

Chapter 1

6:42 AM

South 20th Street

Newark, New Jersey

Special Agent Ethan Reeves rubbed his eyes and took a sip of bitter coffee from a worn blue travel mug. Sunlight crept through the open doorway connecting the front room of the apartment to the kitchen, spreading along the worn gray carpeting. Through the opening, he heard Special Agent Dave Howard rummage noisily through cabinets and drawers. Muttered obscenities floated into the quiet room, causing a barely discernible grin to form on his face.

"The sugar's gone," said Reeves.

"What happened to the rest of the packets?"

"You forgot to put them in the fridge last night. The mice showed up again. Crapped all over the kitchen table too," said Reeves.

"Sorry about that. I'll head out a little later. This place is fucking disgusting. Did I mention that before?" groaned Howard.

"That's the first time today. I'll call the incoming team and let them know what they need to bring," he said blandly.

Reeves shook the mouse and brought one of the computer monitors back to life. He leaned back and slouched in the stiff, inexpensive office chair that the Newark field office had finally approved. Before these arrived, they had suffered through the day on folding chairs, frequently standing up to stretch out ever tightening backs and hamstrings.

By mid afternoon, he usually spent more time standing than sitting. At the end of a week's rotation, Reeves felt twice his age. His body would slowly recover over the weekend, eventually returning to normal before he reported to the Newark field office on Monday, where he'd enjoy a few days of slightly less mundane work, constantly dreading the arrival of Friday morning, when he would report for another week of duty holed up in their surveillance post. One week on. One week off. Pure agony.

So far, the realities of stakeout duty had fit few of his preconceived notions. Instructors at the FBI Academy tried to manage every new agent's expectations about the job, but they had failed miserably to prepare him for the inevitable stake out assignment. Reeves stubbornly held onto his pre-academy fantasies. Daydreams that put him in a desperate position to single-handedly apprehend one of the nation's most wanted terrorists and stop the next 9/11. He needed to cling to this delusion, because after five months of reviewing digital feeds and adjusting surveillance equipment, cynicism had started to blanket his romantic notions about life as a special agent in the FBI.

His partner, an even keeled, fifteen-year veteran of the Bureau, did his best to maintain an enthusiastic façade, but Reeves could sense that Special Agent Howard's FBI spark had been extinguished long ago. Howard quickly steered their conversations away from work, focusing on family, friends, hobbies,

vacations...anything but FBI work. Luckily for Reeves, Dave was an entertaining and comical storyteller, because as a newly minted, single agent, their lives had little in common beyond their FBI credentials.

He activated two more monitors and searched the first screen for the 'digital highlights' function. Despite the FBI's frugal interior decorating job, the surveillance package deployed in the apartment was state-of-the-art. Little expense had been spared to provide a nearly automated system, which made their jobs infinitely easier than any of their predecessors. Long gone were the days spent coordinating bathroom breaks and snapping pictures through a 35mm camera equipped with a telephoto lens. Ironically, they rarely looked out of the apartment windows at their surveillance target. They could watch everything from the monitors.

The new system employed four digital cameras, providing continuous, automated coverage of the target house. The powerful, night vision equipped cameras worked simultaneously from different windows, to capture each and every detail. The system even provided limited thermal detection capability, which could roughly pinpoint the location of a human or large dog within the house. Laser microphones continuously scanned exposed windows for vibrations and automatically recorded the conversations within.

All of this information was continuously uploaded to a location unknown to either agent, where it was closely analyzed on a timeline determined by investigative prioritization algorithms. Based on their extensive experience at this location, the data review for the first floor occupants of 32A, South 20th Street, started later in the morning. They had never been contacted by the Data Analysis Group (DAG) prior to lunch.

Even with all of this automation, their duties included a cursory review of the video and audio surveillance recordings. Since neither of them spoke Arabic, their only responsibility regarding the audio involved reviewing "irregularities." These included arguments, languages other than Arabic, or female voices. Even that job was simplified by the software, which screened the different feeds and highlighted these portions for them based on embedded protocols. The video review required a little more effort.

They typically reviewed the night's digital highlights before breakfast, quickly catching up to near "real time" on the daily feeds. The system flawlessly drew their attention to anomalies detected by the sensors: late night visitors, lights at unusual hours and telephone calls after the team recorded "all quiet" in the house. The suspects in the target apartment kept a pretty tight schedule, which made the job simple. Reeves or Howard would check the highlights, if there were any, and together they would conduct a fast speed scan through the video, further searching for any obvious irregularities.

They weren't required to remain awake once they logged "all quiet," since their stakeout was classified as an intelligence gathering activity. The four men living together in 32A had raised enough red flags to warrant further investigation, but hadn't been classified as an immediate or developing threat.

When the digital highlights screen appeared, Reeves first thought the system had experienced a glitch. Five months of reviewing night feeds had never yielded

anything more interesting than an aborted break-in attempt through one of the building's side windows. Annoyed, he sat up in the chair. The system had highlighted multiple audio, video, and thermal irregularities. In fact, the Windows based system provided a two-page list of anomalies for him to review.

He clicked the first one in the queue, which started a recorded digital feedback stamped "2:24 AM," sending video to two of his screens. He watched the screen on the right, which showed three figures emerge from the back of the target building's backyard and approach the rear deck. The second screen zoomed in on each of the figures in rapid succession, intelligently deciding to capture close up images. Oddly, all of them were dressed in dark clothing, wearing ski masks.

"What the hell?" he muttered.

"You say something?" answered Howard from the kitchen.

"Dave. Get over here!" he said.

He leaned forward in the chair and watched the three figures pause at the bottom of the deck on the screen.

"What?"

Howard appeared in the opening and leaned against the white, paint-chipped doorframe.

"Take a look at this. I think our friends had visitors...holy fuck! Someone took out our guys!" he yelled and shot up from the chair.

"Take it easy, Ethan. What did you see?" said Howard, who calmly walked over to the card table hosting all of their computer equipment.

"Multiple flashes inside the house. We need to get over there now!"

Reeves scrambled around the chair and moved quickly across the room. He reached into a black and gray nylon backpack lying next to the opened sleeper couch, removing his badge, service pistol and a spare magazine from a hidden compartment. Howard leaned over the table and started working the computer mouse.

"Will you settle down? What are we looking at...what the?"

His voice trailed off as he replayed the video and watched the figures disappear from sight. The camera panned out and everything looked normal for a few seconds. The first flash came from the front window, followed immediately by flashes from the side windows, which they had previously determined were bedrooms.

"Shit!" yelled Howard.

He nearly fell backward over the chair, colliding with Reeves as they both sprinted for the kitchen. Howard grabbed his holster and badge from one of the kitchen cabinets, and followed Reeves out the back door and down the crumbling stairway to the cracked, weed filled concrete patio. They sprinted across the street with their guns drawn and approached the rear deck.

"We're fucked," hissed Reeves when they reached the back door.

"Nobody's fucked here. This..."

"This kind of shit happens all the time? You were about to say that, weren't you?" said Reeves.

"Maybe. Let's throttle back and do this by the book. I'll go first, staying low. You cover. We'll work our way through the rooms. No assumptions. Someone might still be alive in the house, and they won't be happy to see us," said Howard.

Reeves took a deep breath.

"Got it. I'm good," he said and adjusted the grip on his Glock 23.

"Ready?" said Howard.

"Ready."

Reeves watched Howard turn the doorknob and push the weathered door inward. They both braced themselves against the doorframe and aimed into the duplex. The door led into the kitchen.

"You smell that?" whispered Howard.

"Smells like someone took a shit on the floor," replied Reeves.

"That's what dead people smell like, before they start rotting. Cover me."

Howard crouched and moved slowly through the kitchen, aiming at the only doorway leading further into the house. When he reached the doorway, he took up a position on the left side of the door, staying low. Reeves followed the same path and stacked up behind Howard. Once in position, Howard aimed through the opening into a long hallway. Reeves stood up and aimed over Howard's head. He saw two doors on the left, which they knew were bedrooms, and a door on the right, which had to be a bathroom. Howard edged into the hallway and nodded at the first door on the right. Reeves and Howard moved up to the closed door. Once in position, Reeves pressed up against the left side of the hall and aimed down the hallway. Howard slowly worked the doorknob before quickly pushing the door open, pistol extended forward with both hands.

