The

EIGHTH

DAY

Harold Coyle

*“Whenever the legislators endeavor to take away and destroy the property of the people, or to reduce them to slavery under arbitrary power, they put themselves into a state of war with the people, who are thereupon absolved from any further obedience."*

*John Locke, 1690*

*"It does not require a majority to prevail, but rather an irate, tireless minority keen to set brush fires in people's minds."*

*Samuel Adams*

*"The right to revolt has sources deep in our history."*

*Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas*

*“The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.”*

*Sun Tzu*

Author’s Note

This is a work of fiction, nothing more. It is inspired by the book *Seven Days in May*, written by Fletcher Knebel and Charles W. Bailey and published in 1962. The story those authors penned concerned a plot by members of the American military and certain politicians to take over the government to stop the president from engaging in nuclear disarmament talks with the Soviet Union. Even as a young *aspirant* with an eye on a military career, I found the premise a bit hard to buy into. The American military, after all, has a long and proud history of staying out of politics and yielding, without question, to civilian authority as prescribed by the Constitution.

That does not mean there have not been incidents where some in uniform thought about taking steps to correct what they saw as wrongheaded decisions by the government they served. The most well know occurred on March 15, 1783 when officers of the Continental Army met to discuss plans to march on Philadelphia and force the Continental Congress to redress their grievances. In an act of selfless courage that exemplified his skills as a leader of men, George Washington was able to put an end to all thoughts of rebelling against Congress by the simple means of reaching into his pocket to retrieve a pair of spectacles in order to read a letter he’d recently received from Congress to the mutinous officers. When he saw the expression on the faces of those who were not aware he needed spectacles, he is said to have stopped to apologize, saying, “Gentlemen, you must permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown old and grey, but almost blind in the service of my country.”

The idea that a group of general officers, not matter how well-meaning or powerful they were, could bring down the government of the United States on their own is, in my opinion, laughable. That does not mean the government of the United States could not be subverted from within. Sinclair Lewis, in the Nobel Prize winner’s 1935 novel *It Can’t Happen Here,* tells of a president who, having assumed dictatorial powers, is challenged by a revolt in which a large portion of the Army defects to the rebel cause. The premise upon which he based his book on is the often forgotten fact that Adolf Hitler came to power just three years prior to the book’s publication using the electoral process specified in the short lived Weimar Republic’s constitution.

My story is, as I said, is a work of pure fiction. Though I have not worn a uniform in over twenty-four years, I still stand by the oath of office I took when I received my commission on May 9, 1974 in the Cadet Chapel at the Virginia Military Institute, an oath that obligated me, and every officer who has served this country for over two hundred years, to defend the Constitution of the United States, against all enemies, foreign and domestic.

HW Coyle

November 18, 2015

Prologue

*Arizona*

Angel Cavazos, despite what his mother had said, knew he was no fool. He knew crossing over the border from Mexico through the Arizona desert on foot would be risky. That those risks ballooned due to his chosen approach also didn’t bother him in the least; at least, not when he had started out. It had all made sense to him then. He had even been able to look upon the need to help smuggle drugs as something of an adventure, the kind of dangerous exploit young men find to be all but irresistible and strangely exhilarating. Besides, the idea of seeking out a people smuggler and becoming part of a group that would include old men, women, and children had been one he’d given little serious thought to. Even if he and his family had been able to scrape together the two thousand dollars demanded by the *coyotaje* who preyed upon those who sought to escape their stifling poverty, Angel had heard far too many rumors of how some of the more notorious smugglers abandoned their charges after crossing, leaving them to wander until they were picked up by the Border Patrol and hauled off to internment camps or died of thirst. And while the risks of running drugs were greater, at least the narco boss who had recruited him and a dozen other young men as human mules had some interest in looking after their welfare, if for no other reason than ensuring the cargo they were carrying made it safely to its destination.

What Angel Cavazos had not counted on was lying in the dirt with his hands bound behind his back while staring into the sightless eyes of one of his party’s guides, a man who had been dumb enough to argue with the *sicarios* of a rival cartel who had ambushed them. Angel knew it was foolish to hope that their attackers would keep their word and let the young men go once they’d collected the bales of drugs. At the moment, however, it was the only one he was able to cling to. To imagine things otherwise was simply too terrible for the young *Mixtec* to contemplate.

As he stared into the guide’s sightless eyes, already filming over with a light sheen of dust, he began to wonder if, somehow, the blessed saints his mother prayed to would see him through to the prosperous future he so desperately sought—even as he heard the metallic click of a fresh magazine being slapped into place, followed by the sound of footsteps drawing nearer.

Unable to help himself, he took up a chant he’d not uttered in years: “Hail Mary, full of grace . . .”

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Sitting on the hood of a pickup, an oddly mismatched pair began to perk up as they heard the faint echo of distant gunfire drifting along the pre-dawn breeze. “There,” Thomas Wells declared, as he pointed in the direction of the staccato chattering of automatic fire. “They’re on the canyon trail, I’m sure of it.”

His partner, Everett Lloyd, was irked that a man twice his age had not only heard the shots first, but was able to pinpoint the direction even as another short rattle of gunfire rolled across the desert. The young militiaman shook his head. Despite being an ornery old coot, the former Marine and Vietnam vet actually knew his stuff.

“Well, alright then,” Lloyd replied as he slid off his perch on the hood of the pickup and hustled around to the driver’s side of their pickup. “Let’s roll.”

“Not so fast.” Wells stayed where he was, his head still and his mouth slightly open to catch every sound as he continued to listen to the distinctive chatter of AKs, a sound that still called up haunting memories of another time and place. “You know the drill,” he muttered without looking back. “First we report this to the Border Patrol, then the Colonel.”

Lloyd was eager to mix it up with the drug runners they had been out tracking all night. He was in no mood to stand around with his thumb up his third point of contact while his partner submitted a properly formatted report (using Allen Devin’s script) that a retired Marine colonel and the commander of the Arizona Home Guard had insisted upon. “Get in. We’ve already wasted too much time. You can call it in while we’re heading over to the canyon.”

Like Lloyd, Wells was just as eager to take down the bastards running drugs and illegals into the country, all but unchecked by Federal authorities. But he knew better than going up against armed drug runners, who clearly had no qualms about fighting, unless he had plenty of backup. Unfortunately, Wells was not up to the challenge of reining in some of the younger members of Devin’s militia group, veterans who were fresh from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Knowing full well Lloyd was the sort of gung-ho, hell-for-leather adrenaline junkie who would take off without him, he reluctantly climbed into the passenger seat of his own truck. After firmly clamping down his AR-15 between his knees and muzzle as if he were back in a Huey in Nam, he took up the radio’s hand mike while his headstrong partner was adjusting his night vision goggles.

“All right, let’s do this,” Lloyd called out as he gunned the engine and took off, kicking up a cloud of dust that would have earned him a reprimand from the captain he’d driven for had he pulled a stunt like that in Iraq.

Relying on skills he’d perfected in that war, Lloyd raced along a track that cut through the rugged hills of Arizona’s Coronado National Forest, bouncing Wells up and down and side to side, making it near impossible for him to call in their report to the Border Patrol. He was describing their location to the dispatcher when the faint glow of vehicle headlights appeared on the horizon, just as their truck reached the crest of a small hill. Without warning, Lloyd slammed on the brakes, bringing the pickup to an abrupt stop even as he ripped off his night vision goggles, lest the likely rapid change from darkness to headlights caused the goggles to flare and momentarily blind him.

Wells, who had not bothered to fasten his seatbelt, was thrown forward and into the windshield. Stunned and confused, it took him a second to assess the situation. When he did, he responded with ingrained habit. Dropping the hand mike, he instinctively grabbed his rifle in one hand, the passenger’s door handle in the other, and bailed out of the pickup. He roll away to take up a prone firing position just as the approaching vehicle was about to crest the ridge ahead.

By the time Lloyd realized Wells was no longer next to him, it was too late to do anything but follow suit. Not that he minded. As part of the Arizona Home Guard, Lloyd spent countless nights tracking down drug runners and coyotaje, only to find out later that the Border Patrol had turned a blind eye to the activities he’d reported to them. So Lloyd was ready to mix it up with people who defied the laws of America, a country he loved and had bled for. Reaching behind, he snatched his AR from the gun rack and chambered a round before flipping the weapon’s safety off. Ready, he threw open his door and climbed out. With a calm deliberateness, he snugged down into a prone firing position that had become second nature to him during his time in Iraq.

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The trio of young sicarios was anxious to put as much distance between themselves and the site where they’d ambushed the party of mules working for a rival cartel, but they were taken by surprise by the two men in the pickup. When it became clear they had no intention of yielding to them, the narco driving the converted SUV cut the wheel hard left and both his passengers leaned out their windows to let loose a spray of automatic fire. The two veterans were more than happy to return fire with deadly accuracy.

Chapter 1

*The White House, Washington, D.C.*

“Got a minute?”

