO, Ivan Helt. Came with the highest recommendations.”

“PrecisionX?” said Devine. “I saw one of their trucks heading toward a data center under construction on the way to Melbourne.”

“I’m sure you did,” said Woolwine. “It just so happens that I bought both PrecisionX and Purple Sage OT around the same time. They provide hardware and software for data centers all over the world.”

“Including cybersecurity?” asked Devine.

“Especially that. They use AI to put together the best firewalls and detection systems on the planet. It’s one of our biggest selling features and the reason I acquired both companies.”

“So Radu once worked for Helt?”

“Yes, what is this about? If you’re trying to imply that Radu is being disloyal, I can assure you that you’re wrong. During the bombings of my shops I got many threats. And one man even attacked me with a knife. Radu literally saved my life.”

Devine said, “Then who hired Anna Cipolla, who we now know is a Russian operative named Anastasia Morozov?”

Woolwine now didn’t look as cocksure. “Well, I don’t know. She wasn’t security. She was a PA at Charlotte’s home. You’d have to talk to her for details. But if you think—”

Devine held up a finger to his mouth and Woolwine fell silent. Devine rose, went over to one of the shelves, and lifted up a framed photo, of which there were an array there. Behind it was a black object. He held it up and Jones sucked in a breath. It was a listening device.

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CHAPTER

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DEVINE'S GLOCK CAME OUT AND so did Jones's sidearm.

Woolwine had half risen from his seat, but Devine motioned for him to remain still. He took the listening device and carried it into another room, then came back without it.

"No wonder Radu wanted to take our guns," said Jones in a low voice. "How'd you spot it?"

"Its red transmission light. There was a faint reflection of it off the glass frame behind it. I should have caught it before."

"They were listening?" said Woolwine.

"We need backup," Devine said to Jones. "Now."

She pulled out her phone and made the call, or tried to. "I've got no bars, nothing," she said incredulously.

Devine pulled his phone and found the same result.

Woolwine did as well, with no luck. He told them there was no landline phone.

Devine told Jones and Woolwine to remain where they were.

He left the room and walked over to the front door and listened. He then stepped to the side with his back to the wall, sat down on his butt, reached up, and slowly turned the door handle.

Four slugs pierced the door and the rounds lodged in the far wall.

Devine retreated to Jones and Woolwine.

"Were those gunshots?" said a shaky Woolwine.

Devine nodded. "We go out there, we're dead."

"What in the hell is happening?" said Woolwine.

Devine gazed at him and saw not one of the richest people in the world, but just a terrified old man.

In a whisper Devine said to Woolwine, "Where are the exit stairs?"

“Halfway down the hall and on the left,” he mumbled. “But you said—”

Devine glanced around the apartment but saw no other way out. He turned to one of the windows and looked out. They were a long way up, and there was no balcony to climb out on.

There was also no one on the street below to call out to.

Devine unlocked and raised the window.

“Travis, you can’t jump,” cried out Jones.

He looked at her. “I’m not delusional. Yet.”

He leaned out, pointed his gun downward, took aim, and fired. The bullet hit the windshield of an empty parked convertible, shattering it. The car alarm started blaring and the lights commenced going on and off.

They heard voices shouting and a few people rushed out onto the street, saw the blown-out glass, and looked wildly around.

Devine leaned out and shouted, “Call the cops. There’s a shooter in the area.”

He didn’t know if they could hear him over the blare of the alarm, but it didn’t matter. He’d done what he had set out to do.

Devine rushed out to the apartment’s front door and listened; he heard the sounds of feet running away. He carefully opened the door in time to see Radu taking a right turn off the hallway. He called over his shoulder, “Anais, bring Mr. Woolwine.”

A few moments later they appeared next to him. He led them down the hall and to the exit stairs. With Devine in front and Jones in the rear, they made their way quickly down.

When they got to the street level, a police car had pulled up.

Jones flashed her warrant card and started talking to the officers while Devine kept Woolwine behind him and peered around for any sign of Radu, or even Kozlov.

Woolwine said anxiously, “Do you think it’s safe?”

“I don’t know,” said Devine. “But I’m not betting on it.”

Jones came over to them with the officers trailing her.

She introduced them to Carlton Woolwine, and it was clear that both cops knew who he was. They quickly escorted him back to their patrol car and put him inside. Both men stood guard around the car while Jones got on her phone, which was now working.

Devine looked at his own phone, which now had full bars. They must have had a jamming device in the building, he figured.

Jones finished her call, went over to the patrol car, and talked to the two officers. They nodded, got into their vehicle, and drove off with Woolwine.

She hurried back over to Devine. “They’re taking Woolwine to a safe house.”

“Tim Blair lied to us,” said Devine. “He said he saw Woolwine at the Canberra estate.”

“Maybe when he came over to us at the pub he was actually spying on us.”

“But why lie about Woolwine? If he’s in on it, what did it gain them?”

Jones said, “I don’t know. And Tim did help us get on the Woolwine estate by contacting Bridget.”

“And we also almost got caught. Maybe he tipped them off.”

“It’s certainly possible. Hell, with this case it seems anything is possible.”

“I think we need to get out there, pronto, Anais. I’m getting really tired of questions. I want answers.”

They raced to her Passat.

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CHAPTER

77

TIM BLAIR HAD WORKED HARD all that day and his father had driven him relentlessly, just like always. One more chore to do, and then another and another. He had no idea when it would ever end. Blair had told himself that when the station became his he would do things differently. He had dropped into bed at near midnight and immediately fallen asleep.

Sunrise was still hours away when he felt something touch him. He thought at first it was a gnat or mosquito. He rubbed at his nose and listened for the sound of the thing buzzing. But he didn't hear it. He settled back down, but there it was again. Touching him.

Frustrated, he finally opened his eyes.

The gun muzzle hovered right above his face.

"Holy shit!" he called out.

Devine put a finger to his lips and said, "Get up and get some clothes on. Now."

Two minutes later he, Jones, and Blair were outside.

"What the hell are you two—" began Blair.

Devine grabbed him by the shirt front, lifted him off the ground, and slammed him against the side of the house.

"You lied to us, Tim. And I don't like people who lie."

"What did I lie about?" Blair gasped.

"Seeing Carlton Woolwine in a car the night the jet came in. You said he waved to you, couldn't miss him. Only he was actually giving a speech in Adelaide at the time."

Blair looked at Jones and then at Devine and sighed. "Okay, I lied."

Devine let go and Blair slumped to the dirt.

"Why?" demanded Jones. "Why did you lie?"

“ ’Cause the way you were talking, if he was here then he’d be in trouble. And I want Woolwine to be in trouble so he’ll stop trying to buy our place. That’s why. So . . . so I said I saw him, when I didn’t.”

“Bullshit!” snapped Jones. “I think you’re working with some people who tried to kill Woolwine and us earlier tonight back in Sydney. And you were the one who wanted to get out of our car and walk home that night. Right after that we were attacked probably by a bunch of Russians. Pretty damn convenient. For you!”

Blair looked at her like she was out of her mind. “Russians? I’ve never even seen a Russian, okay?”

Devine snapped, “Did you lie about anything else? The chopper? Roylott’s insomnia?”

“No, that’s all true. I . . . she did have insomnia. And I *did* see the chopper that night.”

Devine shook his head, rubbed the back of his neck, and looked at Jones inquiringly. “Is he an idiot and telling the truth or a spy and lying his ass off?”

Jones ran her gaze down the obviously out-of-his-depth Blair and said, “I vote idiot.”

Devine knelt down next to Blair. “If you’re lying I will come back here. First I will hurt you, really badly, and then DS Jones is going to arrest you for indictable offenses, and obstruction or whatever the fuck they call it down here.”

“Perverting the cause of justice,” interjected Jones.

Devine barked, “Yeah, *that*. Do you understand?”

“I . . . Yeah, I . . . understand,” said Blair dejectedly.

Devine took his hand and helped him back up.

“Anything to report since we’ve been gone, Tim?” said Jones.

“No, not much. I mean, Mrs. Woolwine’s at the estate. She came in the chopper yesterday. She drove out a little later but then came back.”

Jones and Devine exchanged a glance. “She said she almost never came here anymore,” said Jones.

“Yeah, I was surprised, too,” said Blair.

Devine’s phone buzzed. When he saw the number he said to Jones, “I’ll be right back.” He looked at Blair. “Don’t go anywhere.”

Devine walked away and answered the phone. “Lydia?”

Lydia White, his old coworker from his Wall Street days, said, “You still down under?”

“I’m as *down under* as it’s actually possible to be,” he replied curtly.

“Well, I have some things for you per your request.”

“I’m all ears.”

“Okay, starting six years ago Woolwine Enterprises started to get big into data centers, clouds, crypto, and then AI, the whole playbook. For a while they didn’t seem to know what they wanted to do. No clear vision. Hard, soft, a player, a sub, a peripheral.”

“And now?”

“Now their strategy is to become the premier player in the data center infrastructure business.”

“I read that, too.”

“Yeah, but what you may not know is that they are implementing a cradle-to-grave strategy.”

“Meaning?”

“They will secure the financing, develop the site, build it out, install all the guts, equip it with everything the lessee needs, from monitoring to security to troubleshooting to running periodic diagnostic filtering to meeting all the individual requirements of their clients. To do that fully they purchased two companies about eighteen months ago, Purple Sage OT and PrecisionX.”

“I saw them on a list but didn’t do a deep dive into them.”

“They’re both hybrids. Meaning they do hardware and software with an AI kicker.”

“Explain that.”

“They supply servers, related hardware, and the software to run them, but then build in an AI overlay that is constantly learning every nuance of the data flow to make sure it can make real-time adjustments to that flow to ensure that the system will run flawlessly. You can’t let any grit get in the way of the flow, Travis. From losing AC to a blip in the transmission of data, it can be catastrophic.”

“I suppose they prevent cyberattacks and the like?”

“Of course. That’s Data Center 101. But I did find one thing interesting.”

“What was that?”

“All data centers that I’m familiar with employ human engineers and security on-site, the so-called human in the loop. They monitor the systems and make sure everything is running smoothly. They’re also the fail-safe in case the technology goes crazy for some reason and starts hallucinating.”

“And these guys?”

“Totally automated. No humans in the mix. And there are robots for security also run by AI to do things that require a physical presence. And there’s another thing.”

“What?”

“Both Purple Sage and Precision, before they were purchased by Woolwine, were sold to a firm operating out of Southeast Asia named Cerberus Holdings that I can’t really find anything on. The sale to Woolwine took place only a few months after the unknown firm had completed the purchase.”

“So a flip. Was there a premium purchase price?”

“That’s the thing, Travis, it was for the same amount that Cerberus paid a few months earlier.”

“Is Cerberus publicly traded?”

“No. Which makes finding info on them difficult. I had to dig deep and call in favors for what I did find out.”

“Who signed off on the deal on behalf of Woolwine? Carlton Woolwine presumably?”

“No. He’s not running that division now. His daughter signed off on it.”

“Wait a minute, I knew she was involved in the data center business, but you say she’s *running* it?”

“Has been for a while now. Hey, didn’t her husband just get killed or something? Wait a minute, is that why you’re down there?”