"Bathroom's clear," he whispered, leaving the door open.

He turned to face the first door on the left, repeating the process as soon as Reeves took up a position on the right side of the hallway. Instead of pausing at the door, he followed it into the room, feet scuffling just out of Reeves' sight.

"Clear," he heard from inside the room.

Reeves moved into the bedroom doorway and braced his forearms against the doorframe, focused on the hallway leading to the front room.

"One of our subjects is dead. Al Farouq. Two shots to the forehead. We call this in and wait," said Howard.

The smell of feces had worsened after Howard opened the door, activating his gag reflex. Reeves turned his head and glanced into the room. He took small breaths through his mouth. He had to see this. He'd imagined shooting these guys in several of his daydream scenarios, and simply couldn't believe someone had actually done it. The image took his breath away, almost forcing his coffee back up.

A single figure lay on the bed, perfectly arranged for sleep. The pillow looked dark brown under Farouq's head, clearly soaked with coagulating blood. The fitted mattress sheet at the head of the bed was similarly stained, along with the top sheet, which was still pulled up to the man's chin. A small puddle of blood had started to form on the floor under the corner of the loosely hanging top sheet. He could imagine a much larger pool spreading under the bed, where the blood

had finally soaked through the mattress. He snapped his head back to the hallway. Howard counted on him to cover the hallway.

"Shit. We're screwed," whispered Reeves.

"This is not going to be good. That's for sure," replied Howard.

"What do we do?"

"Not much we can do. We call this in and check the rest of the bodies."

"Look on the bright side," added Howard.

"There's a bright side to this?" asked Reeves.

"Yeah, we won't have to spend another night in that rat infested shithole. Let's get this over with," he said and moved back into the hall.

They had three more dead bodies to confirm.

Chapter 2

7:25 AM

White House Situation Room

Washington D.C.

Frederick Shelby sat in one of the prime seats at the long conference table. Two seats away from The President of The United States, he was content to be included in the upper echelon of attendees. The conference table had been reconfigured to seat an expanded group of the most important people in the United States government, in what could easily be described as the most important conference room in the entire world. Technicians had worked feverishly yesterday to configure the room exclusively for the command and control of the government's response to the terrorist plot uncovered by the CIA.

Video conference cameras adorned the table, next to each imbedded computer terminal. Flat screen monitors covered nearly every square inch of eye-level wall space, each presenting a different map, data table or news report. The constant flow of information on the screens brought the static walls alive with vivid, high definition colors. The information flowing to these screens was controlled by analysts sitting at the mobile "watch floor" station at the far corner of the room.

This two-tiered hub consisted of four stations packed closely together, each housing three flat screen monitors for operators to analyze and manipulate. The mobile station's electronics suite had been modified to communicate with the nerve centers of every agency and unit involved in the operation. All crisis related communications sent to the White House would filter through the station and be appropriately disseminated. In anticipation of the complicated, multi-agency effort required to handle the crisis, the President decided to transfer complete responsibility for information management from the White House Situation Room's central Watch Floor to the mobile hub. If necessary, Situation Room technicians could add another mobile station and double the conference room's information management capacity.

He stared down the long table, very much enjoying the picture he saw. The generals and admirals were about as far away as possible from the President, without putting them at a kiddie table, which was where they belonged in his opinion. Especially after last night's debacle and the clear implication that someone in their ranks had tipped off Sanderson. He had been so close to catching Sanderson, only to have the rug pulled out from under him, in what could only be described as a calculated, carefully planned publicity stunt. Fortunately, he had kept his cool. A few more choice words the other night, and he might be a lot further away from The President. Everyone sat quietly as the flat screen monitors simultaneously changed to a CNN broadcast.

"CNN ran this twenty five minutes ago and we're already getting hit left and right with domestic requests for information and civil emergency funding. Pay attention," said the President.

International news correspondent, Michael Foreman, appeared on the screen next to an inset map of western Russia. As he started speaking, the map zoomed in to the Kola Peninsula and the location of Monchegorsk appeared. The words "Breaking News" were stacked above the CNN tagline, "Civil Unrest Reported in Russia."

"This is Michael Foreman with breaking news in Russia. A shockingly bizarre Reuters news story is quickly shaping into a potential nightmare for the world community. Samantha Rivers reports live from St. Petersburg."

"Thank you Michael. I'm standing outside of St. Petersburg square, next to a group of protesters that will join thousands of their fellow countrymen inside the square to demand open access to Monchegorsk. As it stands, only military traffic is allowed on the main highway leading out of St. Petersburg to the beleaguered city, strictly enforced at checkpoints and by ominous patrols of armored vehicles. Until earlier today, most of the media crews had been operating out of Petrozavodsk, a little over two hundred kilometers to the north. Hundreds of military vehicles poured through the small city on their way north to Monchegorsk, which is another two hundred and fifty kilometers north. Abruptly, military and police units forced all media crews back to St. Petersburg, where we have been told to remain indefinitely.

"Confirmed news from the area is scarce, but persistent rumors of a deadly epidemic continue to surface. So far, nobody has been able to confirm the shocking and unbelievable footage sent anonymously to Reuters, suggesting that the Russian military is systematically destroying the city and killing its inhabitants. Russian officials have made no comment. One thing is for certain, the Russian government has taken extraordinary measures to seal off the area surrounding Monchegorsk. What is truly frightening is the fact that the world hasn't seen an emergency government response on this scale from the Russian government since Chernobyl."

"Thank you, Samantha. And now we turn to CNN's very own national security advisor, Brett Russell."

The screen froze and the president returned his gaze to the table.

"And therein lays our problem. The media didn't skip a beat making this a national security issue, and they don't know the half of it...yet. We need to accelerate our efforts to safeguard the American public, and I'm not sure it can be done without drawing attention to the fact that the Monchegorsk situation is directly related to our national security and could very well be the tip of the iceberg. I want to leave this room with an effective, short-term strategy that we can improve upon for the long term. Here's what I think. We can't deploy the National Guard to watch over the nations' water treatment plants without answering some difficult questions. Homeland is already getting crushed with inquiries from state and local law enforcement agencies. We prudently raised the threat level to Orange, without providing details about the threat. This is highly unusual. We've only raised the threat level this high five times on a national level,

and we've always provided details. I don't feel this strategy is sustainable beyond noon today. I want to hear your thoughts."

Shelby made a quick decision to jump into the thick of things. The FBI's taskforce stood at the vanguard of efforts to stop whatever might be headed to U.S. shores and he wanted to make sure everyone in the room understood that fact. The squeaky wheel got the grease, or in this case, the resources.

"Yes, Mr. President. I think we all need more information on the incoming threat. What exactly are we dealing with? I've read the reports, but the information is vague at best. I think we could better shape the nation's response with more precise information," said Frederick Shelby.

Many of the attendees muttered agreement with his comment, while a few displayed mildly disapproving faces. He committed these to memory. It was always good to know who might not be on your side when things went sideways. The Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, White House Chief of Staff and no surprise here, The Director of the CIA. Even Sarah Kestler, the White House Counter-Terrorism Director looked a little annoyed.

"Our CDC liaison answers the technical questions about the Zulu Virus," said the President.

"Zulu Virus?" said one of the Generals.

A tall man with exceedingly dark hair and matching eyebrows stood up from the far end of the table. He looked nothing like a scientific type to Shelby.

"Good morning. I'm doctor Marston Phillips, assistant deputy director for the CDC's Office of Infectious Diseases. This is my colleague, doctor Pradeep Chandrashekar, who heads the Office of Public Health Preparedness and Response," he said, gesturing to the man in a dark blue suit seated next to him at the conference table.

"So, to answer your question briefly, we are looking at a weaponized form of herpes simplex encephalitis, genetically modified to aggressively attack the brain's temporal lobe. Worse yet, we suspect that the modification has reduced the virus's lethality."

"Isn't that a good thing?" interjected James Quinn, National Security Advisor.

"Normally, yes. Left untreated herpes simplex encephalitis has a high fatality rate. Near seventy percent."