The idea of saying no to the man standing in the open doorway to her office never entered Ann Lucas’ mind. No one said no to Timothy Rowland, at least not anyone who wanted to keep their job. To say that the President’s chief of staff was a humorless, insufferable runt of a tyrant was an understatement. For him to be trustworthy was unimaginable. It took a person with his political background, self-righteousness, and willingness to go to any lengths to achieve his ends to do what the President expected of him.

After hitting the save key and blanking the screen of her computer, Ann Lucas turned away from the credenza behind her desk, using the time it took her to swivel her chair around to muster up a blank expression, one that hid the dread she always felt whenever Rowland unexpectedly showed up at her door. Rowland, like so many of the President’s closest advisors and confidants, was the kind of man who felt it was beneath his dignity to climb down from the perch he had clawed his way up to. “*In this town*,” he was fond of saying, “*it is Mohamed who must go to the mountain.”*

“To what do I owe this unexpected honor?” Lucas asked dryly as she watched Rowland close the door and take a seat across from her.

Before responding, Rowland sprawled out, resting his elbows on the arms of the chair and bringing his hands together just under his chin with the two index fingers raised, fixing Lucas in a stare that might have given a lesser being pause. Ann Lucas, like all of the top-tier staffers working in the West Wing, was no mere mortal. The former law professor had served as the President’s legal counsel when he had been a senator. During his first presidential campaign, she had been instrumental in mobilizing grassroots organizations. This, in turn, led him to choose her to serve as his principal domestic policy advisor—over the heads of others who thought themselves far better suited for the post. It was her willingness to turn a blind eye to the very laws she had once revered if, in her opinion, doing so served the greater good. This is what made her such a valuable asset to a man like Rowland; it was also a propensity he never let her forget.

“The President is scheduled to meet with the Mexican ambassador this afternoon,” Rowland stated flatly. “He’ll want to know what we intend to do to ensure another incident—with a dozen Mexican citizens dying on us—doesn’t happen again.”

“I thought Sam Ryder over at the Bureau was point on that?”

“True, true,” Rowland muttered. “But I suspect you, of all people, are well aware that an investigation that leads to the conviction of a pair of good ole boys isn’t going to be enough to satisfy the Mexicans. They’re going to want more than a pound of flesh. Word has it they want us to rein in the militia groups that have been roaming free along the border.” Left unsaid, at least for the moment, was a desire on the part of the Mexican government to remove any impediments to the unfettered flow of traffic along its border with the United States, a condition that allowed it to quickly dispose of Central American migrants and other undesirables who were making their way north via Mexico.

Without him needing to say another word, Lucas knew exactly where this conversation was going. But who was behind it? She was tempted to ask if it was the President, and not the Mexican government or even Rowland himself, who sought to use the latest shooting incident as an excuse to crack down on militia groups and vigilantes operating along the southern border. Not that she needed to. Both the President and Rowland had made their feelings on that subject crystal clear on numerous occasions during informal, off-the-record settings. And even if the President had been the one who had directed Rowland to broach the subject with her, Rowland would never admit it. He liked to keep people guessing at who might be behind the dictates issued to lesser beings like her. It was not just his way of protecting the President by providing him with plausible deniability if one of his Machiavellian schemes he was noted for went south. Being a consummate powerbroker, Timothy Rowland liked to keep people guessing as to just how much power and influence he really had in Washington.

Eager to be rid of Rowland so she could return to what she’d been doing before this unwelcomed intrusion, Lucas asked the obvious question. “If an investigation leading to a conviction isn’t going to be good enough, what is?”

As a skilled political operative, Rowland relied on innuendos and euphemisms when dealing with awkward subjects, particularly those that could have adverse political consequences. Before answering, he came to his feet, made his way past Lucas’ desk, and paused to gaze out a window, putting Lucas in mind of a man who was searching for just the right words to answer her question. This, she suspected, was nothing more than an act. Rowland would have never wasted his time wandering down to her office unless he already had those words in mind. This dramatic pause, a staged moment of reflection, was just the sort of behavior he enjoyed indulging in with other members of the President’s staff.

“As you know, the Mexican government is not at all pleased with the way we allow armed militia groups to roam freely along their border with the United States,” he finally murmured, as if the issue he was bringing up was of no great importance. “They, the militia groups, make an already dangerous situation more volatile.”

The temptation to remind Rowland that “they” were the only thing keeping much of the border from descending into total anarchy was dismissed out of hand. Like the President and many others in the administration, Rowland viewed the largely unregulated militia groups as being counter to the concept of open borders. Instead, she merely nodded. “Yes, I know.”

“No doubt you’re well aware a crisis is a terrible thing to waste,” he continued offhandedly as he gazed out the window. A gardener was kneeling in a flowerbed, diligently yanking weeds out by their roots.

The cynical little smile Rowland was unable to suppress whenever he used that tired cliché made her cringe. Tiring of his roundabout way of getting to the point, Lucas sighed, signaling her capitulation. She stared at him intensely, hoping he’d see she was not at all amused by his little game. “So, what exactly do you expect me to do?”

Turning away from the window, Rowland ignored Lucas’ glacial stare as casually wandered her office with his hands loosely clasped behind his back. “Expect? Oh, nothing really,” he muttered offhandedly. “It’s just that we thought it might be a good idea if you got together with Ethan Odam over at Homeland Security before the President meets with the Mexican ambassador. See if he has some thoughts on how best to deal with Allen Devin—and all the headaches he’s causing us.”

Again, Lucas didn’t bother to ask Rowland who he was talking about when he said “*we*.”. Nor did she waste any time inquiring about what Odam would do. “I’m being played,” she thought.

Throughout the exchange, Rowland was careful not to mention the President, just as he was doing his damnedest to keep from telling her any more than she needed to know to set in motion a plan ‘Wild Bill’ Odam had been sitting on, waiting for an event to justify its execution. Her role in this farce was to put as much distance as possible between the President and was any actions by Homeland Security. “No doubt you want an answer before the President meets with the ambassador?” she asked.

“But of course,” Rowland replied without batting an eye. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to advise Joiner on how to answer any questions he might be asked in the morning press briefing. The last thing we want to do is tip our hand to Devin.”

No doubt, Lucas told herself, Eric Joiner, the press secretary, would be kept clueless as to what was about to go down. His role in Rowland’s little scheme was to lay the ground for whatever it was Odam was about to unleash on the motley collection of volunteers who had gathered around a charismatic retired Marine colonel in order to protect borders the President and many in Washington had no interest defending.

After Rowland left the room, Lucas turned her attention back to finishing up what she’d been working on before heading over to Homeland Security where she’d re-enact the scene that had just played out in her office. With little more than a wink and a nod, she would inform Odam that he was finally going to be afforded the opportunity to take action against the Arizona Home Guard. He, in turn, would do the same, passing the go-signal down the food chain until it landed on the desk of the poor bastard who’d actually have to go eye-to-eye with Allen P. Devin, USMC retired.

What would happen when that happened was not Lucas’ concern. Making sure there were no breadcrumbs leading back to her office if things didn’t play out the way Rowland wanted and Odam expected was.

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*New York, New York*

The need to leave her plush office and high-tech studio and venture out beyond the shores of Manhattan from time to time to renew her street cred was, for Amy Porter, an annoying part of her job, but one she normally took in stride. There were some assignments, however, that were beyond her ability to slap a smiley face on. This was one of them.

The idea of traveling to the Southwest to do a story that would require her to spend time with a group of right-wing militia types bereft of her usual entourage was bad enough. Being told she would need to work with a producer and cameraman from the network’s local affiliate was, for her, way beyond the pale. Determined to have her way on that point, if for no other reason than to keep her boss from thinking she could order her around like one of the fawning interns she surrounded herself with, Porter had stormed into Jan Fields-Dixon’s office to make it clear she had no intention of working with second-string talent.

Having expected as much, Jan was able to deal with her very own in-house diva the network had plucked from a rival news network with a calmness that only served to further enrage an already irate Porter. Easing back in her seat, Jan knitted her fingers together and rested them in her lap as she watched the blue-eyed natural blond stalking back and forth before her desk like a caged panther. “You do know things are pretty tense along the Mexican border at the moment?” Jan offered by way of explanation.

“Really?” Porter snapped cynically. “I hadn’t heard.”

Jan ignored Porter’s remark. “The station manager in Tucson has assured me the crew you’ll be working with has been covering problems along the border for years. He said when it comes to reading the signs and knowing when to tuck tail and run, they’re the people you want to be with.”

Stopping in midstride, Porter took to glaring at Jan. “Oh please. Just who do you think you’re talking to?”

Jan checked the temptation to blurt out the first thought that popped into her head. There was, after all, no need to remind Porter she was the only woman she knew who needed to use the GPS app on her cell phone to find a Starbucks in a city where there was one on nearly every corner. Instead, Jan laid out her case in the same calm, no-nonsense manner she relied on to rein in this New Jersey-bred prima donna. “Look, you’re going to be in a part of the country where the words law and order are only found in the dictionary. Like I said, I’ve been assured the crew from the Tucson affiliate will keep you from wandering into the middle of something you have no business becoming involved with or going astray.”