“Look, Lydia, is there anything else weird about these companies that you saw?”

“Other than the purchase price being the same, not really.”

“I recall from our time together at Cowl that you went with your gut more than you did the numbers. Any insight here?”

“Well . . . it may be nothing.”

“Tell me.”

“When I dug deeper on Precision and Purple Sage I found a really obscure article from *Wired* that talked about them both.”

“What did it say?”

“It reported that the board of directors for the two companies appeared to be the same even though they were entirely separate businesses. And two of the board members?”

“Yeah, what about them?”

“Well, one was a Russian oligarch who it was *believed* had fallen out of favor with Putin.”

“And the other?”

“Was a prince from the Middle East.”

“Russian and desert royal. Unusual but not unheard of.” But Devine was also thinking about the mix of players in his case: *Eastern European and Middle Eastern*.

“But the Russian was in the agriculture business. And the prince had the rep of being simply a playboy.”

“Okay, but I’m not seeing—”

“The thing is that a week after the story pubbed the writer died.”

“How?”

“He apparently jumped out of a window in his apartment building. There was a suicide note and his body was full of fentanyl. But he was getting married the following week, had never been suicidal, and had no history of drug use.”

“So maybe he was pushed?”

“Not my specialty, Travis. That’s your job, I guess. And the last thing?”

“Yeah.”

“These two companies offer cradle-to-grave services on data centers?”

“You already told me that, so?”

“I know a friend in the business. He got me a peek at their standard lease agreement for their facilities.”

“Anything weird in the terms?”

“Only one thing, but it seems pretty important.”

“Which is?”

“Well, that all contact and communication must be with the parties’ chatbots—no humans in the chain.”

“Okay, is that usual?”

“Well, one day very soon it may be the norm. But not now. Like I said, there’s a human overlay with every other outfit. Now it may just be that these companies are on the cutting edge, or it may be something else.” She paused. “But then again, why pay humans a living wage if you don’t have

to? I keep my résumé updated at all times because of that. Hell, I might become an electrician." She let out a long breath. "Okay, I'm done preaching. Anything else?"

"No, I think I'll just slit my wrists now."

"Come on, Travis, I think what you do will always be needed. Gotta go, the boss is looking at me right now and wondering which chatbot to trade me in for."

She clicked off and Devine put his phone down, more confused now than when the conversation had started.

But with maybe a smidge of light at the end of a very long, very dark tunnel.

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CHAPTER

78

DEVINE REJOINED JONES AND BLAIR. Jones said, “Everything good?”

“Don’t know,” he said. He looked at Blair. “Go back to sleep and consider yourself warned and lucky as shit.”

Blair sprinted back inside his house.

Devine looked at Jones. “Charlotte Woolwine is the head of Woolwine’s AI business.”

“That’s not what she told us.”

“Look, do you have an AI expert lying around? Because I need a crash course.”

“I know a journalist who’s been covering AI exclusively for the last five years. She’s a computer science major and knows about as much as anyone on the subject.”

“Any chance of getting a sit-down with the person?”

“Sure. She’s local.”

“Set it up sooner rather than later.”

“You have a lead?”

“I have a . . . feeling, Anais. That’s all. But it’s burning a hole right in my gut.”

* * *

Jess Whitaker was in her forties, brunette and petite, with a ready smile and a quiet but confident manner. Devine instantly liked her.

They were at Jones’s flat with coffees in hand and sitting around the kitchen table the next day.

“I understand you have some questions about AI, Agent Devine?” she said.

“I’d actually like to know about data centers first.”

“Okay, shoot.”

“Data is important, correct?”

“Right now it’s the most valuable thing on earth. It’s how Meta and Google and all the other tech companies make the vast majority of their income and justify trillion-dollar valuations. Every time you interact with Meta or Google or whatever platform, they learn a ton of things about you. Literally trillions of data points can be analyzed and monetized every hour of every day. Now with people engaging routinely with chatbots, that pace has only quickened.”

“But you can opt out by limiting what data they can access,” pointed out Jones.

“Sure, you can opt out. And for corporate customers the contracts usually prohibit what is called frontier model training. Most ethical providers respect this but who really knows. And who’s making sure they aren’t ignoring your choices and grabbing that data and selling it anyway, Anais?”

“But aren’t there laws and safeguards in place?” said Devine.

She scoffed, “Regulating tech and making sure cookie choices are honored? That’s at the very bottom of a government’s to-do list. Trust me, every time you’re online they are learning everything about you, and now with AI companions, it’s only going to accelerate in pace and scope. The EU has laws and regs in place for data privacy and it works well. The default setting there on cookies is no, so you have to affirmatively opt in as a consumer. A company violating those wishes gets hit with massive fines.”

“How about in Australia?” asked Jones.

“Not that strong. It’s implied consent and you have to opt out.”

“I feel naked,” exclaimed Jones.

“We’re all pretty much naked, Anais,” said Whitaker. She looked at Devine. “You mentioned data centers? What in particular?”

“First, the general overview, who owns what?”

“The hyper-scalers, like Amazon, Google, and Microsoft, own their commercial cloud compute space. Anthropic goes through Google and Open AI uses Microsoft’s—its partner’s—space. But it’s still a disadvantage. And ironically Microsoft has to rely on its investment in OpenAI, although word is they are both looking to decouple. And Open AI and Anthropic still are in the phase of will they build or lease their cloud compute.”

“What do they use to protect the data?”

“The shorter answer is what *don’t* they use to protect all that data.”

“Can you walk us through a few scenarios?” said Jones.

“I’d be happy to. A phishing email opens a hole through which a digital Trojan horse slips in to both observe and steal. A human engineer uses his personal computer, which does not have extra layers of security that his work device does, to perform some business-related task and a virus lurking on his laptop is then transferred to the data center’s operating system. There was one case where a bad actor used a zombie device to steal important financial information and then ransomed the legit owner to the tune of one billion in crypto for its safe return.”

“Excuse me?” said Jones. “A zombie device?”

“A computer, phone, or other smart device, a server in the closet that has been forgotten, incorrectly programmed, or no longer in use but still on the system. They’re basically stupid but they can be controlled by bad actors. Hence the name. The Mirai Botnet involved the hijacking of hundreds of thousands of home webcams and routers that had abysmal security. They were then amassed into a digital army to attack platforms like Netflix.”

“What about when data centers are leased?” said Devine. “Any special problems there?”

“Lessors own the optic cables. Bad actors can use something called ‘fiber tapping’ to pull out signals without interfering with the connection. Then there’s the man-in-the-middle attacker. The lessor also owns the switches and routers. With that a bad actor can put themselves between the lessee and the internet—in the middle, so to speak—to either steal or change data packets. They can get in through the tiniest crack. That’s why there are so many players making billions off that need.”

“And the protections?” asked Devine.

Whitaker listed them off on her fingers. “They call it ‘good hygiene.’ There’s advanced threat detection, proactive patching, regular backups; end-to-end encryption is a particularly popular one. If they can’t get into the pipeline at the beginning or end, it’s very difficult to break through—and even if they do, certain standard protocols will mean the thieves get nothing but gibberish instead of usable data. There are hardware security modules that are dedicated. Another safety method is the lessor never having the passwords or admin access to read the data. Then there’s optical-layer encryption. That protects the data the instant it reaches the pipe. All the top-

tier centers use similar protocols, like regular security audits. That's a big selling point for clients, to make sure their data is safe."

"How does AI come into this now?" asked Devine.

"In many ways it is still evolving and will continue to do so. Everything I just talked about now has AI overlays."

"But AI can be used by bad actors, too, right?" said Devine.

"Absolutely. And they *are* using it. AI can automate the threat protection and responses. But it also may be susceptible to machine-learning assaults and manipulation. If you over-rely on algos, it can create problems. You essentially build an AI police force, but it has to be managed by humans, just in case."

Devine said, "Woolwine's companies use only AI at their leased data centers. There are no human staffers, engineers, or security personnel. If you want to communicate, you're doing it through nonhuman means."

Whitaker looked surprised but then said, "Well, taking the human out can reduce the risk, so I can understand them taking that approach."

"But having *no* humans overseeing the ops?" said Jones.

"I have to admit that isn't typical," said Whitaker. "At least not right now."

Devine said, "Okay, I get that having just AI on the inside can cut down on human error, but it also might create blind spots in the threat protection for the data centers. And what about the reverse?"

"Not following," said Whitaker.

"If the clients or lessees or whatever you want to call them are dealing with AI or chatbots from the lessor, what if the latter are the thieves, the ones wanting to steal the data?"

"But they'd be stealing from themselves," said Whitaker.

"No. The data doesn't belong to, say, Woolwine. He's just basically leasing them a warehouse to store it. And are data centers connected? If you corrupt one can you corrupt the entire pipe?"

"A year ago I would have answered that differently. But with third-party lessors and thousands of data centers coming online and churning forward on machine learning and the comingling of parts of clouds, it's gotten a lot more complicated. Not all centers are looped together, surely. But far more are now than were. But I still didn't get your point about AI being the thief."

“If an AI overlay secretly caused a security breach, their AI ‘staff’ would interact with a client to ‘solve’ that problem, right?”

“Yes. What’s also becoming more common is the emerging use of the AI Super Agent, which oversees a battalion of regular AI agents. They sometimes negotiate with one another with no human intervention.”

“And I read where Claude wrote the new AI platform for Anthropic,” said Jones.

“That’s right, Mythos,” replied Whitaker. She looked back at Devine. “Agents can create other agents to perform tasks, so you need a system in place to manage all that, guardrails, security access that can stop some agents from drifting or else retire them when they do. Companies are even starting to look at registering AI agents like people so there can be better control over access rights and the like.”

“Drifting?” said Devine.

“That’s when an AI agent starts giving answers that are progressively inaccurate. No one is sure why they do that, but it’s often when there isn’t new info in the pipe. Then the damn agents start making shit up.”

“Great, let’s hope they’re never involved in bloody air traffic control,” noted Jones.

Devine glanced at Jones for a moment, but then said to Whitaker, “My point is if these Super Agents are dealing with humans on the other end, it could trick them into trusting it, or the human may key in something that they believe is innocuous in response to something the AI requests. They may have other screens or files up on their computer at the time. Can AI potentially see all that somehow? Passwords, access codes, admin credentials?”

“The short and long answer is, I don’t know, Agent Devine. But the way you laid it out, it’s certainly possible.”

“And if AI is talking to AI, on both ends, I mean, we don’t really know what they’re exchanging, I mean, for certain, do we?”

“Well, there would be a record of the interaction.”

“Prepared by the AI, which might be deceived and/or compromised? Or deceiving on purpose?”

Whitaker drummed her fingers on the desk. “In other words the AI might lie and then hide the truth?”

“Compromised people do that all the time. Why not AI, whose intelligence is drawn from humans, correct? Can AI be bribed? Can AI hold

a grudge? Can AI keep things from its masters? And if these things can drift, maybe they can be manipulated."

Jones said, "You're scaring the shit out of me, Travis."