The entire room broke into murmurs at the presentation of that statistic.

"Treated aggressively, we can reduce this to thirty percent," continued the scientist.

"Thirty? That's still extremely high," added the National Security Advisor.

"Correct. For an infectious disease, this is a worst-case scenario in terms of lethality, but keep in mind that viral encephalitis is not a highly transmittable disease, like the Avian Flu. This is partly why cases of viral encephalitis are still extremely rare," said Phillips.

"So this should be relatively easy to contain if released on U.S. soil?" asked the Homeland Security Director.

"May I?" asked Pradeep Chandrashekar.

"Please," said Phillips, who sat down to let his colleague continue.

"If the Zulu Virus is released into a public water source, containment of the disease itself will not be our biggest challenge. Physical containment of the impacted community and the management of information will be your biggest priority. Weaponized encephalitis is the ultimate biological weapon..."

"But if it's not contagious, at worst we're looking at highly localized terrorist incidents. Tragic and horrific, but manageable," said the White House Chief of Staff.

"You're missing the bigger picture here, Mr. Remy. Herpes simplex encephalitis does more than produce casualties, and if the virus in question has been modified as suggested, the impact of its release can't be understated. Here are the statistics for the unmodified virus. In those treated aggressively, less than three percent regain normal brain function. This can vary from very mild to severe impairment, depending upon several factors. Early treatment with high dose, intravenous acyclovir is the only modifiable factor scientists have identified. However, this may not be an option in our situation. Testing isn't complete, but the initial research conducted by Edgewood indicates that the weaponized strain in question races to the temporal lobe, leaving little hope of recovery."

"How can you know that for sure?" asked Shelby.

"We can't, but based on the information surrounding the current situation, we have to assume a worst case scenario," interjected Phillips.

"And what is that?" continued Shelby.

"If released in a municipal water supply, unknown to the population, it has the potential to affect nearly everyone. Take a small town of twenty thousand people. Even if we discovered the attack immediately after the virus circulated through the drinking water and treated everyone in the town with acyclovir, 95% of them will suffer neurological impairment at varying levels. 19,000 citizens. Neurological impairment will range from..." he paused and glanced at the President and the Director of the CIA, who shared a glance and nod almost imperceptibly toward Phillips.

"Full homicidal rage and hyper-aggressive behavior to minor seizures. Brain damage in almost every case. Edgewood's initial report indicated that we would likely be dealing with the more serious end of that spectrum. The reports gathered by..." he stopped again and looked to the CIA Director.

Shelby started to get even further annoyed. He could tell that Phillips was uncomfortable taking the conversation any further and he knew exactly why. Prior to entering the conference room, Shelby had been cornered by the National Security Advisor, who informed him that there could be no direct mention of Sanderson's team during the meeting. They could be called "intelligence assets in Europe" or "onsite ground assets" but specific reference beyond that was forbidden.

They didn't have time for the paperwork before the meeting, but information regarding Sanderson's present and future involvement with the government would be classified Compartmentalized Information Security (CIS) Category One. The Black Flag program was once again one of the most highly classified secrets of the United States government. Obviously, Phillips had been given the same speech. He wondered who else had been yanked aside by the National Security

Advisor. Not everyone, or they wouldn't have to dance around this issue during the meeting. The President ended the uncomfortable pause.

"The effects of the virus in question have been confirmed first hand in Russia. We are dealing with the worst end of that spectrum. I don't mean to cut you off, Dr. Phillips, but let me say what needs to be said. If that virus is released, we face the likelihood of trying to contain an entire city or township of brain damaged citizens, many of them mentally deranged and violent, who face no hope of recovery. I can't even begin to fathom how we would handle 19,000 cases like Dr. Phillips suggested in just a small township. People would have to be detained and treated compassionately, even the ones that would require maximum security institutionalization. Imagine this happening simultaneously in fifty-eight separate cities across America. This is the ultimate terrorist weapon, with the potential to tear apart the fabric of American society.

"I want to focus on taking steps to protect our citizens from the release of this virus in the United States, while responsibly and cautiously preparing them for the possibility of an attack. The joint FBI and Homeland Security taskforce based out of our National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) is already fast at work tracking down domestic leads. We have assets doing the same thing abroad. So, how do we start preparing the public, while not hindering investigative progress?" said the President.

"We have to be careful with raising the threat level. Orange is significant, but taking it to Red could tip off the group preparing to attack. Possibly accelerate their timeline or cause them to go to ground. Whatever we do, we can't tip them off until the investigation has reached a critical mass," said Shelby.

"But going to Red would leave no question in anyone's mind that this was the real deal. If we're planning to activate the National Guard, I don't see how we can avoid it," said Marianne Templeton, Secretary of Homeland Security.

"Going to Red will cause a widespread panic. We need to slowly ease into this, based on the immediacy of the threat. We can activate the National Guard without going to Red," said the White House Chief of Staff.

"I don't think we can get away with that for very long. Dr. Chandrashekar. Where does the CDC stand in terms of a response?" said Templeton.

"We're already assembling first response teams and deploying them nationwide so they can reach anywhere within the continental U.S. within a few hours. These teams will confirm the presence of the virus and allow full scale resources to be deployed. We'll coordinate with Health and Human Services to educate the public as determined by the administration. We're working up media packages, public education announcements, and response guidelines for first responders," responded Chandrashekar.

"Pauline, what can we expect from your department at the outset?" asked the President.

Pauline Rosenberg, Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services leaned forward to see around Director Frederick Shelby.

"Mr. President. My department will work closely with CDC to ensure the rapid and targeted deployment of our National Disaster Medical System assets. Under your recent directive, we have created and disseminated several National

Planning Scenarios intended to guide federal, state and local disaster planning efforts. Unfortunately, efforts to implement the recommendations proposed by these scenarios are still in their infancy at the state and local levels. The sooner we alert state and local governments, the better. These scenarios are designed to focus response efforts for geographically limited disasters projected to produce significant casualties in the tens of thousands. A bioweapons attack is one of the scenarios. State governments need to start readying a response."

"I agree with you Ms. Rosenberg, but we need to figure out how to do this without creating a panic," said the President.

"What are we doing directly on a federal level?" he asked.

"On a federal level, we are preparing all of our deployable medical response assets. We have fifty-five Disaster Medical Assistance Teams and thirty-one Federal Medical Stations that can be deployed within twenty four hours. All of the equipment and personnel are being assembled as we speak. Once CDC identifies a hot zone, we will commit these additional assets and start intensively coordinating with local medical and law enforcement authorities. Nineteen thousand patients will require an incredible effort at every level, which will quickly outstrip local resources. Mr. President, you should be prepared to immediately declare any area hit as a federal disaster."

"Nineteen thousand was only an example. The number could be in the hundreds of thousands, depending on the target city," added Dr. Chandrashekar.

"What about the Strategic National Stockpile and Project BioShield? We've spent close to forty billion dollars on bioweapons defense since 9/11 and the anthrax attacks. Five billion alone for vaccines," said the White House Chief of Staff.

"Unfortunately, most of that money went to purchasing and stockpiling vaccines and drugs to counter anthrax and smallpox, which have always been considered to be the most likely bioterrorism threats. We've also put a considerable amount of funding into research for an antidote to botulism toxins. The rest went to research to improve treatments to exposure to chemical and radiological weapons. We have no stockpile of anti-virals suited to treat a weaponized version, or any version of herpes simplex encephalitis."

"What about the drug companies that make the ones we need?" added the Chief of Staff.

"We're in contact with them right now, to see how quickly they can increase production of these drugs. The production of oral valacyclovir can likely be increased immediately, but the intravenous acyclovir will present a problem. Unfortunately, the intravenous solution is the standard of treatment for HSE. High doses of orally administered valacyclovir are only theoretically effective in this case."

"Shit. We have nothing stockpiled to defend against this?" the Chief of Staff adds.

"Not at the moment," she says.

"I'll get on the phone to the CEO's of these companies as soon as I leave the room and make sure you have their undivided attention," said the President.

"Where do we stand right now in the investigation?" asked Sarah Kestler, White House Counterterrorism Director.