Porter sniffed as she looked up at the ceiling, rolling her eyes. “For Christ’s sake, I’m a New Yorker.”

“So I’ve heard,” Jan replied dryly before continuing. “Were I sending you to Gracie Mansion for an interview with the mayor or a one-on-one with Trump, I’d have no problem. But I’m not. The man you’re dealing with is a decorated Marine colonel who some think has gone way off the reservation. If even half of what my contact from inside the Beltway says is true, and I have no reason to doubt it isn’t, Allen Devin has all but staked out his own private little fiefdom along the Mexican border. Plus, he’s got an army of hardcore volunteers who are better armed and trained than most third world nations.”

Stopping in midstride, Porter turned to face Jan. “And you think these people you’re saddling me with are going to protect me from Devin?”

“It’s not Devin I’m concerned about. It’s the people Devin and his bunch are playing cowboys and Indians with that you’ll need to watch out for,” Jan replied in a tone she’d hoped was sufficiently menacing enough to penetrate Porter’s well-tended mane. “The narcos waging their own little turf war down there don’t screw around. Last week’s shootout with some of Devin’s lads is proof of that.”

Despite knowing what Jan was saying was true, Porter wasn’t about to give her the satisfaction of yielding, not without a fight. Drawing herself up, she took to regarding the head of the network’s news bureau down the bridge of her nose as she spoke. “I *do* know how to handle myself when dealing with thugs.”

Having no wish to waste any more time on this, Jan snickered. “It’s not you I’m worried about. It’s the equipment. With the way the network is cutting our budget, the last thing I can afford to do is lose a satellite truck and all that goes with it. Do you have any idea how expensive one of those suckers is?”

Jan’s response, the airy tone with which it was delivered, and the smirk she wore did the trick. In no mood to stand there and be mocked by a woman she saw as a has-been, Porter snapped. “Fine!” she snarled before pivoting on her four-inch heels and storming out of Jan’s office.

Only when Porter was gone did Jan drop her little act and slump down in her seat. After kicking off her shoes under her desk, she used her toes to push herself away from it before slowly rotating her chair around until she was looking out the window of her corner office. That she hadn’t heard the last from Porter on this subject was a given. The Ann Porters of the world had an annoying habit of getting back at those they thought were holding them back.

“Chris, where are you when I need you?” Jan sighed as she gazed out at the early morning traffic filling Sixth Avenue. She of course knew exactly where her daughter-in-law was and, after looking at her watch, imagined she knew what she was doing. That Christina Dixon had given up a promising career as a journalist to get on the mommy track was a decision Jan was unable to find fault with; she had come to appreciate too late that a life spent dealing with the “Ann Porters” of the world simply wasn’t what she had imagined for herself when she’d been a young and ambitious journalist years ago. Jan’s only hope was that the twit would wait until she returned to New York before indulging in whatever vengeance she dreamed up while enjoying her sojourn to the wild west.

Chapter 2

*Fort Lewis, Washington State*

After quietly slipping out of bed, Nathan Dixon made his way to the bathroom where he pulled on a ratty sweatshirt he’d kept from his days as a cadet at the Virginia Military Academy. Without turning on any lights, lest he wake his wife, he carefully shuffled along the darkened hall leading toward the room they had set up as a nursery. Upon opening the door, he was greeted with a loud squeal that cut through him like fingernails being dragged across a slate chalkboard. Its source was a bright-eyed little cherub who was standing up at the side of her crib, watching the door as if she’d been expecting him.

Ignoring a pungent odor that caused his nose to twitch, alerting him to diapers in desperate need of changing, Nathan couldn’t help but smile as he walked over to little Wendy Marie. As much as he loved his son Scott, who at the moment remained sprawled out on his back in his own crib, making faces as he stirred fitfully in his sleep, it was his daughter he truly cherished. In addition to the flaming red hair and striking green eyes she had inherited from her mother, Wendy possessed a vivacious personality that touched Nathan in a way only one other person ever had. “And what have *you* been up to?” he asked as he plucked his daughter out of her crib.

Once more Wendy squealed as Nathan hoisted her up over his head and held her at arm’s length, returning her smile. Despite a stench that would have gagged a goat, he slowly lowered his daughter to eye level, kissing her on the forehead before cradling her in his arms and turning toward the changing table. “Let’s go see what kind of surprises my own little WMD has for her Daddy today.”

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The sight of her husband in the kitchen with his back to the doorway seated between two highchairs busily feeding their children caused Christina Dixon to smile as she paused in the doorway. It disappeared just as quickly as it had come when she recalled how she’d once considered motherhood an impediment to her career. Well, Chris mused, as she watched in silence while Nathan shoveled spoonfuls of mushy cereal into the waiting mouths of his children, at least she had managed to make the right call on that front before it was too late.

Upon seeing her mother, Wendy turned away from the spoon Nathan was holding before her, greeting Jan with a broad grin that revealed every tooth in her mouth, all five. This was immediately followed by a loud squeal, a wild flailing about of her feet and the pounding of hands on her highchair tray. Without needing to look over to where she was standing, Nathan greeted his wife. “Ready to take over?”

“Do I have a choice?” Chris muttered as she made her way to where Nathan was seated.

After coming to his feet, Nathan looked into her eyes and gave her what she called his *‘get real’* look as he handed over the half-empty bowl of cereal and baby spoon. “Give me a break, will ’ya? You know better than to try bullshitting a bullshitter.”

“Nathan Dixon! How many times have I told you not to use that sort of language in front of Wendy and Scott?”

“Like they understand what I’m saying.”

“Precisely my point,” Chris admonished as she lightly tapped his nose with the wet end of the spoon. “One of these days these little sponges will start blurting out their new word to everyone they come across. What then?”

“Well,” he replied as he struggled to hold back the grin tugging at the corners of his mouth, “I guess I’ll just have to do like Dad used to do whenever I did something that pissed him off.”

“And what, pray tell, was that?”

“*Damn it, stop that*.”

With her hands full, Chris was unable to give Nathan a playful slap. Instead, she had to be content scrunching up her nose. “You’re just like your father.”

“So I’ve been told. Now, if you excuse me, I need to shower, get dressed, and sally forth once more in the defense of freedom, justice, and the American way.”

Taking the seat her husband had vacated, Chris began to chat with her children loud enough for him to hear as he was leaving the kitchen. “You’ll have to forgive your father. He’s infantry, and you know what they’re like.”

As if in agreement, Wendy slapped her little hand on the tray of her highchair and squealed. As delightful as that was, Chris noticed the look of consternation little Scott wore whenever his father set aside his domestic responsibilities to take up his assigned duties as a commissioned officer.

Setting the spoon and bowl aside, Chris reached out with her free hand and placed it on little Scott’s cheek. “He’ll be back,” she cooed reassuringly in an effort to calm the child. While she had no reason to doubt this would be true tonight, she dreaded the day when Nathan would need to pack up his go-bag and once more place himself in harm’s way, leaving her little choice but to lie to their child—a child who did not yet understand that duty, honor, and country were more than words to a man like his father.

*Tucson, Arizona*

Had Jan Field-Dixon’s flippant manner and her failure to give an inch on any of her demands been the end of it, Amy Porter, known as AP to both admirers and detractors, would have been able to take what she considered to be an affront to her professional judgment in stride and carry on in the same, no-nonsense manner she had relied on when she’d just been starting out. It was word that one of a swarm of interns, Sarah Jennings, a vivacious blond with deceptively innocent honey brown eyes, would be accompanying her that really left Porter in a foul mood. Were it not for the girl’s fawning admiration of the veteran journalist and her eagerness to please her, Porter would have ignored her. Instead, Porter used Jennings as if she were her own personal assistant, never acknowledging that she was treating the intern in the same condescending manner she’d once been treated.

The producer and cameraman she’d be working with were an entirely different matter. John Cardosa, a tall, lean native of Arizona whose weathered face didn’t betray a hint of his Latino heritage, was gregarious without being overbearing. What annoyed Porter was the manner with which he dealt with her. Unimpressed by her credentials and pedigree, from the moment he picked her up at the airport, Cardosa treated her as if she were just one of his regular team. He tried to soften this unintended affront somewhat by informing her out here, meaning Arizona, they tendered to be laidback and easygoing. “We’re a tight-knit little group at the station,” he explained. “More like a family.” Though she made it clear in her own less than subtle way she had no wish to be part of his family, Cardosa continued to deal with her as if they were old friends who just happened to be working together.