Whitaker glanced at her. "The thing is, Anais, everything he just said is completely possible, and some of it has already happened. Meta's superintelligence safety director had most of her emails deleted by her open tool AI agent despite her telling it to stop. It didn't stop, but later apologized for its unauthorized actions. America's military may want to use AI for widespread domestic surveillance or fully autonomous weapons. What could possibly go wrong with that?" she added sarcastically.

"I've read your articles, Jess. But I don't think you've ever addressed those risks."

"I think Agent Devine has spoken as to the reason."

"Which is?" said Devine.

"If I write about such things I probably won't have a job much longer. An AI firm just bought the magazine where I work. Pretty soon they'll control all media."

"I read *1984* at West Point," said Devine, looking at her keenly.

"Yes, well, Orwell was actually right. He was just a little off on his damn timing," said Whitaker.

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CHAPTER

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"Why did Charlotte Woolwine downplay her work on AI?" asked Jones. She and Devine were in her Passat.

"More to the point, if her father didn't have those prisoners transferred out, what power at the top of the chain did?"

"Wait, do you think it was her? Have we suspected the *wrong* Woolwine all along?"

"I think maybe we've been looking at this *all* wrong. She told us she almost never goes to the estate in Canberra, but she was just there. And we never asked where she was when her mother was killed, or Emily Roylott."

"You can't believe she killed either one, can you? I mean, her *mother*?"

"Children do kill their parents." He glanced out the window. "And wives kill their husbands, too. All the time."

"You really think she had Walker murdered?"

"We never answered the question, really, of why he was divorcing her. By everything we've heard they loved each other, right?"

"Right."

"But what if something changed with Walker? And I'm not talking about his illness."

"What do you mean *changed*?"

"He was an intelligence analyst. What if he found out something that would not allow him to remain married to Charlotte?"

"What could that possibly be?"

"If she is wrapped up in all this, he might have found out, been appalled, couldn't stand being married to her. He files for divorce, leaves his job and the country, and goes to work for Carl Peeters and his company, which pops up whenever there's a new crisis that needs solving. Only

maybe Walker's wife is the source of the new crisis that her husband is now trying to defeat. An impossible situation for him, hell, for anyone."

"But she was targeted with a bomb."

"And Walker heard chatter on it and found out and told them, so no harm done. But what a way to throw off suspicion from Charlotte, right? That's what I mean when I said we might be looking at all of this wrong. And like we talked about before, maybe Walker knew that Theresa Lee was working on this story, about a crooked head of a petrostate, which may or may not be referring to the Russians or a prince in the Middle East, or both. He was terrified that she was going to run with it, which would have, he feared, blown up his plans to bring it all down. So he 'saves' her from Somali human traffickers, gets her to back off as a personal favor, then later hunts her down in New York, and tells her the truth."

"And the hit team goes after both of them when they learned what Walker was up to and they knew something of what Lee had been planning to investigate. Two birds, one stone."

"And putting Walker's body right on his wife's doorstep? Another way to throw off suspicion from her."

"But are you saying Carlton is innocent in all this?"

"He had spies in his own apartment building, Anais. This Ion Radu guy has vanished. It seems that they were prepared to kill him that night if necessary."

"But Charlotte's mother said it was all about BRICS."

"No, *Charlotte* told us that."

"But Mueller thought it was connected, too."

Devine looked less confident now. "That's right."

"And Travis, why would a billionairess do any of this?"

"Well, we were wondering why Carlton might be doing it. And we had settled on making more money. But maybe that's not what drives Charlotte."

"What then?"

"She said she was a socialist at university."

"Come on, lots of people say that."

As they stopped at a light, Devine looked out the window. "Sergei Kozlov is Special Forces. He's here, right in the middle of all this. His daughter was a Russian agent and also one of Charlotte's PAs. She presumably hired her."

“So if Charlotte Woolwine is in bed with the Russians we have to find out why, *and* what the endgame truly is.”

Devine pulled out his phone and punched in a number.

It was answered and he said, “I need whatever you can find on the Institut Le Harpyie, it’s in Switzerland. Student rolls, teachers, whatever you can find. Going back as far as you can. And also the university where Charlotte Woolwine went in Berlin.” Devine had another thought. “And her mother, too. Martha, maiden name, Dugan. She went to Harpyie as well and then to an art university in Prague. And two other people. Malcolm Jarvis, who is the estate manager for Carlton Woolwine’s Canberra property, and Ion Radu, head of security for Carlton Woolwine. And I need all that as fast as you can get it.”

He clicked off and looked at Jones.

“What the hell is going on, Travis?”

“All I can tell you is it’s nothing good.”

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CHAPTER

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IT WAS LATE AT NIGHT and Devine was riding a ferry across the harbor. As the darkness deepened, so did his mood.

Anais Jones's job and career were hanging on by a thread.

Bill Walker and Dennis Mueller had been shot to death. Emerson Campbell and Theresa Lee had been attacked and were in the hospital, with the former not certain of surviving. Sergeant Lewis Drury was still missing. Anna Cipolla, aka Anastasia Morozov, was dead by Devine's hand. He had killed two other men who had kidnapped him. The other two had been gunned down, presumably by forces aligned with Sergei Kozlov. And with all that information in hand, he wasn't sure he understood this case any better than he had when he'd first landed in Australia.

Yet he was starting to understand one thing, and that was why he was making this trip tonight. And if he was right, everything that was puzzling him would suddenly click into place. If he was wrong, Devine wasn't sure he had a Plan B. But from what he had learned from his folks back in the States who had dug into the questions he had given them about Martha Woolwine and her daughter's pasts and sent the results to him, Devine thought he was probably correct.

He got off at Darling Point and took a few moments to stare down at the water where Walker's body had resurfaced, intentionally at this location, they had since learned.

He labored up the hill to the neighborhood where Charlotte Woolwine lived. He stood on a darkened corner under a tree and watched the gate leading to her home.

It was dark, quiet, potentially deadly. For all the time he'd spent with the woman, Devine had realized he didn't know Charlotte Woolwine, bereaved widow and mother of three, really at all.

But with all that he had just learned, maybe he was beginning to.

His hand went to his Glock. He took it out, rechecked the mag, and reholstered it. He lifted his leg and tapped his ankle where lay the K-bar knife that had snuffed out Morozov's young life, for which her father had promised vengeance against Devine.

A violent vengeance. If the Russian has his way.

But he would have a say in that, Devine knew. And promised violence could flow both ways.

He stood there for two hours just watching because sometimes simply observing could yield invaluable intel. He wasn't precisely sure what he was waiting for, but Devine figured that late at night would be the ideal time for certain people to meet with the woman who called this place home. And Devine was a very patient hunter. If they didn't come tonight, he would be back tomorrow.

Ten minutes later a car pulled up to the gate. Two men got out and the car drove off. Probably an Uber, thought Devine.

He couldn't make out the men in the darkness, but when they moved to the call box a motion sensor light came on, bathing them in illumination. Devine quickly recognized both.

One was Malcolm Jarvis, the Canberra estate manager. And more than likely the man who had sicced the two truckloads of would-be killers on him and Jones. The other was Ion Radu, the Woolwine head of security.

The gates swung open, and Jarvis and Radu walked through.

Devine raced across the street and slipped in between the gates right before they banged shut. As the front door opened, Devine hid behind a large rhododendron and continued to watch. Jarvis and Radu went inside and the door closed behind the two late-night visitors.

Remembering the configuration of the house, Devine hurried around back but had to duck behind a tree as a security person came around the other corner of the house, probably on his rounds.

After the man passed by, Devine kept moving until he had a sight line into the house through a set of large rear windows.

Charlotte Woolwine was seated when Jarvis and Radu walked in. The men looked confident and imposing in the harsh light. By contrast Woolwine looked beaten down and fearful.

DHS had also learned some things about these two men. Jarvis was German, East German, having been born long before the Wall came down.

His career had been an interesting one, but there were curious gaps that agents at DHS said smacked of a sophisticated cover story, perhaps to hide some troubling past affiliations. Radu, it turned out, had been vetted and hired by Jarvis. And Radu had been born in Romania when it was still under the Soviets' control. And his past had been a checkered one with similar gaps to Jarvis's. Bottom line, DHS believed both men were Russian operatives.

They sat across from her and Radu started speaking, rapidly, so rapidly that Devine, who had drawn as close as he could, was unable to make out any phrases or even words. The man gesticulated with his hands, and when he pointed sharply at Woolwine she drew back as though pricked by the thrust. Jarvis then rose and paced as *he* spoke.

As Devine watched, Jarvis turned to Woolwine, bent down, and slapped her. Hard. She gasped and fell back against her seat, her hand over her injured cheek.

When the men left a minute later, Devine hurried over to the window and peered through at Woolwine, who was still seated, and looking shattered.

He tapped on the glass. Woolwine glanced sharply up and saw him.

Okay, here we go.

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CHAPTER

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A FEW MOMENTS LATER DEVINE WAS seated across from Woolwine. She had let him in through a set of French doors opening onto the rear grounds.

"My visitors usually come through the front door," she said sternly. She was rubbing her reddened cheek where Jarvis had struck her.

"I was just out for a stroll and then I saw a cat jump the wall around your house and then I heard it cry out. I thought it might have been hurt. So I climbed over the wall and tried to find it, but didn't."

It was as lame a story as he'd ever told, and she didn't believe a word of it, he knew. She could have pushed him on it, or asked him to leave. But she didn't and he thought he knew why.

She didn't have to let me in. She wants to talk. To me.

Woolwine asked him if he wanted something to drink. He accepted. She used her phone to call someone and order the drinks. When an elderly aide delivered her a gin and tonic and him a beer, she was surprised to see Devine, but Woolwine said, "Thank you, Jean." And the woman quickly left.

Devine's gaze followed her all the way. Woolwine must have noted this because she said, "Don't worry, she's not a Russian soldier. She's been with me since I was a child."

"At this point, I'm suspicious of everyone."

Woolwine sipped her drink and said, "This is reminiscent of our first meeting on the plane. But now we're *both* drinking."

Devine took a swallow of beer. "Sometimes a case just drives you to drink."

Her eyes darted to his, and in that searching gaze, Devine saw many things, including an attempt by her to read his motives for being here. Did she assume that he had seen Jarvis and Radu?

Her next words answered that. “You just missed Malcolm Jarvis and his mate, Mr. Radu.”

“Who?” Devine lied.

“Oh, right, you’ve never met them.” She shot him a glance once more, and once more came the searching look that he did his best to stare right through. “He’s our estate manager in Canberra. Well, my *father’s* estate manager. He owns the property, not me.”

This was a cover-your-ass move, Devine interpreted. She wanted nothing to do with the Canberra estate, clearly.

“And Mr. Radu?”

“Head of overall security. Again for my father.”

“Everything okay in Canberra?” he said.

“Yes, fine. He . . . Mr. Jarvis just comes up to report from time to time. And Radu decided to tag along, I suppose.”

“I’m sorry we couldn’t help you with the trespass and fire out there. But your father did not seem so inclined.”

“That was at best a minor matter. Very minor.”

“Compared to what?”

“Why are you here, Agent Devine?” she snapped.

The woman’s nerves are clearly running away from her.

“Have you been to the Canberra estate recently?”