This was Shelby's chance to shine, though he knew that most of his own Task Force's success depended heavily on the Sanderson's team's efforts in Europe. All of this was a cruel twist of fate and irony for Shelby. One that scorched his very soul with the fires of mistrust and suspicion. Sanderson had burned them all twice now. Two years ago by destroying the HYDRA investigation for his own selfish purposes and one day ago by forcing the President to grant his entire band of criminals a blanket immunity agreement. Each scenario had been carefully crafted and manipulated by Sanderson.

Deep down inside, he wasn't completely convinced that this whole terrorist threat wasn't Sanderson's plan from the very beginning. He would never forgive Sanderson for the two high profile embarrassments placed in his lap, and despite the immunity agreement, he would have his revenge. He'd have to be patient and extremely cautious, but he'd find a way to send that traitorous bastard to prison for the rest of his life. He already knew where to start the process.

He stared down at Major General Bob Kearney and nodded. He hadn't been surprised to see his friend in the meeting, but the presence of Rear Admiral DeSantos seemed unusual. Why the Strategic Services Branch (SSB) needed to sit in on one of the most important meetings in history was lost on him, unless the SSB was Sanderson's new home. Kearney would be seething if this turned out to be the case, but the arrangement might prove useful. Kearney was an ally that might prove instrumental to bringing Sanderson down. If Sanderson's crew was attached to the SSB, a subordinate command to Kearney's DIA, Shelby's commitment to bringing Sanderson down might be easier than expected.

Clearing his throat, he stood up to address the President.

"Task Force Scorpion will focus investigative efforts in two directions. Since Al Qaeda operatives were last in possession of the virus in Europe, our primary focus is on suspected Al Qaeda cells in the U.S. These cells typically operate independently, but based on the coordinated plan foiled in Europe, we suspect that this will be a coordinated effort here at home. The larger the network, the more likely we will pick up leads right away. I have tripled the number of agents assigned to the International Terrorism Operations Section assigned to Al Qaeda and made this the FBI's number one investigative priority. Homeland Security has made a similar shift in its resources," said Shelby, nodding to Marianne Templeton.

"Our second focus is on domestic terrorism networks. Intelligence gathered in Europe indicated the remote possibility that one of our home-grown terrorist groups may be involved, though this has not been confirmed and the extent of their involvement is unknown. Special Agent Ryan Sharpe, Task Force Scorpion's leader, has worked extensively within the Domestic Terrorism section for the past few years and is intimately familiar with all of these groups. His assistant, Special Agent Frank Mendoza, is a rising star within the Al Qaeda investigative section. I've put our best people on deck for this and am confident that we'll start making significant progress immediately," he finished.

"And our overseas assets? How do they fit into this?" asked the National Security Advisor.

Both Shelby and the Director of the CIA started to answer this question at the same time, neither one of them wanting to back down.

"General Copley?" said the President.

"Thank you, Mr. President. Intelligence suggests that Al Qaeda planned to use a medical supply distribution company in Germany to ship the remaining virus to the U.S. Discreet assets are moving quickly to that site..."

"Should I be worried about this?" interrupted the Secretary of State, Colin Hyde.

Shelby chuckled to himself and had to exercise every last bit of restraint not to visibly show his amusement. Should he be worried? Hadn't he seen the results of the CIA's discreet assets in Stockholm? They nearly destroyed half of a city block in broad daylight. The Black Flag teams were the Secretary of State's worst nightmare. An international incident steamroller on autopilot to tear up as much of Europe as humanly possible. He should be very worried.

"We can talk about that a little later, Colin. Based on the information we've shared with Germany already, I don't think they'll have a problem with what we have in mind," said the President, nodding for General Copley to finish.

Shelby couldn't constrain himself and barely managed to turn an outright laugh into a cough.

"If we're lucky, the virus may still be sitting in Europe. If not, they'll do everything possible to figure out where these canisters were shipped. Evidence found in Europe indicated that several Al Qaeda cells made hasty exits from the European scene. If the canisters were shipped recently, as suspected, Task Force Scorpion might have a chance of grabbing it all at once on the ground here."

"You mean we're not even 100% sure this is inbound?" said Joseph Morales, speaking up for the first time.

Morales was the Department of Justice's Assistant Attorney General for National Security (AAG-NS) and directed three other AAG's within the National Security Division that handled the legal aspects of counterterrorism, counterespionage and intelligence gathering. Shelby rarely clashed with Morales, since his position was newly appointed by the President, and they mostly saw eye to eye on issues regarding domestic counterintelligence and counterterrorism. Most importantly, his attorneys spent most of their time focusing on foreign intelligence gathering methods. Frankly, he was surprised that the President included him in this meeting, as he could imagine no circumstance on earth under which the administration would bring him up to speed on the details of their most current foreign intelligence gathering asset's origins. Morales would be another ally Shelby could rely upon when things started to get dicey.

"We should have a yes or no answer on that within a few hours," said Copley.

"I don't want to overstep my area of expertise, Madame Secretary," said Morales, gesturing toward Pauline Rosenberg from Health and Human Services, "but there are certain actions that won't be retractable. Maybe we should wait for word from our overseas assets, before we start contacting state governors and

ramping up bioterrorism resources. It won't take much for the media to start piecing this all together, especially with the news from Russia."

"I tend to agree with this course of action," said Marianne Templeton from Homeland Security, "if this isn't inbound, an overreaction on our part will unnecessarily panic the public."

Sarah Kestler stood up, scowling with pursed lips. She always wore a severe looking face, but this new look gave her an entirely new dimension of seriousness.

"Nobody is suggesting that we shut down FEDEX and UPS, or confiscate every package delivered within the last week. Some basic steps are prudent. It sounds like the virus could already be here. The European cells vanished within the last four days, right?"

"So it appears from the foreign law enforcement reports," said Shelby.

"Al Qaeda isn't going to wait for us to gather the next report. Four days ago? Give them a day to consolidate the virus at the shipping facility, maybe another day to pack and ship. Until proven otherwise, I recommend that we start taking steps based on the assumption that U.S. based Al Qaeda cells are in possession of fifty-eight bioweapons canisters. Or at least someone is in possession of these weapons. Given the fact that they abandoned Europe, likely in response to the news pouring out of the Kola Peninsula, I don't think they plan to sit around and stare at the canisters for very long. This is a bold plan that took years to coordinate. They're shifting tactics and strategy quickly. Frankly, I'd be surprised if they hadn't already carried out their mission here. We need the National Guard and local law enforcement out protecting our water supply right now. European authorities didn't waste any time securing and testing their water supplies."

"It's just that once we start this ball rolling, it'll be hard to stop," added the Secretary of Homeland Security.

"She's right. Once we start making calls at the state level, this thing will take on a life of its own," said the Health and Human Services Secretary.

"I think we'll have much bigger problems if Al Qaeda manages to release the virus. Each canister can poison a city," said Kestler.

"Our intelligence indicates that they would use more than one per city," added the CIA Director.

"Fair enough. Twenty cities...even one city will create an unstoppable panic, well beyond any scare caused by preparing for an attack. It sounds like the right steps are being taken by every agency at the federal level. I just think it's time to get local and state authorities involved. We need to start securing water supply points and testing water."

"Does anyone firmly disagree with this strategy?" said the President.

"I still think we should wait until the threat is confirmed. If we immediately take the steps that Ms. Kestler recommends, we have to raise the threat level to Red. There is no going back from there. It has only been done once since 9/11."

"I can live with that," said Kestler.

"You don't have to deal with the impact on the nation's transportation system, airports, borders...this goes far beyond just sliding the color over to Red."

"Just one successful attack will change the nation forever, Mr. President. This has the potential to make 9/11 look like a pipe bomb," replied Kestler.

Shelby liked the way she thought and acted. No nonsense, action oriented.

"Alright. Ms. Kennedy?" said the President.

"Sir?" said Sandra Kennedy, the Deputy Secretary of Defense, leaning her head inward to make eye contact with the President.

"Let's activate the Army National Guard and Army Reserve immediately. Do whatever needs to be done to coordinate with each state. Make sure they understand that this is a nationally directed deployment."

"Understood, Mr. President," said the Under Secretary.