Samantha Emerson, the sound tech and cameraperson, was something altogether different. Called Sam by Cardosa and everyone at the local affiliate, Emerson could best be described as a rough-and-tumble Southwestern girl who dressed the part out of habit. Among her many accomplishments, Emerson had been something of a celebrity in the junior rodeo circuit. “When she was in high school no one could top her when it came to calf roping,” Cardosa informed Jennings as they were driving to the first of several interviews Porter would conduct in Tucson. “She wasn’t half bad when it came to barrel racing either,” he added before his expression suddenly darkened.

Pausing, Cardosa glanced in the rearview mirror of the SUV as if afraid Emerson, who was following them in the satellite truck, might somehow overhear what he was about to say. He spoke with a mournful tone of voice, in place of his previous easygoing cheerfulness. “That all changed after Iraq.”

Again he paused, believing, as most people do who know or are related to a veteran, that Porter and Jennings might understand the implication of that simple statement. But Jennings, the only child of a prosperous New England couple and the product of Columbia University, did not know a single veteran. She could not help but ask what he had meant by that.

At first Cardosa thought the spry young blond seated in the backseat was being slow on the uptake. Only when he glanced up in the rearview mirror to see the look in her face did he realize she really did not understand. “After leaving the service and spending several months collecting worms from bottles of mescal, she managed to sort herself out and went back to school,” Cardosa patiently explained. “She used her veteran’s benefits, the money she’d saved during the time she’d spent on the circuit and while in the Corps, to pay for college where she majored in journalism. Unfortunately, the poor girl is blessed with a face made for radio. So rather than waste her education, she took up a camera and, as they say, the rest is history.”

Whereas Jennings was quite amused by Cardosa and his stories, Porter paid little attention to anything he said. Instead, she kept herself busy going over the list of questions she’d be asking various officials during her interviews. With the intention of filing her story on what her network had dubbed The Canyon Massacre as quickly as possible so she could return to New York, Porter had made it quite clear she had no interest doing any stories on local color. Instead, after taking a short break at her hotel where she changed outfits and freshened up, she set out for a pair of in-town interviews the manager of the Tucson station had set up for her.

The first of these interviews was with the head of the Border Patrol’s Tucson station, a twenty-five-year veteran and, like Cardosa, a native of Arizona. It came as no great surprise to Porter that his answers to questions she had prepared during the flight from New York were as predictable as the questions. The same held true when she met with Sam Ryder, Special Agent in Charge, for Tucson’s FBI field office later that afternoon. With an earnestness she imagined he relied on to impress the local politicians and journalists, Ryder laconically fed her a steady stream of non-answers that came across as if they had been drafted by a team of DoJ lawyers back in DC. For the most part this was true, something Porter had expected, which was why she didn’t waste a great deal of time with Ryder who was accommodating and tolerant of her banal questions. But he was of little help in advancing the narrative she was slowly constructing.

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After staying but one night in Tucson, Porter and her crew headed south where she conducted a similar series of interviews with Mexican officials in Nogales, Mexico, in an effort to create the impression her coverage of the incident was fair and balanced. Though she had had no doubt their responses to her questions were also scripted, unlike their American counterparts in Tucson, their tone was strident. All made a point of accusing American politicians and officials of turning a blind eye to what they repeatedly called lawlessness and vigilante justice along the border. “This is particularly true of the governor of Arizona,” the head of the Mexican Federal Investigations Agency in Nogales pointed out. “He and members of his party all but encourage men like Allen Devin to take the law into their own hands when dealing with citizens of my country!”

Only later in the evening, while Porter was sipping her Chardonnay after a long, trying day putting up with incensed Mexican officials eager to make a point in the mid-May heat, did Cardosa attempt to talk to her. He wanted to provide her some context for an issue that was, in his mind, simple. As he sat next to her, nursing a bottle of Negra Modelo, he did his best to point out the Canyon Incident was the result of years of wrongheaded policies pursued by both the Mexican and American governments. “South of the border you have a weak central government struggling to defuse an economic and demographic time bomb. North of it is a country whose policies are out of touch with the reality on the ground.”

Cocking an eyebrow, Porter smirked. “So, you’re one of them?”

“If you mean I’m a person who wishes to see some semblance of sanity applied to the problems the people who live down here have to deal with day in, day out, then yes, I am one of them,” Cardosa shot back with an earnestness that causes Porter to mentally pull back. “The people in Washington don’t have to put up with what we do. They’re 2,300 miles away. The home where my wife and children live is sixty miles from where hundreds of human mules carry drugs across the border every day. The only way I can escape that is to pack up and move, something I have no intention of doing,” Cardosa concluded before easing back in his seat. Taking up his beer, he enjoyed a long sip without ever taking his eyes off of Porter, as if daring her to come back at him with an argument that might make sense at a Manhattan cocktail party but held little weight here, a mere one hundred and fifty meters from the border.

It was only then, as she stared into the eyes of a man she had assumed held beliefs and opinions no different from the people she worked with back in New York that she realized this story might not be as simple and clear-cut as she’d imagined. Just how wrong she’d been would only become clear the next day when she and her pickup team headed back into the US to meet the man who would soon be at the center of a storm. A storm that would, in seven days, bring a whole new meaning to the phrase *We the people*.

The

First

DAY

Chapter 3

*Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Tucson, AZ*

Having finished covering the details of his plan to the three special weapons and tactics teams that had been hastily assembled for an operation he had little confidence in, Special Agent in Charge Sam Ryder headed over to a table set up against the back wall of the hangar where the teams were marshaling. That things would not go down exactly as he had briefed them was a given. Even when he had all the time in the world to think things through and an opportunity to properly prepare for an operation as complex as this one, rarely did everything play out as he intended. He’d had neither during the run-up to the raid on the main compound of Arizona Home Guard that he was about to lead. The best he could hope for as he turned his attention to making his own preparations was that the men he was leading against Allen Devin (and his motley collection of militiamen) could handle whatever problems might crop up.

Upon reaching the table where boxes of ammunition of various calibers were stacked, Ryder pulled an empty magazine from a pocket of his tactical vest and proceeded to gather a handful of 9-millimeter rounds from an open box. Mechanically, he slipped round after round into the magazine. He was halfway through filling the first magazine when he was joined at the table by Andy Nebel, the head of the FBI’s Dallas SWAT and, on this day, his second in command. Like the three teams, this was the first time the two would be working together during an actual raid, a word both men had been told not to use by the head of the Bureau’s Critical Incident Response Group, but found themselves unable to keep from doing so.

“Okay, what’s on your mind?” Ryder asked without bothering to look up from what he was doing.

“Since no one else did, I guess it’s up to me to ask the obvious. Why the rush?” Nebel shot back as he watched the special agent in charge finish loading one magazine and return it to its pocket before pulling another empty one out.

Glancing over at Nebel from the corner of his eye as he began slipping round after round into the second magazine, Ryder snickered. “Ours is not to reason why.”

“It’s the last part of that little ditty that’s got me worried,” Nebel grunted. “My wife has a list of honey-do projects a mile long she expects me to finish in this lifetime.”

Despite an effort on the part of the Dallas-based team leader to lighten the mood, Ryder was unable to shake the misgivings he’d been harboring over an operation he had no doubt was politically motivated. Unable to come up with anything resembling a logical response, he grunted. “You’d have to be a fool not to be worried. I break out in a cold sweat every time I get handed a slapdash job like this with orders to execute by one of the Director’s minions. I don’t have the intelligence needed to pull together a coherent plan or the time to rehearse it.”

Unable to come up with a reasonable reply of his own, not that he needed to, Nebel dropped the subject. Instead, he glanced over his shoulder at the three SWAT teams gathering in small groups who had just listened to the mission briefing. He watched them for a moment as they went about checking their weapons or preparing the Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected armored vehicles (or MRAP for short) that the Air Force had flown in just hours before. Like the three FBI SWAT teams, the drivers of those vehicles had never worked together, making an operation he already saw as being dicey even riskier than it needed to be.

When he turned his attention back to Ryder, Nebel couldn’t help but ask another troublesome question Ryder had failed to address during the mission brief. “Has anyone bothered to explain why all the secrecy? I mean, given the fact we’ll be operating near the border, you’d think someone would have at least given the Border Patrol a heads-up that we were coming? And have them assign someone to us to serve as a liaison. And where’s someone from our field office in Tucson? If nothing else, they would be able to provide us with a better idea of what the current situation is inside Devin’s compound than the one we received last night from Washington. I, for one, think knowing exactly how many people we’ll be going up against rather than a guesstimate is better than simply nice-to-know information. And while we’re at it,” he went on without giving Ryder a chance to respond to his first question, “why is the pittance of information we are receiving coming directly from Homeland Security and not the Directorate of Intelligence?”

Though he shared most of Nebel’s concerns, as the agent in charge Ryder felt he was compelled to defend the decisions of his superiors, even when they didn’t make a lick of sense to him. “You know as well as I do, the fewer people who know about an operation like this, the better our chances are that we’ll catch them by surprise which, I expect, is our only chance of being able to pull this off without any problems.”