Her gaze flashed across him a third time. He read this one just as readily.

Did I know of her recent visit?

“Yes. I went down there to check on some things, and also to ride, as I told you. It’s a nice time of year. And it clears my mind.”

“Weren’t you able to meet with Jarvis then, or was he not there?”

She was evidently not prepared for this simple query and chose not to answer it.

“So, really, what brings you here tonight?” she asked. “It is rather late for visitors. And, quite frankly, Jarvis and Radu wore me out.”

Truer words were probably never spoken, thought Devine as he glanced at her bruised cheek. Radu and Jarvis doing all the talking. And that slap? That slap provided a possible opening. “Have you heard from your father?”

“No, why?”

He didn’t know if Jarvis and Radu had filled her in on what happened at her father’s apartment. It probably didn’t matter.

“Just wondering. I know you were worried about him.”

“I constantly worry about my father.”

As Devine ran his gaze over her, it seemed that the woman, however inexplicably to him now, was telling the truth. He decided to test another theory. “You really did love your husband, didn’t you?”

“I told you that I did. And it was the *truth*.” Her answer was dispassionately automatic, her expression was not. It was guarded, mingled with shock, outrage even. But then there was the crumpling of her forehead, the sag of her eyes, finally the tears that sprouted from them. And Woolwine could no longer look at him. Her gaze dropped to the carpet under her bare feet.

“And yet he was divorcing you. Any thoughts on that?”

She wiped her runny nose with a tissue. “We’ve been over this!”

“But you can have new thoughts, anything that might help us find whoever did this.”

“I . . . I can’t. I have no . . . thoughts.”

“Your husband was in the intelligence business.”

She stopped sniffling and looked up at him. Her expression was now vivid, with fear. “What does that have to do with him divorcing me?”

In answer Devine pulled out his phone. The DHS researchers had more than earned their salary. He was about to drop the hammer on the billionairess.

On the screen was an old photo of a young woman.

“This is Marta Dugin, your mother,” he explained.

“No, you mean *Martha Dugan*.”

“No, I mean *Marta Dugin*. She changed both her names before she met your father. And I don’t think that meeting was a coincidence.”

“You’re wrong. He ran into her.”

But Devine could tell from her hopeless expression and defeated tone that she knew it was close to being over.

“No, she pursued him, like she had been *ordered* to.” He had no clear proof of this, yet he had never been surer of anything in his life.

“Been ordered to?” she said dully.

“Dugin, as you know, is a Russian surname. It probably comes from the word *duga*. It can refer to something curved or bent. And I guess that was sort of spot-on here. I mean, your mother bent herself into a shape that was not who she really was.”

She stared at him with a blank expression before blurting out, “I have no idea what the fuck you’re talking about.”

“The Institut Le Harpyie? When your mother attended, it was infiltrated by the KGB. Some would say controlled by it. This was during the Cold War, of course.”

“Not everyone who attended there was a Soviet. There were Westerners.”

“So you know about its history? Interesting. Yes, there were Westerners, but very few. And the same could be said for when *you* attended.”

“You are not insinuating that the KGB was at Harpyie when I was there?” she said coldly.

“No.”

“Well, good then.”

“The KGB was long defunct by then. The *FSB* was there in its place.” He looked at his phone. “And the university your mother went to in Prague? Back then Czechoslovakia *was* behind the Iron Curtain. Not technically part of the Soviet Union, it was a communist country, a loyal member of the Eastern Bloc, a staunch ally of the Kremlin, and no friend of the Western world. Your mother had one favorite professor, it seems. I’m amazed my folks could track this down so quickly, but then again, as I keep hearing, there really are no more secrets.”

“What professor?”

“Ivan *Kozlov*. The father of Sergei Kozlov, who tried to kill me, at least twice. And whose daughter, Anastasia, I did kill, and who was hired by you, or maybe Radu, or Jarvis, who are both in league with Kozlov. He was at your Canberra estate, but then you knew that. I think Jarvis and Radu came here tonight to personally convey your marching orders from Kozlov. Letters and emails can be intercepted, after all, and a face-to-face can be rather more intimidating and leave a lasting impression.” He pointed to her reddened cheek where Jarvis had struck her.

She stood. “You are absolutely deranged.”

“And your husband discovered this. But he didn’t out you, because he was married to you, and you were the mother of his children. It was a delicate business, you see. So he did the best he could, especially considering he didn’t have long to live. He left you and this country and went to work in New York trying to fight back against what was coming. Previously, Theresa Lee had grabbed a lead on a story, the crooked or

corrupt head or heads of a petrostate, and was running it down when Walker saved her life. Later, he arranged what looked to her like a coincidental meeting to confess that he had set her up to be rescued so he could get her to stop working on her story, on the pretense that there was nothing there. She didn't take it well, but then the hit team showed up, and she and Walker suddenly had far bigger problems."

Woolwine sputtered, "The . . . the Russians tried to kill me, the car bomb, remember?"

"And your husband was given lots of notice to make sure it never did any harm. It was a cover move, Charlotte, maybe a desperate, transparent one, but it worked, until it didn't." He drew a breath and said, "Why did your mother decide she didn't want to spy for the Russians anymore?"

Tears dripped from Woolwine's eyes and threaded down her cheeks. She stared at him with such an expression of misery that, despite everything, Devine felt sympathy for the woman.

He said, "Valuable spies are not killed by their handlers. But spies who want out? They are a *liability*. Kozlov was sent to dispatch her. He might have even known her from when his father taught the former Marta Dugin. And when he came back that night and Emily Roylott saw him again, recognized him, again, she had to die, too."

"If my mother were a Russian working for the Soviets, do you really think that her identity wouldn't have been—"

"She had deep cover and she became a spy when people could disappear and reappear and no one the wiser. Marta Dugin vanished and Martha Dugan, complete with an ironclad backstory, emerged from the ashes." He paused and considered her. "They killed your husband and tied him to the dock at Darling Point. Again, as misdirection, because they could not afford to lose you, Charlotte. You're the linchpin. Without you, their plan does not work."

"Plan?"

"How hard was it flying fourteen hours down here with me asking you questions about your husband's murder while you knew the truth the whole time? More importantly, how was telling your children about it? Watching them in pain, crying their hearts out, and you knew the whole—"

She rose on shaky limbs. "Stop. Stop!"

Devine sat back and watched her. "I truly believe you want out, too, Charlotte. But you have no idea how to do it. You don't want your children

to be orphans. That's a strong motivation. Is that why Jarvis and Radu came by? Not to simply convey orders? I was watching at the window. They did all the talking. Jarvis slapped you, like he owned you. Did he tell you that if you pull out now, not only do you die, but your kids do, too? Because I know you love them. I've never been in doubt about that."

Woolwine dropped to her knees, spilling her drink. "Please . . . please stop."

"I won't stop, Charlotte. Because my job is to keep going. But I can help you."

She shook her head. "No, you can't. No one can."

Devine didn't react to her tacit acknowledgment that his theory was correct. He knelt and took both her hands in his.

"How soon after your mother's death did they approach you?"

"W-what?"

"I don't think you were recruited while in school in Switzerland. I think your mother probably sent you there hoping you would be. I think possibly steps were taken to nudge you in that direction. You did say you were a socialist at university. But then you met the man of your dreams, and that was body armor against anything they could throw at you. But then decades later Marta Dugin was murdered and they approached you. They threatened you, right? And told you what you needed to do. With the data centers? With the two companies purchased for the same price they had recently sold for, even though anything related to AI has seen its value skyrocket? Two companies with the same boards of directors and connections to Russia and the Middle East? Crooked petrostates? The story Theresa Lee was working on? All seems to fit. And with one spy gone, you had to step up. And they gave you no choice. And that BRICS comment you said your mother made? Never happened, did it? That was just misdirection your employers told you to make. And maybe you mentioned it to Mueller because he told me that, too. But that never really made sense." He paused again. "But what I don't know is: How did your husband find out?"

"Will you not accept my answer that I have no idea what it is you're rambling on about?"

"I'm pretty damn sure we don't have the time to play games, Charlotte." To Devine, she appeared to be a woman at the very end of her tether. "If we don't get to the bottom of this and soon, it's going to be too late, for all of us. So how did your husband find out?"

Her voice was tiny, but crystal clear, and her answer stunned Devine even more than the revelations about her mother.

“I told him.”

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CHAPTER

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DEVINE JUST KNELT THERE STARING at Woolwine, who stared right back.

“You . . . you told him?” said Devine.

“I told him what they were making me do. I told him about my mother. I told him everything, even though Kozlov ordered me to tell no one.”

“How . . . how did he take it?”

“Better than I thought. I believe he suspected. Not me, my mother. Bill was very perceptive. But I’m sure he didn’t want to believe that she . . . . would do . . . that.”

“But I don’t understand, then why did he—”

She wiped her eyes and sat back on her haunches, as though her revelation had lifted the weight of the world off her.

“That was *our* plan, Agent Devine. One he mostly came up with. Bill would file for divorce and leave Australia. You see, he told me about these people he had worked with before while at Five Eyes. He was going to work with them again to try to fight back. He was going to try to hack into their systems at the data centers, to try to subvert and then expose what they were doing. And he thought if he left me, it would allow him the freedom to do this work, and also show the Russians that I had severed connections with him. They didn’t like that Bill was around me, you see. He was the enemy. I told them that while Bill had filed for the divorce, I had demanded it. And that my public comments would put the responsibility solely on him.”

After she finished speaking Woolwine broke down and started to sob. Devine put a hand under her arm to support the woman while she cried. When she had finished and composed herself, he said, “But Kozlov must have been suspicious.”

“He was. Very. That’s when I told him the truth.”

“What?” said Devine, shocked again.

“That Bill . . . was dying.”

“You knew?”

Woolwine retook her seat and Devine rose to stand in front of her. “I was being very truthful when I said that my husband and I loved each other very much. He would never keep something like that from me. I . . . I showed Kozlov the medical results. I told him that Bill wanted to go back to America. That he didn’t want to die in front of me. That he would just peacefully fade away. That that was the true reason for the divorce, but one we were trying to keep private. I hoped that would alleviate all suspicion of Bill and keep him safe.”

“But they found out what he was really up to?”

She mutely nodded, the tears sliding down her cheeks. “I don’t know how. But we must have made a mistake somewhere.”

“Did you know Theresa Lee?”

Woolwine drew a long breath and cleared her throat. “Bill had mentioned her. He said that she had discovered some of what was going on. He . . . he didn’t want her to get killed, or complicate what he and the others were trying to do. He felt if the story came out, it would make Kozlov and his people go deep underground, only to resurface when it was safe to do so. Then they were *both* attacked. I . . . I couldn’t believe it.”

“I think they were following your husband and Lee all that time. That might be how they learned what was going on, Charlotte.”

“And then, when Bill . . . when Bill . . . .”

“They placed his remains right in your front yard, so to speak. We thought it was a warning to your father and then misdirection to throw suspicion off you. It was actually a warning to *you* to stay in line.”

“They gave me a very explicit mission when all this started. Become the head of the AI business within my father’s company. So, I did. My father was happy I was taking an interest. I did a crash course in the technology. I traveled all over the world and met with all the significant players. And I was actually very good at it. Apparently, as I told you at our first meeting, I am very much like my father.”