"If we're lucky, we'll find out in a few hours that the virus never left Europe. I'm willing to deal with the fallout of putting the Guard and the appropriate government agencies on high alert. The situation in Monchegorsk is a nightmare. Even before Russia's unforgiveable wholesale slaughter of the population, it was..."

"Unverified at the moment," interrupted the Secretary of State.

"It's been verified, Colin. However, I understand your concerns regarding the Russians," he said, shooting the Secretary of State a harsh look.

"Marianne, let's move the Homeland Security Advisory System threat level to Red. Severe risk of attack," said the President.

The President started going down the line, tasking the members, but Shelby was distracted by an alert on the built in table top computer monitor in front of him. The monitor at his seat had been configured for him to send and receive intranet traffic from his own office to provide a way for his staff and immediate subordinates to pass him information while he was stuck in the White House situation room. So far, the messages had been routine, intended for him to review in between sessions. A Flash Priority message caught his eye at the top of the queue and all of his other message traffic stopped. He noticed that one of the President's aides, sitting at a chair behind the President, received a cell phone call. Even Shelby wasn't allowed to bring a cell phone into the Situation Room, so he knew this must have been an internal communication. The aide stood up and walked along the outside wall of the room toward him.

"Director Shelby, I've been informed that you have a Flash message," he stated.

"Thank you. I just saw it."

This exchange went mostly unnoticed in the room. It wasn't uncommon for senior government officials to receive critical messages while in the audience of the President. Shelby's eyes narrowed as he read the contents of the message. When he shifted his gaze to the President, he noticed that all eyes were focused on him. The President had stopped talking and was waiting for Shelby.

"What happened?" said the President.

"Six of the seven suspected Al Qaeda cells under surveillance in the greater New York/New Jersey metro area were taken out last night. Massacred in their sleep. I think it's fair to assume that some of the virus is here already," said Shelby, clearly shaken by the news.

"What about the other cell?" asked Marianne Templeton.

"Missing. They shook ground surveillance and never returned to their apartment last night," said Shelby.

"Shit. How the hell could this have happened right under your peoples' noses. They were under surveillance right?" snapped Jacob Remy.

"Easy, Jacob," said the President.

"Simultaneous strikes around 2:30 in the morning. This is surveillance, not protective duty. These groups never move at night. They follow unvarying routines throughout the day and wake up in the middle of the night to pray. We listen to every conversation they have and analyze every aspect of their lives."

"But someone can walk inside and kill them without anyone knowing?" pressed the White House Chief.

"We can figure this out later. Do you have any leads? Anything that can move us in the right direction?" said the President.

"We got lucky at one of the sites," said Shelby.

Jacob Remy huffed at this comment.

"One of the killers removed his mask prematurely, within view of our cameras. We're working on identifying him. Surveillance records indicate that all of the sites received multiple FEDEX package yesterday," said Shelby.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" yelled Jacobs.

"How long would it have taken for that information to raise an alarm? This is unreal!"

"Maybe if you'd quit withholding funds from my Agency, I could hire more agents to watch these pricks...and upgrade the systems used by our analysts to filter through the thousands of reports that are filed on an hourly basis from law enforcement agencies nationwide."

"Now this is my fault?" said Jacobs.

"It's Al Qaeda's fault, gentlemen. That's it. Let's get the investigation moving with the new information," said the President.

He turned to Director Copley.

"I still want your people moving on the medical supply company in Germany. Seven cells with suspicious activity isn't the full extent of this. There would have to be more. We need to figure out who hit them..."

"Probably the domestic group referenced by our intelligence source," interrupted the CIA Director.

"Let's figure that out. I can't imagine this domestic group got every canister. We need to approach this from both angles," said the President.

"General Gordon. I am invoking my authority under the Insurrection Act to deploy active military units in support of domestic law enforcement agencies. My own counsel and the Attorney General agree that this level of coordinated terrorist activity on U.S. soil warrants my authority in this case."

"What did you have in mind, Mr. President?" said Lieutenant General Frank Gordon.

"Special Forces. Tier One units and all other direct action capable Special Forces teams. Full helicopter support. I want our best teams available to support Task Force Scorpion," said the President.

"Sir, we have the same capabilities within the FBI. Coupled with local SWAT assets, this should be more than enough to cover any possible contingencies," said Director Shelby.

"I'm not casting any doubt on your agency's capabilities. I want to plan for the worst-case scenario. We get all of our best operators into the game. I will only authorize the use of U.S. Special Forces as a last option," said the President.

"I'll get the units ready and coordinate with Task Force Scorpion regarding geographic deployment. If you don't mind, Director Shelby, I'd like to assign a liaison to your task force," said Gordon.

"The more the merrier," said Shelby, not really meaning what he said.

"We have a long day ahead of us. I don't want to hold any of you up any longer. Make sure you coordinate your agency's press releases with my office. We need to be on the same page when communicating to the press and the public. Any last concerns?" he said, not really waiting.

"Good. Get to it," said the President.

He immediately left the room with his entourage, which included the Chief of Staff, his secret service detail, a few aides and the Director of the CIA. Major General Bob Kearney and Rear Admiral DeSantos vanished just as quickly out of a door on the other side of the conference room. The noise level suddenly rose to a level making it nearly impossible to carry on a conversation. He yelled across to Marianne Templeton.

"Are you scheduled to meet with the President after this?"

"No. I need to get out of here and get this nightmare rolling. I still think we should wait for further confirmation. You won't be able to buy groceries tonight on your way home after this news hits," said Templeton.

"Or bottled water. I wouldn't worry about heading home tonight. Nobody's leaving his or her office in the foreseeable future. I'll catch up with you later," he said, moving swiftly toward the door.

He reached the conference room exit and stepped outside, searching for any signs of the President's entourage. He spotted General Kearney and Admiral DeSantos headed in the direction of the President's private office on the other side of the Watch Floor. Tracking their progress, he pushed through an endless gaggle of seemingly inconsequential aides and government staffers waiting to rendezvous with someone important in the conference room he just departed. He watched as Secret Service agents stationed outside of the office admitted the two flag ranked officers and pulled the office door shut.

Through the two windows, he could see the President seated behind a desk and Director Copley sitting directly across from him. The President motioned with his hand and the two officers sat down on chairs squeezed into the office next to the CIA director. The President reached behind him and the windows suddenly fogged, obscuring Shelby's view inside the office.

He knew this had something to do with Sanderson. The President was taking an extreme risk sanctioning the use of these assets. Less than twenty-eight hours ago, Sanderson's organizations had been classified as a terrorist organization. He couldn't afford a screw up that would draw the public's attention to that fact. The President was probably spelling out exactly what he expected in terms of

Sanderson's continued involvement on foreign soil. Shelby didn't like guessing. Sanderson's operatives had been assigned to Task Force Scorpion, and he still didn't have a good handle on their rules of engagement or the scope of their authority. He was told to wait on this, until a DIA liaison was assigned to the NCTC.

As Director of the FBI, in charge of the nation's premiere law enforcement and domestic surveillance apparatus, the term "need to know basis" didn't apply to him. He needed to know everything. His only consolation in this case was the fact that he had a man on the inside, talking with the President while he was jostled around by this endless tide of servants waiting eagerly to serve their masters.

Chapter 3

9:25 AM

Acassuso Barrio

Buenos Aires, Argentina

Jessica leaned into the vanity mirror and gently applied the concealer stick to the remaining dark purple areas under her left eye. She held the stick between her index finger and thumb, patting the application lightly with her pinky finger to blend it into the foundation. She had spent the better half of an hour applying makeup to her bruised and battered face. The process was taking her twice as long without help from her left hand, which sat uselessly in a tight gauze wrap on the brown speckled granite countertop.

Concealing signs of physical abuse surfaced deep, distant emotions that Jessica had spent the last ten years pushing further and further into her subconscious. She was no stranger to “making herself look pretty again” after silently enduring repeated beatings at the hand of Srecko Hadzic’s associates in Serbia.

The physical abuse hadn’t been the worst part. In fact, it had barely bothered her at all. She had a built-in tolerance for physical pain. One of the many “gifts” she had acquired living under the constant threat of her father’s wildly unpredictable, alcohol fueled rampages. Taking a closed fist high on the cheekbone or a backhand to the mouth was something she had learned to live with.