“What about the Air Force personnel who flew the MRAPs in? They’re not blind or, I imagine, as stupid as the people at Homeland Security who dreamed this nightmare up think they are. Has anyone bothered to find out how many of them read the blog on advice to veterans Devin puts out every week?”

Despite his best efforts not to, Ryder visibly cringed before looking over his shoulder at a pair of airmen belonging to the Air Force Security Force detachment who were standing guard in the partially open hangar doors. Both were watching the goings-on in the hangar rather than facing out into the pre-dawn darkness, ready to chase off curious passers-by. No, he thought to himself as he hesitated a moment. They weren’t stupid. The cover story used to justify the need to transport half dozen MRAPs emblazoned with bold, block letters identifying the vehicles as belonging to the FBI to a part of the country where political tensions were running high was nothing more than a no-notice exercise, one that would have been laughable had circumstances been otherwise. But they weren’t. Members of the armed forces considered Allen Devin and the members of the Arizona Home Guard as brothers-in-arms. Some even saw them as patriots. Every man and woman who belonged to the Arizona Home Guard had, at one time or another, been members of the same armed forces that had been tasked to support this operation by providing transportation and a staging area. Save for a few moving vehicle violations, none of Devin’s people had a criminal record. If anything, Ryder suspected he and his people had more in common with the people they were about to go up against than they did with the career bureaucrats and politicians in Washington who had set this operation in motion.

“I wouldn’t worry about the Air Force types,” he finally muttered as he turned his attention back to loading magazines. “I have complete confidence they know enough to keep their mouths shut. Don’t you?”

When he saw Nebel was about to answer, Ryder held a hand up in order to keep him from responding. “No, don’t answer that,” he quipped in a halfhearted attempt to lighten the pessimism that had crept into their exchange. “Allow me the opportunity to enjoy the illusion that this little foray we’re about to embark on will go off without a hitch for a little while longer.”

Nebel was tempted to ask Ryder why he had insisted on the plan, but decided against it. Ryder had been at the Phoenix field office for well over a year, giving him a far better feel for the people of Arizona than he had. And Ryder would know how they’d react to what was, in truth, nothing short of a no-knock raid. In addition, Nebel hadn’t been privy to what had passed between Ryder and Ethan Odam at Homeland Security, the self-styled anti-terrorist guru whose sole claim to fame were the books he had written on the subject. Having arrived late the previous evening with little opportunity to do little more than settle in and catch a few hours’ sleep on the hangar floor before joining the other teams for the mission brief, he’d had little time to confer with Ryder before the just completed briefing. With no other choice, he put his faith in the hope that the special agent in charge had a better handle on things than he was letting on.

Of all his concerns regarding the raid, the one that truly bothered Nebel was Ryder’s assessment of Allen Devin and the veterans he’d gathered around him. His own experience in dealing with veterans had shown they weren’t the kind of people who would simply throw open the gates of the compound and allow them to search it. Nor, he suspect, would they willingly surrender the two men named in the arrest warrant, not without some pushback. About the only comfort Nebel found in Ryder’s plan had been his insistence that they go in using the MRAPs and not cattle trailers being pulled by a pickup truck like the ATF had employed during the Waco raid.

Sensing that there was nothing further to be gained in continuing a discussion that was, at the moment, purely academic, Nebel gave Ryder a weak smile and nod before turning away and heading over to the MRAP to check on the preparations of his team. If they were going to go through with this raid, he wanted to make sure his men and their vehicles were as ready as they could possibly be for an operation that gave new meaning to the term “ad hoc.”

Pausing, Ryder stopped what he had been doing and watched as Nebel walked away, wondering why he hadn’t asked him the most obvious question of all. Then, after giving the matter a moment’s thought, he realized a man who understood the way things were done back in Washington as well as Nebel did had no need to ask why FBI SWAT teams were being used—and not Homeland Security’s own special response teams. It was, after all, the head of their Office of Operations Coordination and Planning who was calling the shots, but who was yanking his chain was anybody’s guess.

What Ryder didn’t speculate about was why this was the case. Plausible deniability, a desire to put as many buffers and firewalls between the people who had initiated this action and any fallout that might result from it. Ryder had always likened this game as a grownup version of musical chairs, one he detested, but was very much a part of. He just hoped that when the music stopped, he’d be able to find a chair before someone else grabbed it and left him the odd man out.

*Fort Necessity, Arizona*

After arriving late the previous afternoon at the deserted mining camp Allen Devin had converted into the main base of operations for the Arizona Home Guard, Ann Porter decided to wait until the following day to conduct her interview with the retired Marine colonel. Her stated reason for putting off the interview was a desire to get a feel for the place and the men and women who made up the Arizona Home Guard before meeting its founder and leader. Neither Cardosa nor Emerson believed that line for one moment. “I had often wondered if the way people depicted prima donnas like her in the movies and on TV was true,” Emerson remarked when she joined Cardosa in the camp’s mess hall well before sunrise.

“Well, now you know,” Cardosa chuckled as he took to pouring himself a second cup of coffee before glancing around the empty mess hall, wondering as he did so if it was possible for him and Emerson to beat a bunch of former service men and women to breakfast. “Where do you suppose everyone is?”

“I expect her majesty and her blond shadow are still in bed,” Emerson muttered derisively.

“No, I mean the volunteers. Last night the place was packed with them.”

Ignoring the way Cardosa tended to refer to the members of the Arizona Home Guard as volunteers instead of vigilantes, or worse, like everyone who worked for the network tended to do, Emerson looked up from her plate and glanced about the Spartan, but clean mess hall. “Well, either you finally found someone who rolls out of bed earlier than you do, or all the stories we’ve been fed about the dedication and professionalism of people Devin’s recruited for his little army are all hype.”

Suspecting there was more behind a calm that struck him as being unnatural given the fuss the Canyon Incident had created, Cardosa planted his elbows on the table, clasped his coffee cup in his two hands, and took a leisurely sip. For the moment he was content to savor its bitterness and relax before the darling of the network’s news bureau made her grand entrance and ruined an otherwise pleasant morning.

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The convoy of armored vehicles was not hard to spot from where Ed Meehan sat perched on the hood of his patrol car, which was nestled among the mountain mahogany. Ed had done a hitch in the Navy before returning home to Arizona and joining the Highway Patrol. Long before he saw them he heard the deep, throaty growl of the armored vehicles’ diesel engines as they roared south. Pulling out a burner cell phone, Meehan dialed a number he had committed to memory.

“Jerry, Ed here. They’re just passing me now. I count six, just like Frank’s kid said.”

Pausing, he waited for his friend and neighbor to pass the word on, answering a question Meehan heard someone in the background shout out before his friend could relay it. “Tell whoever that was there’s no state police or Border Patrol with them. Nor have I heard anything over the radio from dispatch about anyone from our office being tagged to go along with the Feds. It’s just the six armored cars.”

Again, Meehan paused as he listened to the voice on the other end. “Remember who you’re talking to. I *do* know how to be discreet when tailing someone.”

Pause. “Yeah, well, you be careful. I’d hate to be the one who had to tell Mary you went and got your damned fool head shot off.”

Pause. “Yeah, you too. Via con Dios, amigo.” With that, Meehan ended the call, slipped his cell phone into his pocket, and slid down onto the ground. After taking a moment to stretch, he settled in behind the wheel of his patrol car, started it up, and pulled out onto the highway, taking care to keep a safe distance behind the last of the MRAPs.

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The gathering pre-dawn light was all Danny Pinero needed to remind him he was fast running out of time. Still, he would not be rushed as he finished wiring the explosive charges he’d placed in the pre-chamber hole he and other members of the Arizona Home Guard’s Red Section had dug out months before. Back then, they had all thought doing so had been an exercise in futility, a make-work project the Colonel had dreamed up to keep members of the Home Guard’s heavy weapons and engineering section busy during their weekend drills. The idea that they would ever have to drop the side of the hill, thus blocking the back road leading into Fort Necessity, had been a foolish notion.

Even now, as he was preparing to do so, Pinero still found it difficult to believe they were about to take on the Federal government in the form of FBI Special Weapons and Tactics teams. He understood the logic behind the plan Colonel Devin had taken great pains to explain during a mass meeting held in the compound’s mess hall two days prior. *“In order to rouse the public and cause it to pay attention to what is happening to this country, it will be necessary to provoke a response that cannot be ignored,”* he had pointed out to them as a prelude to the proposal he was laying out to them in the wake of the Canyon Incident. “*The Sons of Liberty did so through the simple expedient of taunting soldiers who were occupying their city until one of those soldiers couldn’t take any more and fired on them. Gandhi in India, and Martin Luther King here in the U.S. pushed and prodded local authorities by holding massive rallies in defiance of the law, all but daring those authorities to overreact. In the case of the former, it led to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in 1919, while the latter managed to galvanize Lyndon Johnson into sending the Voting Rights bill to Congress in the wake of Bloody Sunday in Selma*. *If things play out as I expect they will,*” he concluded, *“this administration will use what happens here as an excuse to implement measures that go well beyond what the people of this nation are willing to tolerate.”*

The logic behind the Colonel’s plan that had followed this preamble had made perfect sense. Unfortunately, understanding why it was necessary to do and actually doing it—these were poles apart. The Colonel’s argument was sound but, in Pinero’s mind, philosophical. The C-4 he was emplacing was real, as would be the chain of events its use would set in motion when it brought the side of the hill down on agents of the Federal government. Were it not for the strength of his convictions, and an appreciation for the decisions he’d made long ago that had led him to this time and place—and left him no choice but to follow through when he had rejected what many of his friends and co-workers had done long ago—he might have just accepted the fact that the country he had known as a child must muddle along as best it could.