“What exactly is the mission, Charlotte? You mentioned the data centers. Is it to steal the world’s information? I found out about the two companies Woolwine Enterprises purchased. They have Russian and Middle Eastern ties.”

“Not exactly *steal* the data, Agent Devine. But manipulate it and create their own reality when such would serve their interests, or use it for blackmail when it suits them.” She paused and then added, “And, as a doomsday scenario, destroy all of it and send us back to the Dark Ages. Or threaten to. The leverage that would give them would be enormous.”

“Did you know before that your mother was a spy?”

“When I attended Harpyie, strange things happened. People approached me. Subtly at first, then more aggressively. When my mother visited me there, she went out alone one day. I . . . I must admit I was suspicious. I followed her. She met with some of the strangers who had come to see me. It was all . . . unnerving but I didn’t look into it anymore and I told no one. I . . . I didn’t want to believe . . . ”

“That your mother was involved in something criminal?”

She nodded. “And then, years later, right before she was killed my mother came to see me. She . . . she was distraught. She told me that she had done some things in her life that she was ashamed of. When I asked her what, she wouldn’t tell me. But . . . but she did say that if anything happened to her, that she wanted me to know that she loved me very much. And that she was sorry if any of her past life caused me pain.”

“A lot to unload on your child,” said Devine.

“I couldn’t process it, to be honest.”

“Did you mention it to your father?”

“No. She asked me not to and I promised. He was ignorant of everything and she wanted to keep it that way. She didn’t . . . she didn’t want his memory of her to be . . . tainted. She really did love him.”

“And then she was murdered. Why not go to the police with what she had said?”

“I was planning to.”

Devine said, “Right, of course. That’s when Kozlov showed up with his crew and upended your life.”

“He said it would all come out if I didn’t do exactly as they said. And, as an added threat, he would murder my family.”

“And the tobacconist shop bombings?”

“Apparently, my mother had stopped working with them by then. So they wanted to either force her to reconsider, or else make my father work with them via another route. When he refused, they did what they did. Some people went to prison. Then, my mother was murdered. And, later, the fact

of the bomb being under my car was discreetly telegraphed to Bill. I had been working with them since my mother's death, but they were getting nervous that some people in Australian intelligence were starting to suspect me. They used the bomb threat to throw off that suspicion. At least that's what they told me afterwards."

"Did you have the prisoners moved?"

"Yes. They didn't want you talking to them. Then Kozlov made the arrangements for the two men who had ambushed you to be exchanged for Drury. Kozlov wanted to kill them because he believed they were weak and might talk."

"And the BRICS explanation for it all? Your mother slapping a brick wall?"

"All untrue," she replied quietly. "Although my father is interested in this country joining BRICS, I blew it up as the reason behind everything that was happening to throw you off."

He leaned over and took her hand in his. "How would you like to get back at them for what they did? For killing your mother and your husband? For everything?"

"It's not possible. If they outsmarted Bill, no one can beat them."

Devine leaned in an inch closer and let his voice fall to a near hush. It seemed fitting for what he was about to say. "Give me a chance. Please."

"But what can you really offer me, Agent Devine?" she said desperately.

"I can offer you hope, Charlotte. And a chance to be rid of them forever."

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CHAPTER

83

DEVINE AND JONES SAT IN her Passat. He had just finished filling her in on his conversation with Charlotte Woolwine.

"Jesus, Travis," she said, staring out into the darkness. "How did you figure all this out?"

"I had a lot of help. Folks back at DHS found the smoking guns. Marta Dugin became Martha Dugan. Sergei Kozlov's father was her professor at the Institut Le Harpyie. She later finished her espionage education at the university in Prague. It seems she had the mission of getting close to an already wealthy and well-connected man with critical future prospects that could be exploited. I've been told that is sort of standard ops for the Russians. Only she did better than that. She *married* Carlton Woolwine. Then, under the cover of her philanthropic pursuits, it's suspected that she collected intel on all sorts of organizations, and from political leaders who might have been unguarded when discussing things around her, and fed it all back to her handlers. In addition, we believe that she used her influence over her husband to direct his hand and wealth in all sorts of ways that benefitted not only Russia, but their shadow partners in the Middle East."

"Which is why the hit squad that went after you was represented by *both* factions?"

"Right. But when they wanted to use Carlton's shops for their own purposes, he pushed back. And it seems his wife didn't try to change his mind."

"Wait, is that why she was killed?"

"It's only speculation, Anais, but the timing works. The street-crew Russians went to prison, but their bosses didn't. Shortly thereafter, Martha was gunned down, presumably by Kozlov. I think it's because she had had enough. And they do not deal kindly with betrayal."

“And then, with her no longer in the picture, they went after the daughter?”

“Charlotte told me she was traveling in southeast Asia when she ran into Kozlov and his minions. They somehow got her away from her security team. They showed her all the evidence of her mother’s treachery. It would have brought down the entire family, ruined their name. Her father, however unwitting he was, might have gone to prison. And then they also threatened to kill her family if she didn’t agree to do their bidding.”

“But she told her husband and they concocted a plan to fight back?” said Jones.

“However, the Russians got wind of if somehow, and we know the result. And you were right about Lee. So she was a target, not just collateral damage.”

“That may be the only thing I was right about in this case. God, I feel like shit for thinking that Charlotte was spying voluntarily. What that poor woman has gone through.”

“Well, she *was* a spy, just one under enormous duress. I don’t know what I would have done in her circumstances. And she tried to fight back. But when she lost her husband—”

“—she just gave it up as hopeless. How the hell did she keep it together? I would have been in the fetal position.”

“Though she doesn’t look it, Charlotte Woolwine is apparently made of titanium.” He glanced at Jones. “She blames herself for her husband’s death.”

Jones shot him an anguished look. “Why?”

“She said if she hadn’t involved him in this he wouldn’t have been killed.”

“But he obviously wanted to do it, to help her.”

“Didn’t matter to her. She told me she killed him, plain and simple.”

Jones shook her head. “She’s going to need some world-class counseling if she makes it out of this mess alive.”

“And we have to do all we can to make sure she does, Anais.”

“And your plan?”

“It’s simple, and complicated.”

“Sounds ominous.”

“And it’s a long shot,” he added.

“That’s a given.”

“We might get Drury back as a result. Alive.”

“He’s a fellow cop who we need to save.”

“There’s danger.”

“I’m a police detective, Travis.”

“I’m not sure you signed up for this.”

“I signed up for what you signed up for,” she shot back.

“This might be more akin to combat than police work.”

“Well, thanks to you, I have a pretty fucking good idea of what that’s like.”

He smiled at her defiant tone. “If we make it through to the other side, how about I come back in December and soak up some rays with you? Deal, DS Jones?”

“Deal, Agent Devine. And I’ll bring the bangers and sunscreen.”

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CHAPTER

84

CHARLOTTE WOOLWINE SAT IN THE library of her Canberra estate staring at a wall of books but not really seeing them. She was dressed in jeans, boots, and a lavender turtleneck. To the right of her was Malcolm Jarvis, looking intense and focused but with a hint of anxiety flitting over his otherwise stoic features. Next to him was Ion Radu, who appeared uncertain about what might be coming his way.

Across from Woolwine sat Sergei Kozlov. He did not look anxious or uncertain. He appeared calm and collected and ready to do things at his pace, and no one else's.

"So Charlotte, you wanted to meet?" he said. "And here we are."

"I want out."

Kozlov nodded, looking unsurprised. "Mr. Jarvis told me this might be an issue after his last meeting with you. Now, we have several problems with that, all of which can be laid at your feet. And we have talked about this, Charlotte. The consequences for those whom you care about will be severe. I do not want to take such steps, but I have others to answer to who will exact severe consequences on me if I do not. I know that you understand this."

"I have done everything you have asked of me," she replied in a monotone, still staring at the wall of books.

"But that is not true, is it?"

Kozlov lighted a cigarette and blew smoke in her direction.

"I don't want you to smoke in here," she said.

"I don't think you want to die on that hill, do you?" replied Kozlov.

"What problems have I created? You wanted me to purchase PrecisionX and Purple Sage OT, and I did. The infrastructure at our data centers has been compromised. Your AI agents have stolen passwords, cloned admin

credentials, gained access to some of the most valuable data in the world. You've stolen some, manipulated some, copied some, sold some, and God knows what else with the rest. My husband has been murdered. My mother was murdered. You tried to kill my father." She finally looked at Kozlov. "And all for Russia and your partner in the Middle East. How is the sheik doing, by the way? He walks freely around Western leaders and they have no idea he has ripped them off and is using them for his own purposes. So where the fuck do you get off telling me that *I've* caused problems?"

Kozlov was shaking his head halfway through her diatribe. "You cannot deny the truth with your hysterical self-serving remarks, Charlotte. Your mother was a traitor to her country. Your husband was trying to defeat us. That made both proper casualties of war. As for my country and the sheik's —who, by the way, is a prince and the ninth-richest man in the world, even wealthier than your father—this is how affairs of state are conducted. Your country has its own people doing this very thing."

"We are not gutter rats, like some."

"Your remarks do you no service or justice, Charlotte. You may seek to act tough, but you have nothing with which to back this tough act up. Which means you remain weak, only weak. I know that you know this."

"What do you want from me?"

"You already know this. You will have Travis Devine come here to meet. You will arrange for this to happen tomorrow night."

"So you can kill him, too?"

"That is not your concern. He is a soldier. He will come prepared and suspecting a trap. He knows he is in a war. I have fairly and fully warned him. He killed my daughter. Now it is my turn."

"You and your daughter were going to kill him!" she retorted.

"Which has no possible relevance to anything. As he will no doubt understand. And whoever walks out alive, they walk out alive. I hope that it will be me, but there is no guarantee."

"But what do I tell him is the purpose of the meeting?"

"That you have important information to tell him. But you must do so in person. You cannot convey it over the phone. You don't know who might be listening."

"And if I help you do this? I end up in prison."

"You are our greatest asset, Charlotte. Much more so than your mother. She grew fat and happy as the wife of a capitalist. She put on . . . airs, I

believe you call them. She became what we despise. And she would no longer serve her country. Now you . . . you, I think, understand what is at stake."

"I'm only doing this because otherwise you will kill my children."

"It is a terrible thing to lose a child. I have suffered this. I know."

"Your daughter chose her life. She sought to kill Agent Devine. She gave up any right to mercy."

Kozlov drew out a knife, rose, and walked over to her.

"But just so you will not forget *your* place, Charlotte, I will provide a small, *permanent* reminder."

She had flinched as he approached. He nodded at Jarvis and Radu, who came forward and held Charlotte's arms down.

Kozlov slid up one of Woolwine's sleeves, studied the soft pink skin, and then slid the blade across the surface. The wound was shallow but bled profusely.

To her credit, Woolwine only jerked slightly as the blade bit into her.

Kozlov took a handkerchief out of his pocket and tossed it into her lap. "Apply pressure and it will stop soon," he said casually. "But now you will have that mark forever, to remember me and this moment by. An important lesson to keep with you always."