She thought all of that would change when she reported to Langley. Ironically, she couldn’t have been further mistaken. Instead, they would turn her into one of the most lethal operatives in recent CIA history and put her into a situation where she was forbidden to use those skills to defend herself. She had developed dozens of coping mechanisms as a helpless child, none of which could help her deal with the fact that she had become a predator, but she would still be abused nonetheless. This burden had slowly unraveled her in Belgrade, nearly killing her.

Finding Daniel in that hellhole had certainly saved her from herself. Daniel insisted that they had saved each other, but she knew better. That was something he said to ease her emotional pain. She had no doubt that Daniel would have survived his “tour of duty” in Serbia. He was one of life’s guaranteed survivors, and staying close to him would always be her best chance to survive too.

She touched up the last remaining evidence of the desperate struggle that almost ended her life and leaned back to take in the masterpiece. She had to give them credit. Even Daniel might not recognize her at first glance. Thanks to a discreet team of beauty consultants, who specialized in hiding wealthy victims of abuse within plain sight, she could effortlessly walk into Ministro Pistarini International Airport and board a plane headed anywhere in the world.

Her long, lustrous jet-black hair had been replaced by a dark brown, short pixie-cropped style that accentuated the strong, angular contours of her face and freshly lifted eyebrows. She had changed her eye color from dark brown to deep blue, with the help of custom vanity contact lenses that also hid the temporary damage to the blood vessels in her left eye. Balanced collagen injections helped her lips appear normal against the persistent swelling on the left side of her face. She had changed her appearance as much

as possible without plastic surgery or Hollywood-level special effects makeup. Only a close examination by a seasoned social services case-worker could detect her secret. Even her bandaged hand would be disguised in a sleek, medical grade plastic hand splint that would require little more than a quick explanation about a recent “tennis” accident.

In a few minutes she would complete the transformation with a dark grey, Ralph Lauren sleeveless turtleneck dress that would cover the extensive abrasions and cuts from the piano wire that had nearly severed her carotid artery five days earlier. She had to hand it to the small group of stylists that took over her bedroom for several hours yesterday. They may have cost a fortune, but they didn’t mess around. She “felt pretty again.”

Her cellphone rang from somewhere deeper in the house. Most likely from the kitchen where she had prepared an espresso earlier. She had carried the phone around with her, hoping to hear from Daniel before he became too involved in his next job for Sanderson. She didn’t have many details regarding his next operation in Germany, but he had made it sound like routine work. She was certain that there would be nothing routine about his day, but at least it wouldn’t involve penetrating a “rabid zombie” infested city to retrieve a human head, or driving full speed into a Spetznaz crossfire. Whatever the mission, she knew it wasn’t a good idea to distract him, but she needed more than a call every two or three days while he was away. Especially after what almost happened in their Buenos Aires high-rise. She needed to talk to him every hour if possible, but would settle for once a day.

She started to form the words to call her two unwilling manservants, Munoz and Melendez, but quickly remembered they had departed soon after she treated them to the most expensive dinner she could import into the safe house. It was the smallest token of gratitude she could offer the two men that had saved her from Srecko’s beasts. The duo had even started to lighten up a little, which probably had less to do with her charming personality and everything to do with the availability of an exquisitely smooth Malbec vintage, and the dawning realization that they would be taking the next available private flight back to Sanderson’s mountain hideaway. Either way, she enjoyed seeing them let their guard down just a little and finally relax. She owed them everything.

She had oddly come to terms with her own death at the apartment. On some level, she had felt relieved that her struggle was finally finished. At least she had convinced herself that she had accepted her death. All she had to do was relax her muscles and take a little weight off her tensed midsection. The thin piano wire would have cut a few more millimeters into her neck, effectively opening her carotid artery. It might have been a bad decision given the Celox Munoz had found in Josef Hadzic’s torture kit, but she somehow doubted they could have kept her alive for more than a minute or two jamming hemostatic powder into her neck. What they had planned to do to her corpse afterward, on camera for their boss, hadn’t mattered to her either, so she thought.

Ultimately, all of those thoughts proved false. When Melendez’s bullet removed her captor’s head, she sprang into action with no hesitation, leaving little doubt about her decision to live or die.

She put down the concealer stick and walked across the cool, gray marble tile to the kitchen. She hadn’t expected to hear from Daniel until later in the afternoon. His group had an operation planned for the evening, which always shut him down externally. She read the caller ID, not recognizing the number, which could only mean one thing. The last person she really wanted to talk to right now. Three people had the number for this

throw away phone. Daniel, Munoz and her least favorite person in the world. She accepted the call.

“Do I need to get a restraining order?” she answered.

“I highly doubt that would be possible, since you officially no longer exist as an Argentinian citizen,” said General Sanderson.

“That was fast. Can I pick up the new paperwork this morning? There’s room on a flight leaving at 12:15,” said Jessica.

“So now you’re happy to hear from me? Your passport will be delivered within the hour by a trusted member of the U.S. Embassy. One of Karl Berg’s friends. That might give you enough time to book that flight.”

“I’m impressed,” she said.

“I’ll take that as a compliment, though I must admit that having a little leverage over the White House helps work wonders with the State Department. The passport has been issued in the name Jessica Petrovich, and will contain an entry stamp for your vacation to Argentina. Once you get out of Argentina, you’re home free. Your names have been removed from every U.S. generated international and domestic watch list. The Petrovich’s are free and clear as far as the U.S. government is concerned.”

“Do you trust them?” said Jessica.

“For now, but I’d recommend having a back up plan ready at all times. I’ll help you get a second set of papers, just in case. Have Daniel pass on the details when the two of you have talked about it,” said Sanderson.

“We’ll be sure to get in touch,” said Jessica.

“Why do I get the feeling the two of you already have a plan to disappear?”

“Because you know us too well? Who knows, we might sign on with you as a *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* freelance team. No promises, but all options are still on the table,” said Jessica.

“Now that is a pleasant surprise coming from you. Even hearing you mention the possibility gives me hope. I was utterly convinced that I’d never see the two of you again,” said Sanderson.

“You might not...” she said and paused.

“But sometimes life makes the choices for you,” said Jessica.

“In my experience, its most of the time. The two of you will always be welcome here. Don’t ever forget that,” he said.

“Somehow, I don’t think you’ll let us forget,” she said.

“We all know each other too well. Enjoy your time together. The two of you have earned it. I expect to hear from Daniel early this evening. Sounds like they are close to wrapping up their work in Germany. Of course, it all depends on his ability to get some very stubborn people to talk,” said Sanderson.

“I’m sure Daniel will be on one of the first flights out of Germany tomorrow,” said Jessica.

“A lot of high placed, extremely anxious government officials in D.C. are counting on that very same assessment,” said Sanderson.

“He never disappoints,” said Jessica.

“No. He doesn’t. Good luck, Jessica,” he said and the call disconnected.

She placed the phone on the cold granite countertop and glanced at a two-thirds empty bottle of last night’s Malbec standing next to the sink. Was nine-thirty in the

morning too early for a glass of wine? Probably. Plus, she needed something stronger to deal with the anxiety stirred up from talking to Sanderson. He'd ruined their lives for his own selfish gain, though the entire situation was certainly more complex. Without the general's new initiative, who knows what the world might have faced in the upcoming weeks. The limited reports streaming out of Russia painted an extremely bleak picture. Without Daniel, the world may never have discovered the truth about what happened in Monchegorsk. She felt her mind spinning again and glanced at the bottle of wine. Still not a good idea. Maybe a little closer to eleven o'clock.

Chapter 4

7:38 PM

***Gallusviertel District "Gallus"
Frankfurt, Germany***

"We stick out like a sore thumb around here," muttered Daniel from the rear bench row of their Ford Transit van.

"At least nobody will call the cops," said Konrad Hubner.

"That's because we look like the cops," said Daniel.

"We're fine. This isn't a high crime area. The immigrants take care of this place," said Reinhard Klinkman.