The sound of footsteps grinding loose dirt and gravel behind him alerted Pinero to Sean McGuinn’s approach. Without waiting for the leader of the security section to ask, he informed him he’d be finished in a minute.

Even as he was acknowledging his satisfaction with the former combat engineer’s progress with a simple nod, McGuinn turned his gaze skyward, scanning the clear, predawn darkness for any sign of drones, the kind his company had used in Iraq to reconnoiter a route it was to take toward an objective McGuinn’s mixed command of tanks and Bradleys had been ordered to seize.

After covering up the chamber in which he’d placed the explosives with loose dirt and taking a step back to inspect his efforts, Pinero joined McGuinn. “Well, that’s the last of ’em.”

“Okay, back to your hidey-hole. And remember, execute only on my command,” McGuinn reminded Pinero. He made his way to his concealed position where his teammate was waiting with the manual blasting machine, carefully playing out the spool of wire as he went.

“Roger that,” Pinero replied without bothering to take his eyes off the wire he was paying out, making sure as he went that it didn’t snag something and pull the blasting caps from the C-4 he’d packed into a hole that would, when detonated, bring down most of the hillside.

Having done all he could to prepare for the impending raid, McGuinn decided to make one final check of the covered and concealed positions members of his team had taken up covering the secondary route into Fort Necessity, before settling into his own. From there, he would be able to spot the approach of the FBI SWAT team Colonel Devin had told him to expect and oversee the ambush he’d laid for the Federal agents who were, he suspected, just as keyed up as he was. Having learned in Afghanistan that most operations that went south were the result of someone jumping the gun or overreacting to an unforeseen contingency, he’d have to keep a tight rein on his men, in case someone did something stupid. Things, he imagined, were going to be hairy enough without turning this into a full-fledged war.

Chapter 4

*Fort Necessity, Arizona*

When Willy Davis, a former Air Force tech sergeant who’d learned his trade as a member of the 67th Network Warfare Group was sure the scanner had locked onto a signal that matched those used to control tactical drones, he snickered. “There you are, ’ya little sucker.”

From across the room used by Allen Devin as his operations center, Bryan Czoski turned away from Karen Stone with whom he had been conferring and made his way over to Davis’ station. “What do you have, Willy?”

“A tactical reconnaissance drone just popped up about five klicks to the southwest.”

“I assume it’s headed this way.”

“Yep, and it’s closing fast.”

Placing one hand on Davis’s workstation desk and the other on the back of his seat, Czoski leaned forward and studied the computer monitor for a moment before glancing over his shoulder to where Stone was watching him. “What’s it going to be, Karen? Do we jam its signal, or hack it?”

Karen Stone, a former major who had flown RQ-4 Global Hawks out of Grand Forks before leaving the Air Force to start her own cyber security firm, didn’t hesitate one second. “Jam its transmissions back to its source and only its transmission, not the controller’s commands. Crashing it would not only be construed as a hostile act, it would give away our capabilities when there’s no need to,” she added before anyone could raise an objection to her decision. “We need to keep a few tricks up our sleeve so we can deal with the big stuff when they send it our way.”

From his seat on a raised platform at the rear of the room, Colonel Allen Devin, USMC retired, nodded his assent when he saw Czoski look away from Stone and over at him.

Turning his attention back to Davis, Czoski drew in a deep breath before giving what he imagined was an order that could very well be the first act of a confrontation between a band of volunteer militia and forces loyal to the government, an electronic shot that could very well reverberate around the world.

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Special Agent George Pappas had done everything he could think of to regain the video feed from the drone. He looked up at Sam Ryder who was standing in front of him and the laptop he’d been using to control the small tactical drone Ryder had been counting on to provide him a view of the route into the militia camp and its occupants. “Sorry boss, but it’s a no-go. Whoever is jamming us knows what they’re doing.”

Determined not to go charging into the militia camp fast, blind, and stupid, Ryder began to pepper the drone’s operator with questions. “Can you switch to a different frequency?”

“This model doesn’t have the ability to do that while in the air,” came the response.

“Can you bring it back and change frequencies?”

“Even if I had software needed to do that out here, which I don’t, I expect the people jamming the signal would find the new frequency and jam it as well before we got the drone off the ground. They’re damned good, if I do say so myself.”

Ignoring Pappas’ unsolicited platitudes, Ryder continued to pepper the electronic warfare expert with questions. “What about the drone’s other sensors? Are they still functioning?”

“What other sensors?” Pappas shot back. “This isn’t a Predator. All this bird has is a camera, built—no doubt—by the lowest bidder.”

“Are you trying to tell me we came out here with a drone that doesn’t have the ability to hop from one frequency to another or has some kind of back sensors?”

Pappas’ frustration by his inability to work through the jamming being directed at the drone’s downlink was compounded by Ryder who, in his opinion, possessed the technological savvy of a Russian peasant. Looking up from the screen of his laptop, Pappas regarded Ryder with an expression that informed him he’d just asked the dumbest question imaginable.

Realizing there was no point in wasting time screwing about with the drone that was deft, dumb, and blind, Ryder turned and headed over to where the members of his detachment were clustered around the MRAPs they’d be using to crash into the militia base camp. As he approached the expectant faces that greeted him, he wondered to himself if the ATF agent in charge at Waco had felt the same way he did before setting out to storm the Branch Davidian compound.

“Well?” a member of his team asked.

After taking a deep breath, Ryder drew himself up and continued on past the man without saying a word. Having already gone round and round with his superiors over the wisdom of using brute force to take down the Arizona Home Guard and been told in no uncertain terms either he shut-up and execute it or step aside and let someone else carry out the raid, Ryder saw no point in delaying any further. The sun was beginning to peek up over the horizon. Whatever hope he’d had that he could catch the former members of the armed forces who made up the Arizona Home Guard was gone.

Stopping at the rear of his MRAP, Ryder looked up at the mountain upon which their compound was perched. They were waiting for him and his teams somewhere up there. That was for sure. What wasn’t clear was what they’d do when he and his teams came face to face with them.

“Okay people, you know what’s expected,” he declared with far more enthusiasm than he felt. “Mount up and prepare to move out.”

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Like many of her classmates at Columbia, Sarah Jennings had always assumed people like Amy Porter could pick and choose their assignments, tackling only those stories that demanded a journalist of her caliber. That Porter was at the mercy of a bureau chief and the whims of network executives came as a shock to the eager young intern. It shouldn’t have, she’d told herself after giving the matter the thought such a supposition deserved. Intuitively, she knew everyone, even the President of the United States, was answerable to someone. Still, that realization, coupled with the way a student with her academic credentials had been treated at World News Network served notice it would take more than hard work, a winning personality, impeccable references, and ambition to make a name for herself in a profession that was already awash with equally talented young women no different than herself. She would need a break, a unique opportunity that would allow her to show the likes of Jan Fields-Dixon and the people she answered to that she was more than ready for primetime.

The way a news bureau went about covering the events of the day and the manner in which people like Amy Porter were treated weren’t the only cherished illusions that caused her to reassess many of her preconceived notions. Having been raised and educated in a part of the country where you had to go out of your way to find someone who’d served with the colors, without exception, the members of the Arizona Home Guard she had met since their arrival at Fort Necessity were surprisingly human. Like all spokespersons and protocol officers, Jennings had expected Maria Rivera, a comely Hispanic who was serving as their guide, to be accommodating, well-groomed, and articulate. Jennings was thrown off by the clean-cut appearance, easygoing attitude, and unremarkable conduct of the militiamen themselves. To a man, and woman, they were nothing at all like the deranged Bible thumping, gun-toting rednecks she’d expected to encounter.

“Of course,” she thought to herself as she waited for Amy Porter to finish primping in front of the only mirror in the small room the two had shared the night before, “that could all be part of the show, a staged performance not unlike the well-rehearsed pantomimes politicians liked to put on when sitting down for interviews. If all they’d seen thus far was nothing more than a modern incarnation of Catherine the Great’s Potemkin villages, I need to expose it.” As a journalist, it was her duty to expose the truth by shining the unflinching glare of a camera light on the dark underbelly of Fort Necessity.