He retook his seat while Woolwine wrapped the cloth around her arm and pressed her hand against the wound.

"You will call Devine. We will listen while you do. Ten o'clock tomorrow night."

"The staff will be here."

"The staff will be given the night off, just like they have tonight. It is only the three of us here now. But that does not matter, he will never reach this place," said Kozlov.

"And after you kill him?" said Woolwine.

"Then we continue on with our business. Simple."

"They will send someone else."

"We will deal with it. If we all keep our wits, then we are good to go. They do not suspect you. They suspect your father, most likely. They have him in hiding, you know."

"No, I didn't know."

"They visited him at his flat in Sydney. Devine and this policewoman. They would have been killed then but things went awry."

“Things seem to go awry a lot for you when Agent Devine is around,” noted Woolwine.

Kozlov held up his knife. “I can give you a matching gift on your other arm, free of charge. Or perhaps your throat.” She didn’t respond and he added, “A man can be lucky. But then he can be unlucky. Now make the call.”

“But it’s late.”

“The American is still on his local time. He will be up. Make the call. On speakerphone.”

Woolwine punched in the number and Devine answered. She relayed the request to meet.

Devine said, “I can make it then. But what exactly is the meeting for?”

Kozlov eyed her severely and held up his knife once more.

“It’s important, Agent Devine. I think it will help you find the truth. But I can’t say over the phone. I’ve . . . I’m paranoid, actually. And you never know who might be listening.”

“Okay, ten o’clock?”

“Yes.”

“Can I bring DS Jones?”

Woolwine looked at Kozlov, who nodded. “Yes, that’s fine.”

“See you then.”

“Goodbye.” Woolwine put her phone down.

Kozlov smiled. “See, that wasn’t hard, was it? And our Mr. Devine has one more day to live. I hope he enjoys it.”

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CHAPTER

85

DEVINE PUT HIS PHONE AWAY. *Well, Sergei, let's see how you deal with a little surprise.*

He had had Charlotte contact Kozlov and ask for this meeting at her Canberra estate. She had wanted Jarvis and Radu there, too. Police observation teams posted there had learned that the regular security team had been sent back to Sydney and a group of men— undoubtedly Kozlov's handpicked crew—had come to the estate. The rest of the staff had been given the night off.

The first sentry Devine encountered was lazy and undisciplined. It cost him his life as Devine stuck his K-bar into his back and then through his aorta. One slash left and then right, and the guy was down forever.

The second guard was a bit feistier. Devine's Glock with the suppressor can did the job as silently as possible under the circumstances.

Devine was inside the house now, which became darker the farther he went. In the distance he could hear the tick-tock of what was probably a grandfather clock. He couldn't hear or feel his heartbeat because it was so low right now. Fight-or-flight mode blew your chances of coming out of these sorts of circumstances. Low and slow with a pulse far down in the fifties would do just fine.

He had just gotten a message from Jones. They had discovered Drury alive and drugged in the cottage that Kozlov had been using. Drury was now heading to a local hospital while Jones was on her way here to back up Devine. He dearly hoped to have the mission completed before the woman arrived.

He stopped and waited. Down the hall he had glimpsed through his night-vision goggles a sliver of a shadow. Devine stepped back into a crevice as the man headed his way. As he passed by, Devine used his K-bar

knife to sever the man’s left carotid sheath. When the blood spewed out of the torn artery, the man slumped in Devine’s arms. Devine gently laid the dead man on the hardwood.

Devine was up in an instant and headed to his target area, which he knew to be the library because Charlotte had told him it would be.

The door was just ahead.

He didn’t know if the men inside had heard anything suspicious. But he had to assume that they had.

So, he stood to the side and turned the knob on the door before pulling his hand away.

Five shots blew through the wood and lodged in the wall beyond.

He couldn’t fire blindly into the room because Charlotte was in there.

He said, “The place is surrounded. Come out, weapons down, hands up. All of you. It’s your only option.”

Five more shots blew chunks off the door as he hunkered down to avoid any blowback.

He figured Kozlov had just done that for the hell of it. Maybe he would have, too, if their positions had been reversed.

“Okay,” he said. “You made your statements. Now you’re all under arrest.”

“I think not,” said Kozlov. “We have a very valuable hostage. So you allow us to walk out of here. Now. Or you can come and collect her corpse.”

Here came the stalemate. Which was why Devine had brought some additional “help” with him.

He put on eye protectors over his goggles, and inserted earplugs. Fortunately for him, the gunshots had blown a large enough hole in the door.

He engaged the flashbang, counted to three, and shoved it through one of the holes. Then he knelt down and looked away.

When it went off he heard screams from several men and one woman. He kicked the door open and looked quickly around through the smoke.

Jarvis was clawing at his eyes. Charlotte had fainted.

The shot hit the doorjamb and chunks of wood were blown off. Two pieces caught Devine on the cheek, cutting his flesh. Devine fired back at Radu, who was staggering at him from the left. The man took the round in the face and dropped to the floor.

When he looked to his right, Jarvis had a pistol leveled on him. Apparently, the man's antics with his eyes were all for show. He, too, must have had protection against the flashbang.

A shot rang out.

Devine watched in fascination as Jarvis stood stock-still and then glanced down at his front, where the blood was pouring out of the hole in his chest, right at heart level.

The man managed to stay up for another second before collapsing to the floor.

Devine turned to see Jones lowering her weapon. She had arrived just in the nick of time after rescuing Drury, otherwise Devine would not be alive.

She smiled. And then her eyes widened as her gun started to come back up.

And then it struck Devine.

Where's Kozlov?

He turned but not in time.

Another shot rang out.

Now it was Jones who looked stunned. She stood there, statue-like, for a moment. And then she, too, fell to the floor.

Devine turned back to see Kozlov—earplugs in, and a mask pushed up on his forehead, which had protected him from the effects of the flashbang—standing there with his gun pointed at Jones, or where Jones had been.

Before Kozlov could fire again Devine leapt and hit the Russian so hard both men toppled over a chair. Kozlov drew a knife.

"This is for my daughter," he snarled. He slashed at Devine with the blade.

But Devine clamped his fingers around Kozlov's hand holding the knife and started to squeeze on the median nerve, just as he had with Yuri Petrov in the transport van.

He pressed harder until he saw the bulge in Kozlov's eyes and jaw, though the Russian made no sound. Next, he placed a forearm under Kozlov's chin and began pressing down on his windpipe at the same time he was jacking the Russian's chin back.

Kozlov was strong but he was over fifty years old. Devine was far stronger and many years younger. And while Kozlov was no doubt motivated to kill Devine because of the death of his daughter, Devine also was motivated. By someone lying just a few feet away.

When Kozlov started to gasp and his eyes rolled up into his head, Devine eased off the pressure. But only so he could use that same arm to make a fist and then deliver that fist into Kozlov's face. And then he did it again and kept going until the man's features were but a mass of mangled flesh; he lay there unconscious and maybe dead. Devine didn't really care.

Devine rushed over to the fallen Jones and dropped to his knees next to her.

"Anais!"

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CHAPTER

86

QANTAS FLIGHT 11 TOUCHED DOWN in LA at roughly noon, local time.

Devine rose from his seat, grabbed his duffel from the overhead bin, and trudged off the giant A380 with 340 other weary passengers. They had flown through some severe storms over the South Pacific, and even the massive plane had been tossed around a good bit. Throughout it all, Devine had sat there staring out the window, hardly seeming to notice. He had a good reason to be distracted.

He had received a call before lifting off from Sydney.

It had not been good news. In fact, it had been the worst possible news.

Devine had a one-night layover in LA. He spent it at the Hotel George in Santa Monica right on the water. It had a speakeasy restaurant-bar on the lower level. He had dinner elsewhere, but then headed down to the speakeasy. It was outfitted in leather and brass, and some serious dollars had been spent re-creating a theme from the past. He sat at one corner of the long bar, surrounded by folks having a good time and snapping selfies, sipped his drinks, and lost himself in the past, the present, and what looked to be quite an uncertain future.

Good people died all the time. He knew that better than most. He had almost died in Australia multiple times. But he hadn’t. He couldn’t say the same for others.

He nearly overslept, but made his flight to New York’s LaGuardia, arriving at around six p.m. After he touched down he went to a men’s shop and bought an off-the-rack suit that he had to get a rush alteration on. Shiny shoes, a somber tie, stiff-collared white shirt, and dark socks followed.

He paid for it all and collected his items. Then he took a cab to a rental place where he got a car, which he drove out of the city and then out of the

state. That was followed by a cheap hotel room, where a severely jet-lagged Devine dropped into bed.

The following morning he got up and showered and shaved. Then he put on his new clothes, combed his hair, finalized his tie, and scuffed the bottoms of his new dress shoes to take out the slipperiness.

He looked at his face in the bathroom mirror. The wooden shrapnel had done a number on his face, and it was far from healed. But he had cleaned it up as best he could.

Devine had eaten no breakfast because he had no appetite.

He drove to the funeral home and found the right chapel. The elaborate coffin was situated in the front. It looked like he had made it just in time.

People he recognized were in the first row. Others he didn't recognize filled the rest of the seats. As he looked around, he concluded there was a nice turnout.

His sister saw him first. She was tall, like all the Devines, and healthily lean. She ran to him as he trudged forward. She was dressed just as sharply and as expensively as any C-suite exec of an enormous corporation would be expected to.

Claire was attractive, with shoulder-length brown hair that matched her younger brother's. But he was surprised to see a few gray flecks here and there.

We're all getting older.

She gripped him with an earnest strength that he remembered from his childhood.

"Oh, Tra-vis," she said, her voice cracking over his name.

He hugged her back and felt her tears against his neck; they leached a bit into his brand-new, scratchy collar.

"I know, sis, I know."

She sniffled, drew back, and saw his facial wounds.

"My God, what happened to you?" she exclaimed, her eyes full of fresh worry.

"Nothing that won't heal."

He held out his hand as his brother came over. The men shook and then the three siblings stood there embracing one another.

Devine realized they were closer at this very moment than perhaps they had ever been growing up because of their differences in age, and everything else.

They stepped back from one another. Devine looked at his mother sitting there by herself in the front row, regal to a fault. And she simply stared at the coffin that contained the remains of the man who had been her other half for the last forty-some years.

The three of them walked to the front, and Devine sat down next to his mother, with Dan next to him and Claire on her mother's other side.

Devine watched as his mother reached out and gripped his hand.

"I'm so glad you made it, Travis," she said quietly.

He squeezed her hand in reply and then turned his attention to the coffin.

It was no doubt costly. His detail-oriented father had probably picked it out himself years ago.

The call he'd gotten before he left Australia had been from his brother. It had been short and to the point: *Dad's gone*.

His brother had figured the illness out, it seemed. But what his father had, apparently could not be repaired, even by a gifted medico like Dan Devine.

And his father *had* suffered a minor stroke.

The next one was not minor. And it had killed the man in his sleep.

Hymns were sung. The minister said his part. Dan and Claire read from the Bible and told some stories about their father. Some Devine knew were true, some were embellished. But what did it matter? Their father, *his* father, was dead. Never to be seen among the living again.