Klinkman had met them in Hamburg, after they had travelled separately by car through Sweden and Denmark. Thanks to the Schengen Agreement, neither of their cars was subjected to more than a visual check at reduced speed, at either the Danish or German border. The Schengen Agreement, started in 1985, gradually abolished border controls throughout the European Union, making it possible to drive from Stockholm to Spain without ever displaying a passport or enduring customs searches. If you held a passport from a non-Schengen Area country, all you had to do was gain admittance to the European continent, legally or illegally, and you could travel freely without question or fear of discovery.

Once Petrovich's team landed in Stockholm a few days earlier, they were more or less guaranteed access to the rest of Europe. Of course, the matter of their involvement in a running gun battle on the streets of Stockholm had the potential to complicate this freedom, but once they escaped the city, they saw no sign of an enhanced security presence in any part of Sweden.

Klinkman had arranged for them to return their rental cars in Hamburg and take possession of two used vans, which they drove to Frankfurt. One van, with darkened rear windows, would be used by the assault team. The windowless, second van gave Sanderson's Electronic Warfare (EW) team a private cargo area to turn the van into a mobile electronics suite.

Three members of this newly formed group had joined them in Frankfurt, having arrived from various parts of Europe. Utilizing lap top equipment and wireless technology worth five times the amount of their van, they had easily hacked into Frankfurt's Deutsche BioMedizinische (DBM) database, sending the data to the CIA. Although theoretically unnecessary in this case, since most of the cyber work could be done from the U.S., Sanderson wanted to put this team in the field alongside the clandestine operatives. Apparently, Berg didn't argue with the idea, since it would provide one more layer of separation between his agency and German authorities, should the unthinkable transpire. Berg seemed to be all about these layers, which Petrovich could appreciate. All of his own layers had been peeled away recently, leaving him completely exposed.

The electronic warfare team had another goal that had been cautiously revealed by their team leader, "Luke." The Frenchman had disclosed the fact that they would try to hack the CIA's system and either download the terrorist databases or install a backdoor that they could access later. Sanderson didn't want the team constrained by nervous decision makers, when national security matters were at stake. Daniel had no doubt that the electronics team had been given orders to go deeper than just the terrorist databases. Sanderson never passed up an opportunity to expand his influence, and if the CIA lets their collective guard down for a second while linking with Luke's team, the General would take full advantage of the situation. Sanderson never ceased to amaze and disgust Petrovich.

"There's the apartment block. Lots of shady looking faces around here. Are you sure the van won't disappear? That would pose a real fucking problem," said Farrington.

"It's not like the states. You don't find the same level of crime. There are plenty of rougher, all white neighborhoods further west," said Hubner.

"I don't want to have to walk him to the nearest U-bahn station if our van disappears," replied Farrington.

"It won't be a problem," muttered Hubner.

"I still think we should deal with him in his apartment. Fewer variables," said Klinkman.

"This is a tightly knit immigrant community. Word will get around fast and eventually make its way to the real police, who will be quick to respond. There's no federal police bureaucracy working in our favor. We need to get Sahil into the van as quickly as possible," said Hubner.

Hubner was right. No broad federal law enforcement agency existed in Germany, so they couldn't flash federal badges and buy time like in the U.S or Russia. Nearly all law enforcement tasks fell under territorial German State Police, which are administered separately by each region. The only federal police apparatus in Germany was the Bundespolizei (BPOL), which didn't include any specialized units that would typically conduct an urban based raid. Most BPOL units served federal internal security or border supervision roles.

They had thought about posing as members of Germany's counter-terrorism forces, GSG-9, a specialized branch of the BPOL, but decided against the idea. The mere suggestion of a GSG-9 operation would raise every law enforcement alarm in the region. Their hastily provided identification badges indicated that they were members of the Hesse Landeskriminalamt (LKA), or State Investigative Bureau, which made enough sense to silence most curious onlookers. The LKA specialized in investigating and preventing politically motivated crimes. Four bulky LKA investigators dragging a young Muslim man into a van wouldn't be the most unusual law enforcement spectacle seen in this neighborhood.

Daniel glanced around at his surroundings, as the van pulled into an empty space next to a large green, graffiti covered dumpster on Idsteiner Strasse. The northern Gallus neighborhood was dominated by rows of long, non-descript, three story apartment blocks, each extending at least one hundred meters from Idsteiner

Strasse. If Sahil's apartment was at the end of one of these blocks, they might have to reposition the car. The van was parked in front of a low hedge, between two of the buildings. Beyond the hedge, lay a grassy courtyard, which was outlined by a continuation of the hedge and covered with rectangular clothes drying poles. Spaced closely together, the poles resembled crudely erected, miniature soccer goals. Only a few were still adorned by drying laundry this close to sunset and presented another possible complication upon exit with their man. Entrance doorways to both buildings were visible on the outer edges of the long courtyard, spaced evenly down the entire block.

He shifted nearly all of his attention to the apartment building on the left side of the courtyard. 85 Idsteiner. Upon arrival, he had noted that the target building featured no balconies on either side, just bare faced walls containing small windows. They wouldn't have to post someone in the adjacent courtyard to prevent a jumper. The target's apartment designation was 2F, which they had presumed to mean second floor. Counting doorways, the apartment was most likely located halfway down the building, which meant a long transit dragging a feisty terrorist. They didn't have much time to spend in the apartment, but he wasn't opposed to spending a few precious moments convincing Sahil that resistance would be met by severe, unthinkable pain. He glanced behind him into the cargo hold area at a large, black nylon bag. He wouldn't need the contents of this bag to convince Sahil. The bag could wait for later, when they had more time.

Farrington patted Klinkman on the shoulder and turned to face Daniel and Hubner.

"Alright. Let's do this. I want to be out of here within five minutes. Daniel and I will handle any law enforcement interference."

He locked eyes with Daniel.

"Use your compressed air pistol first. You'll have five separate shots. Each dart will instantly paralyze your target..."

"I'm familiar with the effects," he interrupted bitterly.

"The darts will not penetrate a ballistic vest. Your best bet will be to hit an arm or leg," said Farrington without changing his expression.

"Or the face," added Petrovich.

"Don't shoot for the face. You'll puncture an eye. At twenty five meters, the air pistols are extremely accurate. Don't shoot for the neck either," he said, maintaining the emotionless face.

Petrovich had at least expected a smile considering the fact that Farrington had zapped him with the same neurotoxin two years ago in the middle of Georgetown University, but this was Farrington's first operation as team leader. Petrovich would play a support role and observe. If Farrington performed as expected, Sanderson would detach Petrovich, leaving Farrington in charge of European operations. Daniel had every intention of making sure Farrington succeeded. He wanted to put as much of this behind him as possible and get back to Jessica.

"Let's hit it," said Farrington.

The four of them simultaneously opened their doors and stepped onto the pavement. Walking briskly, they scanned the courtyard and street for any signs of

trouble. Nothing raised any sort of internal alarm for Daniel as they turned onto the narrow sidewalk running parallel to 85 Idsteiner. The first doorway confirmed the apartment numbering scheme. "Apartments 1-3A." Five more doorways to the entrance for 1-3F. 2F would be on the second floor. Upon casual glance at the first door, Klinkman turned his head to Farrington.

"Ten seconds to pick the lock," he said casually.

They filed down the sidewalk, until arriving at the door marked "Apartments 1-3F." Hubner walked past the doorway, leaning against the wall just short of the nearest first floor window. Farrington took a few steps into the courtyard, through a break in the hedgerow and examined the opposite building's facade. Klinkman immediately went to work on the door with a tool extracted from a small kit he had kept concealed under his black leather jacket. Petrovich concentrated on the street, particularly the area around the van. So far, he hadn't detected any unwanted attention. One pedestrian crossed the opening between buildings, but never glanced in their direction.

Unfortunately, interested pedestrians posed the least of their problems. The real threat came from paranoid neighbors peeking through windows. It didn't take a master's degree in criminology to figure out that Daniel's team was attempting an unauthorized entry. Klinkman was fast, but few citizens kneeled down to insert their keys. A quick scan of the balconies revealed that they were empty, which surprised him given the warm temperature. Then again, most of the working class denizens of the Gallus didn't have time to lounge around mid-week and breathe in the spring air.