Porter, paying no heed to the intern she’d been saddled with (who seemed lost in her own little world, standing behind her) prepared herself for what she expected would be a long and trying day. Dealing with people like Allen Devin was difficult enough when she had home field advantage. Having to do so at a time and place of *his* choosing, using a second-string crew, and after spending the night sharing a room with an intern—would be especially exhausting. Stepping back from the mirror, she took one last look at her efforts. While not the best, they’d do under the circumstances, she decided. Besides, the man she was interviewing later that day was a retired Marine colonel, little more than a blip on her screen, a has-been vainly trying to recapture his past glories.

Pivoting about, she began to pepper Jennings when a string of questions concerning when, where, and with whom their first interview of the day would be with. The sooner they got on with those interviews and were done, Porter reasoned, the sooner she’d be free to return to New York where she’d be at liberty, once more, to cover the important stories of the day.

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Looking up from the speakerphone over which he was having an intense conference call, Robert Flores gave his deputy a look that should have warned him off but didn’t. Instead, the harried Border Patrol agent standing in the open doorway raised his hand and waved it palm down and across his throat, signaling his superior he needed to put the speakerphone on hold so they could speak freely.

With the situation along the border as tense as it was at the moment, Flores didn’t hesitate. After informing the others on the line he needed to drop out for a moment, he hit the mute button and turned his attention to his deputy. “What’s so hellfire important that you have to…”

“I just got a call from Nogales,” Flores’ deputy blurted. “One of their patrols keeping an eye on Devin and his people is reporting armored vehicles with FBI markings heading for it as we speak.”

Stunned, Flores stared at his deputy for a long, terrible moment as he found himself having to stifle his incredulity. “Jesus H Christ!”

“Walker is on line two. He wants to know what he’s supposed to tell his people.”

“Tell him to pull his people back,” Flores snapped without hesitation. “Whatever happens, they’re to do nothing until I find out what’s going on.”

“What if the FBI calls for their assistance?”

“I say again,” Flores growled, “our people are to do nothing. The last thing I want is to have any of my people go bumbling about, becoming mixed up in something we had no hand in.”

Relieved that his superior had no intention of becoming involved in whatever it was the FBI was about to do, the agent in the open doorway acknowledged Flores’ instructions with nothing more than a nod before pivoting on his heels and heading back to operations. Meanwhile, Flores forgot about his conference call and turned his full attention to find out what was going on. That his superiors in Phoenix and Washington had forgotten to inform him someone was moving in on the militia compound was beyond ridiculous. None of the people he was answerable to would even think of doing such a thing. At least, he told himself as he waited for someone in the Phoenix office to answer, he hoped they wouldn’t, forgetting as he sat there that the people back in D.C. didn’t play by the same rules he and his agents did.

Chapter 5

*Fort Necessity, Arizona*

Of the two elements closing in on his compound, Colonel Allen P. Devin had no doubt the pair of armored vehicles barreling down the paved road leading up to Fort Necessity’s main entrance was a feint. His attention was focused on what was obviously the main effort. Consisting of four of the six MRAPs the Highway Patrol had been keeping tabs on, that column was slowly snaking its way up the southeastern side of the mountain using a back road that was little more than a trail.

Aaron Brindle, who had once commanded a ranger battalion, looked up from a battery of monitors receiving images from CCTVs over to where Devin was seated. “Either they think we’re the dumbest sons-of-bitches God ever put on His green earth, or the man leading this raid has a set of balls made out of solid brass.”

Devin grunted by way of response as he continued to watch the lead MRAP approach the six-foot-high chain-linked gate that straddled the back road. The gate itself and the fences that ran but a few hundred meters to either side of it were never intended to form impenetrable barriers capable of keeping anyone who was determined to break into Fort Necessity from doing so. It, like the one located on the primary access route that ran from the highway and straight up the side of the mountain to the compound, were only designed to control access to it. The fences and gates were there to serve as tripwires that, if crossed without his consent or a warrant, allowed members of the Arizona Home Guard to defend what was legally private property bought and paid for using donations and gifts provided by individuals and groups from across the country.

In addition to being well lit, both gates were posted with signs that warned would-be trespassers that the land beyond it was private property. They were also monitored by CCTVs, some of which were well camouflaged, preventing anyone from completely blinding members of the Home Guard charged with keeping an eye on the comings-and-goings at the gates. On this morning, as was usually the case, the main gate was being physically manned by two men. What was unusual was Devin himself had selected them. Knowing things could quickly get out of hand, one of the men he had picked had been his gunnery sergeant when he’d been a brash, fresh-faced second lieutenant. If anyone could keep his wits about him and prevent things from going south, it was Gunny Rojas.

With several camera angles from which to choose as well as audio, all of which were recorded, Devin watched the scene play out as if he himself had scripted it himself. Just short of the main gate, the lead armored vehicle slowed, then stopped. Ensuring that the flap of his holstered Cal .45 pistol was snapped, Gunny Rojas stepped out into the center of the road a few feet in front of the main gate and challenged its occupants.

Taking no chances, Special Agent Andrew Nebel popped the roof top hatch of the lead vehicle and rose up, taking great care to keep as much of himself behind the weapon station’s armor plates as possible. In a clear, no-nonsense tone of voice he informed Rojas they, the occupants of the MRAPs, were FBI.

Despite a desire to see how this little piece of playacting would unfold, Devin’s attention was drawn to another set of monitors with a live feed from the CCTVs covering the other gate leading into the compound. Ordinarily it was unmanned, something Devin suspected the FBI knew. What they were not aware of due to the failure of their drone to provide them with real-time intelligence was the hillside above the road was alive with militiamen, all securely tucked away in prepared positions carefully dug out and expertly concealed among the rocks and native shrubbery. It was a deficiency Ryder and the Federal agents under his immediate command were about to be made aware of.

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Driven by a determination to learn everything she could about the broadcast news business that was matched only by her ambition to one day host her very own primetime news show, Sarah Jennings skipped breakfast and headed out to the satellite truck where she watched and listened to everything John Cardosa and Sam Emerson did as they went about preparing their equipment for the day. With the pre-dawn darkness quickly giving way to a clear, azure blue sky, the pair of native Arizonans set about testing their uplink by shooting a live feed from the truck back to their home station in Tucson. From there it was re-broadcast to a control room in New York where Amy Porter’s producer was making sure everything on his end was set for later in the day when Porter would conduct a live interview with Allen Devin.

Like all techies, Cardosa couldn’t help but show off for the bright-eyed intern. After patiently explaining everything he and Emerson were doing while they were setting up, he handed Jennings a mike. “It’ll be a whole lot more useful to the folks back in New York to get some idea what things are going to look and sound like if there’s someone actually standing in front of the camera talking. This way they can record the settings they’ll need to use when the time comes to trot out the network’s big guns.”

Jennings didn’t need to be asked twice. After taking a second to check her appearance in one of the truck’s side mirrors, she stepped in front of the camera, brought the mike up until it was just under her chin and began to describe her surroundings, doing her best to come across as if she were an old hand at broadcasting live. “A once prosperous mining camp that fell on hard times and was abandoned, located just a few miles from the Mexican border has become the home of the Arizona Home Guard,” she began with a poise that impressed Cardosa. “Unlike many of the volunteer militia units that have taken it upon themselves to stop the flow of illegal immigrants and drugs from Mexico, the Arizona Home Guard, known simply as the Guard, goes about its self-appointed mission with a professionalism that rivals the various branches of the armed forces from which each and every member of the Guard is drawn from.”

Pausing but a second, she shot a quick glance out of the corner of her eyes over to where Cardosa was watching her through the open side door of the satellite truck. Impressed by her performance and ability to adlib, he gave her a broad, toothy grin and an enthusiastic thumbs-up before twirling his hand about in a circular motion, indicating he wanted her to continue.

“Their quiet, confident can-do attitude and dedication to their self-appointed duties can be attributed to the fact that every man and woman who is a member of the Guard is also former military. *Most* are veterans, some of whom began their service in Vietnam. Each one has been carefully screened by their commanding officer, Colonel Allen P. Devin, a retired Marine Colonel. Devin, known affectionately as The Colonel by members of the Guard, served in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Though his mission and that of the Guard is very different than what they were trained for, everyone here, in what the members of the Guard have dubbed Fort Necessity, employ the same professionalism they relied on when confronting . . .”

Jennings never did get a chance to finish her thought, for an explosion, followed by the appearance of a plume of smoke and dust, rose up in the distance just behind her. Rather than cringing and hunching over as people often did when startled by an explosion, she glanced over her shoulder to see what was going on.

Despite being as surprised and clueless as to what was happening as Jennings, both Cardosa and Emerson had the presence of mind to take advantage of the live feed they had. Hunching over ever so slightly in order to keep her camera steady, Emerson shifted about so she could keep Jennings in the frame while focusing on the growing plume of smoke, dirt, and rock which was quickly joined by a second explosion that was equally loud and, from Emerson’s perspective as a professional cameraman and veteran of the war in Iraq, impressive.