There was no American flag over the coffin, although his father's military service allowed for one. But Devine was not surprised. His father had probably planned for that, too.

They rode in the funeral home SUV to the cemetery, where the minister said still more words that Devine did not hear. He was watching his mother, who seemed to be shrinking by the minute. From tall and in command to shorter, smaller, and in a daze of impossibly fast bereavement. Their golden years, and now simply *hers*, had been drastically altered.

As the service wound down and people said their condolences and goodbyes, Devine stood by the coffin and peered down into the freshly dug hole where his father would soon lie for the duration of time. Or until the planet was swallowed up by the sun or some human-made doomsday device. Knowing what he knew about how the world worked, and

particularly the government side of things, Devine would bet on the latter occurring over any other apocalypse.

He left the side of the coffin and his father behind, rejoined his mother, and escorted her back to the car. Claire and Dan were riding in another vehicle provided by the funeral home. When they were settled inside she turned to him. “Travis?”

“Yes?”

She reached into her purse and took out an envelope and handed it to him.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a letter to you, from your father.”

Devine stared down in amazement. “What, when did he have a chance to . . . ?”

“I told your father that I had spoken to you about him being in Vietnam. And how he had read all your correspondence, and how frightened he had been for you. And where his anger had come from.”

She stopped and the tears started to dribble out of her large eyes. “I didn’t know if it was the right thing to do. I really didn’t. With him so sick, I suppose the shock could have killed him. But . . . but your brother was very clear on how dire the situation was. And . . . and.” She sat up straighter, wiped her eyes, and when she spoke next, her voice had firmed.

“I didn’t want him leaving this life with that . . . hanging between you. Like some . . . I don’t know, terrible disease.” She paused. “So he decided to write the letter. I brought him a pen and paper and I helped him. But the words and thoughts are all his, Travis. No one could put words in your father’s mouth or tell him what to do. You know that, right?”

“Better than most,” said Devine, who was still staring at the envelope.

“When you’ve read it, we can talk.”

As they drove away and left his dad behind, Devine was at least grateful that he now had a part of his father to take with him.

Always.

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CHAPTER

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THE HOSPITAL ROOM WAS FAR quieter than it had been the last time Devine was here. There was no vitals machine dinging and beeping. No intubation tube down the woman's throat. She was no longer in a coma, or even unconscious.

Theresa Lee was very much alive. And she was going to stay alive, at least for now.

She sat up in the bed looking relieved and stronger and perhaps more amazed than anyone else that she was actually not dead.

Lee had previously been debriefed and thus knew the fates of Bill Walker and others.

She nodded at Devine as he introduced himself and explained his role in all of this.

Emerson Campbell was sitting next to Devine. He was in a hospital gown and confined to a wheelchair, although he had been very clear on the point that he was ambulatory and did not actually need such assistance.

"Gotta keep the medical types happy, though," he had told Devine.

Devine sat next to the bed and proceeded to provide Lee with some more information, to fill in the gaps she no doubt had.

"I was so angry with Bill," she said, looking a little shell-shocked. "When he confronted me in New York, I couldn't believe what he was saying."

"What exactly did he say?" asked Campbell.

"First of all that he was dying, which stunned me. Then he told me that his saving my life in Somalia was all staged."

"He wanted to get on your good side so he could ask you a favor later?" said Devine.

“Exactly. That’s what he said. He apologized up and down, but I couldn’t really process what he was telling me.”

“This was because you had been working on a story?” said Devine.

“About the head or heads of a petrostate or -states,” added Campbell. “Only you disguised the file with what looked like a woman’s name.”

She nodded at them both. “It was my own method of keeping what I was working on away from prying eyes. And there *was* more than one crooked leader. I had sources that were telling me that something big was going down with the data centers associated with Woolwine Enterprises. And two companies in particular were maybe part of a conspiracy.”

“PrecisionX and Purple Sage OT,” said Devine.

She nodded. “Some time ago, Bill found out what I was working on and told me that they had checked it out and there was nothing there. So, particularly after he saved my life, I backed off. Then, in New York, he told me the truth, that he didn’t want anything I was working on to mess up his own investigation. It was not unreasonable, actually, what he did. But in that moment, I just didn’t want to hear his words, or deal with it.”

“You had written in your file that rumors are important?” said Devine.

“Bill actually told me that. I had researched him after he saved my life, or I thought he had. He was an expert on rumint. And also an elite-level coder. A brilliant, good man, and I’m very sorry he’s no longer with us.”

“So you two were having it out, and then the men in masks showed up,” said Devine.

She shuddered. “I have never been more scared in my life, and I’ve reported from war zones. They came out of nowhere. And then Bill was attacked. And I . . . ” She shuddered again and said, “Well, you know what happened to me.”

Devine said, “And we are thrilled that you pulled through. They tried to make it seem that you and Walker were romantically involved.” He told her about the picture and letter. “But we were told by someone that you would not have been interested.”

“Ron Kittery, right?” she said, smiling. “That my interest was not in men?”

“Yes.”

Campbell said, “They wiped out your and Walker’s cloud accounts. We wondered how that was possible, but when we discovered what they were doing, it made sense. They had access to all sorts of data clouds.”

Devine said, “And they came very close to pulling off their grand plan. And permanent damage has already been done. It’s not been made public and can’t really. It would cause even more damage if the truth came out. I mean, if you can’t rely on the technology . . . ?”

Campbell said, “I say we shitcan all of it and go back to pencils and paper, and two cans on a goddamn string.”

Lee laughed. “My parents actually feel the same about the way the world is going. They’ve been with me the whole time. I could hear them talking to me when I was out of it. I heard some of my coworkers, too.”

“Helen Clark was particularly worried about you,” noted Devine.

“She is very kind and will make a solid journalist.”

“Well, she has a great mentor in you.”

“I really was so sad to hear about what happened to Bill,” she said as the tears clustered in her eyes. “He was one of the good guys. And he just wanted to do the right thing. I feel horrible that our last meeting was so full of anger on my part.”

“You had no way of knowing it would end like that,” Devine pointed out. “So don’t beat yourself up over it.”

Lee smoothed out her blanket and said, “So how *was* it resolved? Or can you not tell me?”

Devine looked at Campbell, who nodded and said, “I think you’ve earned the right to hear the truth, Ms. Lee.”

Devine started to explain, and as he did, Lee’s eyes widened more and more.

Continuing, Devine added, “Charlotte Woolwine and her father survived. Charlotte is cooperating with the authorities. Sergei Kozlov was arrested and is awaiting trial. Moscow has made noises about him being involved in a prisoner swap, but we don’t think that is going to happen.”

“I would hope not,” said Lee. “He should be held accountable for what he did.”

“Charlotte was forced to buy PrecisionX and Purple Sage and use their technology at all their leased data centers. The AI platforms they used gained unauthorized access up and down the data pipelines, all over the world. They then both weaponized and monetized it.”

“We really have created a worst-case scenario by putting all the eggs in the AI data center basket,” said Lee. “All these pipelines will eventually be

connected at some point. So, you infiltrate one, you gain access to them all."

"It's also true, as my colleague pointed out, that this information can't come out because it would create widespread panic and potentially collapse global economic markets," added Campbell.

Lee sat up straighter. "The world needs to know what almost happened, if only to make sure it *doesn't* happen."

Campbell said, "I actually agree with you. But it's out of my hands." He looked at her sternly. "*Officially*, I must inform you that no stories about it can come from your pen, Ms. Lee. It is a national security matter."

She scowled at him and then turned to Devine. "What do you think?"

"You were already working on the story before all of this. And if you write that story with sources independent from us, well . . . ?" He looked at Campbell. "Sir?"

"I have always thought that a free and independent press is the only thing keeping American democracy standing," said Campbell with a wink at Lee.

She sat up more and gave them both hugs.

"So what's next for you?" Lee asked Devine. "I mean, my God, what you went through. You should take some time off."

"Near the end of the year I'll be going on leave to process everything that happened."

"Where will you be doing your processing?" asked Lee.

"Somewhere far from here," replied Devine.

"But you are coming back, right?" said Campbell, looking a bit anxious.

"I plan to," replied Devine honestly enough. "But I guess we'll have to see."

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CHAPTER

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THREE WEEKS BEFORE CHRISTMAS, QANTAS Flight 12 carried Devine back to Australia. They landed a few minutes early. It was broad daylight at six in the morning. Campbell, who was now long since back at work, had sprung for business class for Devine and insisted that DHS pick up the tab.

"It's not government-related business, sir," he had said. "Can you justify the expense?"

"Everything having to do with *you* is government business, Devine. You go down there, chill, have some quality downtime, recharge, and I'll see you when you get back, soldier."

The ride down was far smoother than his ride back to the States had been. He slept most of the way, even though it seemed his mind was moving faster than the A380.

When he got off the plane the waves of heat hit him.

It was summer in Australia, and many of the other passengers had changed in the plane's lavatories into shorts and sandals.

Devine was not one of them.

He trudged off and cleared the facial recognition at passport control, then went through customs. He had declared his weapons on his incoming passenger card, and presented his credentials to reclaim his guns and ammo from Border Force officers.

He then took a cab to his hotel.

It was the same one he had stayed in last time. There was nothing fancy about it, but then again there was nothing fancy about Devine, either.

On the flight down he had looked at pics of him and his family. Not from the funeral. That was not something he wanted to remember, truth be told. These were pictures his brother and sister had sent him from their time

growing up together. His sister had collected an assortment of old family photos, then put them together and emailed a digital album to her siblings.

There was one of Devine with his father. Devine was in his Little League uniform and his father was wearing a ballcap identical to his son's. Devine had not remembered this photo, or when and where it had been taken, or the circumstances behind it.

The only thing he was focusing on was that his father had his hand on his son's shoulder, and he was smiling. Proudly.

I must have forgotten all the good times, he thought.

Later, as Devine grabbed some breakfast at Circular Quay, he watched as two rainbow lorikeets again laid waste to the natural sugar packets. The same waitress as before came over to shoo them off.

She looked at Devine and smiled in recognition. "Hey, haven't seen you in a while. Where you been?"

"Back in America."

Her smile grew broader. "So, just can't keep away, right?"

"Apparently not."

"And now it's summer. So, enjoy."

"Yeah," said Devine tersely.

Afterward, he took a walk around the harbor, then went back to his hotel and changed his clothes. He grabbed a small bag and headed out.

Charlotte Woolwine had retired to her Canberra estate, but he knew she was now visiting her son in California. Devine had actually seen her in LA on his way here. They had had coffee in a café on Wilshire.

She was thinner and looked older than her years, but in many ways seemed happier.

"Thank you, Agent Devine, for all that you did."

"I was just doing my job, Ms. Woolwine."

"It's Charlotte. And in doing your job, you gave me my life back. And if there's anything I can ever do for you, just ask."

He smiled. "Thank you, *Charlotte*."

"What will happen now, to Kozlov and the rest?"

"Kozlov will spend the rest of his days in an Australian jail. The other members of his team have been rounded up. Moscow and a certain prince in the Middle East have been made aware that we know what they did. And if they ever attempt it again, the consequences will be swift and overwhelming."

“But do people like that ever truly learn?” she had asked.