"We're in," said Klinkman.

The team disappeared into 85 Idsteiner with one purpose. To extract Sahil Mazari from the apartment. Mazari worked as a computer network programmer at Deutsche BioMedizinische, assigned specifically to support DBM's distribution department. Mazari had been the only employee at DBM's Frankfurt facility flagged in the CIA database, which made him their most logical starting point. A Pakistani born immigrant, he had taken several trips back to Pakistan within the past year, which raised red flags given his previous association with Al Qaeda extremists. The sudden, increased number of visits to Pakistan fit a pattern identified by the CIA. A dangerous precursor for escalated participation in extremist activity. Similar patterns had been identified prior to hundreds of attempted or completed terrorist attacks in the past.

Even more condemning, he had twice travelled back with known Al Qaeda extremists based out of Hamburg. Both of these suspected operatives had attended Technische Universität Hamburg-Harburg (TUHH) with Mazari, and one of them had even completed the same computer information technology degree. Dubbed "Terrorist U" by the CIA's Middle East analysts, former TUHH students could be found at the top of every "known terrorist" watch list around the world. A claim to fame that does not appear as a selling point on any of the university's marketing brochures.

Hamburg continued to serve as a hot bed of Muslim extremist activity, long after the infamous "Hamburg Cell" had changed the world on 9/11, under the leadership of Mohamed Atta. Atta had also been a "student" at TUHH,

disappearing from Germany for extended periods of time to travel to Afghanistan. He continued his studies at leisure, while plotting the most diabolical terrorist attack in history. The CIA had no intention of letting any more TUHH "graduates" conduct attacks against the United States. Mazari's web of connections in Hamburg barred him from entering the United States, and put him on a growing list of "likely terrorists."

Farrington approached the door marked 2F, and the rest of the team fanned out along the walls of the cramped stairway vestibule. Each apartment had its own small landing. Two old, rusted bicycles were stacked against the far wall, causing Petrovich to squeeze by to get behind Farrington. They all withdrew HK P2000 SK (subcompact) pistols from their waistline holsters and stood silent, taking in any noise from the apartment and stairway. Laughter vibrated from 2F. They would soon put an end to that.

Petrovich took a six inch suppressor out of an inside pocket on his jacket and started screwing it onto the custom threaded barrel. He would be first in the door, charged with neutralizing any threat that stood in the way of abducting Mazari. They didn't have a wealth of information about his roommates, but couldn't discount the possibility that this could be a den of extremism.

Farrington tapped his right ear and nodded at Hubner, who quickly gave him a thumbs up. Hubner was the only member of the group wearing an earpiece, connecting the assault group with the mobile surveillance team. Luc and his group were scanning local police channels, searching for any indication that the team might have unwelcome visitors. Apparently, the police channels were still clear. Farrington pointed at the door, which put Klinkman into action.

Klinkman placed a small electronic device at the top right corner of the door, next to the frame, and slid the device down to the door knob. The device displayed a green LED, which turned red about halfway down the door. He pressed a small button on the device with his thumb as it turned red, leaving a small black dot on the white door. He repeated the process under the doorknob, moving the device to the floor without a break in the green LED color.

He reached down into a small bag attached to his waist and pulled out a small thumb sized charge, called a "popper." He placed the malleable charge over the small black dot and pressed it against the frame. If affixed correctly, the low grade plastic explosive would "pop" the deadbolt identified by Klinkman's device. The noise level created by the small explosion would sound like a very angry husband slamming the door to their apartment. He pushed a small, preset timer into the charge and started to work on the doorknob with his toolkit.

Seven seconds later, he glanced up at Farrington. A quick nod was all it took to start the countdown. Klinkman flipped a small switch on the side of the timer and pressed the single button on its face before clearing to the side of the door.

Immediately following the sudden, explosive crack, Petrovich delivered a strong frontal kick to the weakened door. Klinkman turned the doorknob just in time to ensure that the kick knocked the door open with enough force to embed the inner doorknob into the drywall. Petrovich raced into the apartment with his gun raised, followed by Farrington. Within a second they had identified their target, who was holding an Xbox controller in his hand, flanked on a small green

couch by two dark skinned men, each holding a paper plate containing a partially eaten slice of pizza. One of the young men held an amber beer bottle frozen to his lips. A fourth roommate stood frozen over an open cardboard pizza box on a table behind the couch. All of them had frozen in place, staring wide eyed at the men holding pistols aimed at their heads. Klinkman yanked the door out of the wall and slammed it shut. A science fiction fantasy game displayed on the forty inch flat screen TV mounted on the wall behind Farrington made the only sound in the room. Mazari paused the game and the room quieted. Hubner broke the deathly silence with a calm, authoritative voice.

"Sahil Mazari. Drop the controller and place your hands high above your head. If anyone moves, they will be shot in the head," he said in German.

"We don't really speak much German," Mazari said in broken German.

"Do you speak Russian?" asked Petrovich.

"Is he speaking Russian? Why would the police use Russian?" said the man holding the beer to the left of Mazari in Indian accented English.

He had purposely used Russian to add another layer of confusion to the situation. Now these terrorists would be even more stressed about their fate. Russians operating in Germany spelled bad news for a Muslim extremist, though Petrovich had to admit that the beer and pizza scene seemed completely out of place. The three roommates looked distinctly Indian, and all of them looked "soft," especially Mazari. He was at least forty pounds overweight and had an extremely slack look on his face. He looked nothing like any of the criminal element Petrovich had seen in his notorious career. Somehow this guy spent several months training in the hills of Afghanistan?

Klinkman restated his request in English and Mazari dropped the Xbox controller and moved his hands high.

"I think this is a mistake of some kind...officers?" said Mazari.

"No mistake. Stand up from the couch and walk forward, keeping your hands above your head," stated Farrington.

"Can we just talk about this first? We're all here on work visas," persisted Mazari.

"Can I move?" said the man holding the beer bottle.

His arm was already shaking from keeping the position for several seconds. Petrovich started to get the distinct feeling that Mazari was not their man.

"Nobody moves but Mazari. Stand up and walk toward me slowly, or we'll kill your two friends and grab you ourselves," said Farrington.

"The neighbors won't hear a thing," added Petrovich, aiming the suppressed pistol at the young man to the right of Mazari.

"Dude. Get up from the couch. He's fucking aiming that thing right at my head," said the man to Mazari's right, barely moving his lips.

"You need to go with them," added the man frozen over the pizza box.

All of their English was Hindi accented, including Mazari's.

Mazari complied with their request and found himself zip tied with a bag over his head within seconds. He was out the door and on his way down the stairs a few seconds after that, escorted by Klinkman and Hubner.

"What about the rest of them?" said Petrovich, lingering in the doorway to speak with Farrington in private.

"I don't think they pose a threat. Something's off here. Make sure they don't fuck with us. Grab Mazari's laptop," whispered Farrington.

Petrovich was relieved that Farrington had sensed the same incongruity. If Mazari was involved in the plot to ship the virus to the United States, he may have been an unknowing accomplice. Petrovich took a few steps back into the room. They were still frozen in place, which would make his job easier.

"Let me keep this as simple as possible. If you call the police, we will kill your friend and then kill you. We're monitoring all police channels and have another team watching the building. Don't leave your apartment either. You didn't see a badge tonight, because there are no badges. Your friend may be involved in something really nasty. Something you want to stay as far away from as possible. Mazari will likely end up floating in the Main river tomorrow...without a head. You do anything to alert the authorities and it'll be a busy day for the Frankfurt central morgue. Understood?"

They all nodded and he had little doubt that the message was received.

"Does Mazari have a laptop?"

They all nodded and their eyes shifted toward the counter separating the kitchen from the family room. Four laptops were stuffed onto the crowded Formica counter.

"Get his laptop. Does he have a security token? Something that generates a password?"

"It's on his key chain. In his pocket. Can I put the beer down?"

He grabbed the laptop out of the man's hands, aiming carefully at his head.

"I'd finish the beer first. Remember what I said about ending up in the river."

Petrovich stepped out and closed the door, listening intensely for movement inside. Nothing. Perfect. He sprinted down the stairs to rejoin the team.