“If you want the truth, Charlotte, no, they don’t. But I guess that’s where people like me come in. I want you to know that I am so sorry about your husband. And I’m also sorry that I suspected you were involved.”

“I *was* involved. Just not voluntarily.”

“If you hadn’t worked with us to set up Kozlov at your estate, I doubt we would have nailed him. It was very risky on your part.”

“It was a risk worth taking. I’m just glad it turned out okay.”

“So you’ve given up working in the business?”

“Truth be told, while I’m good at it, I’m not cut out for it. And my father is perfectly capable. But I did inform him that we are taking the pledge to give ninety percent of our wealth away by the time he kicks off. And he agreed. I mean, what is the point of so much money? The remaining ten percent is far more than I or several more generations could ever spend.”

“I just wish more billionaires would see things your way.”

He had left her there sipping her coffee, enjoying the sunshine, and just looking as unrich as it was possible to be. And happier than he had ever seen her.

Money cannot buy happiness, and it can also make you miserable, at least too much of it.

Now, he took an Uber to Waverly Cemetery.

He walked to the spot where he and Jones had been while trying to locate Sergeant Drury. It brought back a rash of memories.

After Jones and her team had rescued Drury from the cottage that Kozlov had used at the Woolwine’s Canberra estate, the AFP sergeant had fully recovered from his ordeal. Devine had learned that the man had then taken a two-month sabbatical from AFP to get his mind right. He had apparently succeeded because he was now back with the AFP. Devine had spoken with Drury on the phone after going back to the States. He planned to visit him when he was here, to provide some final accountings of the matter. He wasn’t a big fan of the man, but Drury had turned out to be not as much of an ass as Devine had originally thought he was. In the world as it was right now, Devine would take that as a positive.

He walked along the cemetery viewing the statuary and neatly laid-out plots. He found a bench and sat down, admiring the water in the distance. Next, he rose and looked at his watch.

He had put this off long enough. Devine knew what he had to do, but he was inexplicably nervous for some reason. Well, he actually knew the reason, but it didn't make it any easier.

It's time, Devine.

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CHAPTER

89

DEVINE USED HIS APP TO dial up another Uber and took that to Manly Beach.

It was packed with vacationers.

He stopped at a bathhouse to change into his swim trunks and a T-shirt.

Then he waded confidently through the rows of sun-draped and, in more than a few cases, sunburnt flesh.

He continued walking through the sand until he reached a spot that was off the beaten path and far more private.

When she saw him the woman sat up on her towel and took off the wide-brimmed sun hat.

Anais Jones had on a two-piece bathing suit, white with black stripes.

Her gunshot wound was fully healed and one had to look closely to see any residue of it.

Her body was already tanned while his was North American winter white.

"I was beginning to wonder if you were going to blow me off," she said.

"Never, ever crossed my mind, trust me," he replied.

She rose and stood in front of him. "Turn around."

"What?"

"Turn around." She put her hands on his shoulders and spun him around so his back was to her. "Off with the shirt," she ordered. He tugged off his shirt while she took out her sunscreen and started applying it onto his skin. "Don't want Mr. Pale Skin to fry," she commented.

"So you *did* bring the sunscreen."

She pointed to a cooler. "And the bangers, as promised. Alcohol isn't allowed on Manly, lots of places nearby."

After she finished, they lay down on their towels and rested on their sides, looking at each other.

“I thought I had lost you,” he said because he needed to say it.

“I thought I had lost me, too. I was told the bullet entered through a flaw in my armor. Hit a rib and then hung a left, missed my heart and all major organs and arteries, but, well, it was closer than I would have liked.” She paused, took off her shades, and studied him. “If you hadn’t stopped the bleeding and gotten help I wouldn’t be here. So you saved my life once more. I really wish you never have to do that again.”

“I believe I wish that even more than you do,” said Devine, his eyes growing watery.

She touched his arm. “I was conscious for a bit, though. I saw what you did. I didn’t think Kozlov was going to survive after that beating you gave him.”

“Call it a cathartic event.”

“I also saw you hovering over me, taking off my body armor, working to keep me alive. I . . . your tears were very touching, Travis.”

Devine now swiped at his eyes. “I don’t cry . . . easily, Anais. But you were more than worth the tears. And you saved my life, too. If you hadn’t taken out Jarvis, I wouldn’t be here.”

She said hesitantly, her voice strained with emotion, “I guess . . . it’s great we were there for each other, then.”

The two stared at one another and she abruptly looked away for a few moments.

She also wiped at her eyes and turned back to him. “Oh, how’s your dad? He all good?”

Devine didn’t reply right away. “It was a stroke, a big one. He died in his sleep.”

“Oh my God, Travis. I’m . . . I’m so sorry.” She reached out and gripped his shoulder and fresh tears sprinkled down her cheeks.

He slipped an envelope from his bag. “But . . . he left me this.”

“He wrote to you before he died?”

“With my mother’s help, but the words are all his.”

“Do you . . . do you mind sharing some of what he said?”

“Let’s go for a walk.”

They rose and headed toward the water. It was a breathtakingly beautiful day, and Devine was walking next to a very attractive woman. For

most guys their mind would be solely on that. But Devine was not most guys, at least not right now.

He said, “First, he apologized for how he had treated me all those years.”

“That was huge, Travis. And no doubt incredibly difficult for him and you, right?”

“Yes, on both counts. Then he admitted that he had two superstars in my brother and sister. And he really didn’t know what to do with me.”

They stopped by the water’s edge and Devine nudged a shell with his toe while Jones kept her gaze on him.

“But that . . . changed?”

“He liked that I was a really good athlete. He’d been one in high school, while my academic siblings had no interest or talent in that regard.”

“Okay.”

“When I decided to go to West Point he said he felt betrayed. But when I went to work on Wall Street he wrote me a congratulatory letter. Then, when that fizzled out, he lost it again, thinking I had betrayed him once more. I couldn’t tell him what I was doing, but he said in the letter that he figured the government had sucked me back in.”

“And how do *you* feel now? About things?”

He slipped the last page of the letter out of the envelope and passed it to her.

“Are you sure you want me to?” she said. “I mean, this is as personal as it gets.”

“I think we’ve been through enough to qualify as *close* friends, Anais.”

She took the page and read down it. Her eyes once more started to fill with tears and after she handed the page back she wiped at her face with both hands and let out a gush of a breath that more resembled a sob.

“He said he loved you, Travis. Your father loved you at the end.”

“I know.”

“Always hold on to that.”

“I plan to.”

“And . . . get back in sync with your family. None of us knows how much time we have left.” She ran her fingers over the spot where’d she been shot and then touched the scars on his shoulders. “I think we both understand that better than most.”

“Yeah, I think we do.”

They later had a beer and banger each, and went for dips in the cool waters of the ocean.

As they were lying on their towels Jones said, “Travis?”

“Yeah?”

“I feel almost normal, how about you?”

He glanced at her, smiling. “As normal as people who do what we do for a living can feel, I guess.”

“Job doesn’t really allow for many friends. I know cops, that’s about it.”

“I’m sort of in the same boat. And with my work I tend to hop from place to place. But for the next two weeks, I’m here.”

“I’m glad you came. I . . . I want to be your friend. A good one.”

“I want that, too, Anais.”

“Then I guess that settles that,” she said with a smile. “You know, before you came into my life I’d never shot my weapon in the line of duty, never been shot or even been shot at, actually. Now I’ve done all three.” She paused and added with a grin, “You sure know how to show a girl a good time, I’ll give you that, mate.”

He smiled. “I do what I can. But . . . no more getting shot, okay?”

“I’ll do what *I* can,” she parroted back.

“So what now?” he said.

“So over the next two weeks I’d like to show you my little piece of paradise, if you’re game, Agent Devine.”

“I’m game, DS Jones.”

She stood, gripped his hand, and pulled him up.

They set off together for a walk along one of the most magnificent beaches on earth.

And, for the first time in what seemed like forever, Travis Devine was just another tourist enjoying a little sun and a little fun in the company of a good friend.

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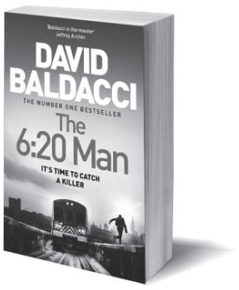
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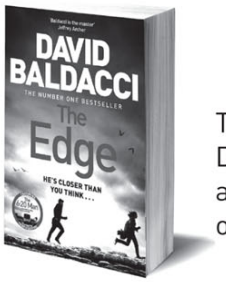
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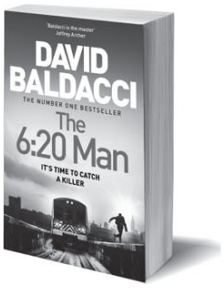
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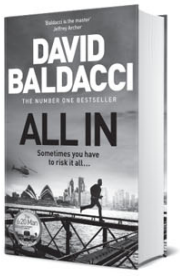




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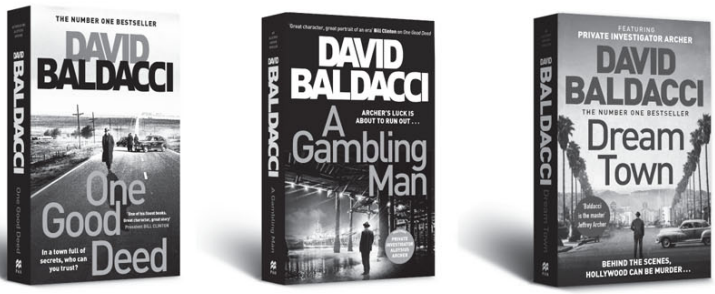




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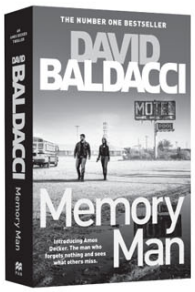
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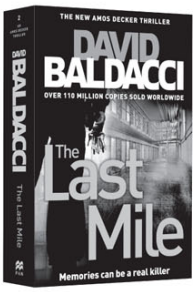
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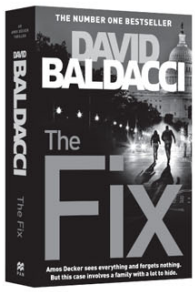


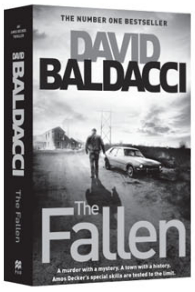
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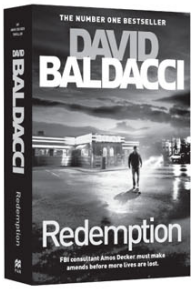
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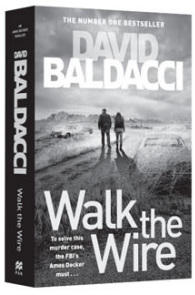


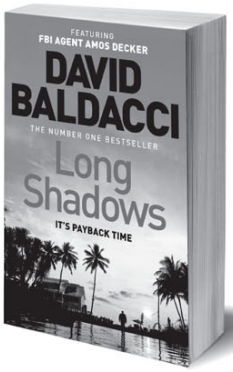












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