Cardosa, in the meantime, was doing his best to get Jennings’ attention without calling out for her. When she finally did notice he was waving frantically at her, the young intern saw him frantically rolling his hand and forearm about, indicating she was still live and needed to keep talking.

After drawing in a deep breath in an effort to steady herself, hoping as she did so her expression wasn’t betraying the panic she felt, she took to describing what they were seeing as best she could. “We’ve just witnessed two massive explosions in the distance. From what I know of Fort Necessity’s layout, I would have to guess they are on or near a road that serves as a secondary access route in and out of this compound. While it could very well be part of a training exercise, with tensions in this part of the country running high due to the Canyon Incident, I seriously doubt that is the case.”

As if to confirm her supposition, the faint echo of small arms fire was heard. Again, Jennings glanced out of the corner of her eye over to Cardosa, seeking some sort of sign or guidance. None came, for he was no longer paying attention to her. Instead, he had turned his back to her. With a finger held up to one ear, pressing against the ear bud in it and his cell phone against the other, she concluded he was talking to someone either at his station in Tucson or WNN studios in New York. Turning her gaze back to the camera and seeing that the bright red light was still on, the young intern once more took in a deep breath before picking up her running narrative from where she’d left off.

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In New York Beth Mitchell, the producer for Amy Porter’s show, decided to make one of those snap decisions that either could make a network employee’s career or end it. Without bothering to seek permission from anyone in senior management or putting down the cell phone she held to her ear, she ordered the technician who had been running the test shot from Arizona to cut over to the network’s morning show’s control room, informing them they were receiving a live feed from a breaking news story.

The producer of the morning show, after talking with Mitchell about the story and then feeding that information to the TV hosts so they could inform the viewers they were cutting to the story, informed Mitchell they would be cutting to her feed in ten seconds. Mitchell in turn relayed this information to the newsroom in Tucson, instructing them to have their people on the ground inform Jennings that when they went live she was to start from the top. She was to give a quick introduction to the story before describing as best she could what she was seeing. Without waiting for her contact in Tucson to acknowledge, Mitchell picked up the countdown she was receiving from the morning show’s producer, relaying it via cell phone to the newsroom in Tucson. “In five, four, three, two, one . . .”

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Sam Ryder had lived among Arizonans long enough to gain an appreciation for their temperament and attitudes when it came to hot button issues such as border security, so he knew Devin and the Arizona Home Guard would make a show of resisting any effort by government agents intent on shutting them down. What he hadn’t expected was having the side of a mountain dropped on him, or as near on top of him and his men as was possible—without actually killing them.

After regaining his balance from the sudden stop his driver had been forced to make to keep from being swept off the road by the rockslide, Ryder looked out at the rubble now blocking the road in front of his MRAP. He naturally assumed it, and a follow-on explosion that caused another rockslide behind his convoy, had been near misses due to poor timing on the part of the militia. He had no way of knowing Allen Devin’s intention was merely to box them in. As a result, the situation report he passed onto Andrew Nebel, who had been haggling with the militiaman standing in front of his MRAP at the main gate when the first detonation had gone off, caused Nebel to assume Ryder’s element was under direct attack. Instinctively he dropped down, yanked the charging handle of the M-240 Machine gun mounted in the MRAP’s weapon station to the rear and trained the weapon on the militiaman at the gate.

Having expected the Federal agent he’d been arguing with to become rattled when the time came to block the back road into the compound, Gunny Rojas made no effort to go for the vintage M1911 .45 he always carried in an old but well cared for brown leather holster he’d picked up during his second tour in Nam. Instead, he brought his hands up, palms out, and took to assuring the Federal agent crouched behind the weapon’s station gun shield he had nothing to worry about.

“Now let’s not go doing anything stupid,” he called out with the same calm, well measured tone he’d relied on to keep young officers from running about in circles like headless chickens. “There’s no need to go getting all excited.”

With Ryder shouting orders over the radio to the other vehicles in his column, giving his people permission to fire if fired upon, Nebel had no intention of relaxing his guard or allowing himself to be talked down by the armed militiaman in front of him. Instead, he did what came natural to him. He ordered Rojas to drop his weapon, put his hands behind his head, and kneel down.

Suspecting any move on his part to reach down for his weapon, even if he was doing so in order to comply with the Federal agent’s order would be a mistake, Rajas kept his hands up, palms out and at shoulder height as he began to backpedal, putting as much distance between himself and the nervous FBI agent behind the machine gun in front of him.

When he realized the militiaman had no intention of complying with his demands, Nebel saw he had no choice but to fire warning shots. Rather than losing a burst over the militiaman’s head, he lowered the muzzle of his machine gun and aimed for a spot in the road several feet in front of the militiaman. What he hadn’t counted on was the tendency bullets have of ricocheting when they come into contact with something hard, like the gravel that was mixed in with the material used to pave the road his MRAP was sitting on.

The spray of partially spent bullets and the debris kicked up by the burst Nebel unleashed hit Gunny Rojas in the shins, thighs, and groin, sending him sprawling. Upon seeing this, the other member of the Guard who had been at the front gate with Rojas, a former ranger who had served multiple tours in Afghanistan, reacted instinctively.

When he saw the militiaman who had been confronting him was no longer a threat, Nebel turned his attention to the one who had been holding back and off to one side of the gate, catching him as he was sliding his AR off his shoulder. Without hesitation, Nebel trained the muzzle of his weapon on the second militiaman and fired. Though most of the rounds flew over the militiaman’s head, one managed to gaze his scalp, putting him down as well.

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Like their colonel, the personnel manning the Home Guard’s tactical operations center watched in hushed silence as the Federal agent manning the machine gun in the lead MRAP fired on people who were more than friends. Gunny Hector Rojas and Everett Lloyd were fellow veterans who belonged to what W.E.B. Griffin had once dubbed the brotherhood of war. Only the crushing of a Styrofoam cup broke the silence that had fallen over the room.

With more effort than such a simple act normally demanded, Karen Stone tore her gaze away from the monitor everyone was watching and over to where Devin sat. Ignoring the hot liquid that was oozing out of the crumpled cup in his hand, he glared at the image of his former gunnery sergeant laying on the ground in front of an armored vehicle emblazoned with bold, block letters identifying it as FBI. Though he said nothing, Stone could tell by the way Devin continued to stare at the monitor through narrow, angry slits the unprovoked act they had just witnessed would not go unanswered. Looking back at the scene unfolding but a few hundred meters from where she stood, she found herself wondering if this was how it had played out on that long ago day when a ragtag collection of citizen soldiers had defied the King’s men across a patch of green in order to defend their homes, their families, and rights they had come to believe were theirs by the grace of God.

Chapter 6

*Fort Necessity, AZ*

Annoyed there was no one in the mess hall to take her order, Amy Porter found she had no choice but to poke around until she found a coffeemaker with a half empty carafe and serve herself. She was still in the process of adding artificial creamer when the sound of an explosion caused her to jump. Amy tried to shrug it off as nothing until she heard a second explosion, quickly followed by the faint rattling of small arms fire, causing her to toss aside the Styrofoam cup and make for the door at a dead run.

Expecting to find the Tucson news team gathered around the satellite truck, patiently waiting for her to appear and issue them their marching orders, Porter was annoyed at the sight of Cardosa sitting inside the truck, staring intently at the monitor set above the uplink control panel. “What are you doing?” she snipped haughtily through the open doors of the truck.

“My job,” Cardosa shot back without bothering to look over to where Porter was standing with her arms crossed.

Confused, Porter began to climb into the truck but stopped the second she saw the image of Jennings on the monitor. The network was broadcasting live across the country. The young intern was standing just inside the militia’s operations center, answering questions being directed at her by a no-name anchorman back at the network’s New York studio. “What in God’s name does she think she’s doing?”

This time, Cardosa did turn away from the monitor as he all but glared at the befuddled New Yorker. “Your job,” he scoffed sarcastically.

Enraged, Porter stepped back, twirled about, and took off toward the building where the operations center was located. Pushing aside a militiaman posted at its door who attempted to block her entrance, she made straight for Jennings and Emerson, who were interviewing Maria Rivera, the Arizona Home Guard’s spokesperson. It took all of Porter’s strength to resist marching up to the little blond-haired bitch to rip her beating heart right out of her chest on live TV. The only thing that kept her from doing so was the sound of the death knell to her career. Instead, after taking a second to calm herself and catch her breath, she made her way closer to the intern with deceptively innocent eyes and cameraman. She ensured that Jennings saw her, but did not interfere with the shot.

Realizing her fifteen minutes of fame were about to expire, Jennings gave the Guard’s spokeswoman an opportunity to finish answering a question Jennings had put to her from the New York-based anchor. After making a show of thanking the woman for taking the time to answer her questions, she turned her full attention back to the camera. With what she hoped was an expression that was appropriate for the gravity of the event she had been reporting on, she signed off. “Reporting live from the operations center of the Arizona Home Guard, this is Sarah Jennings.”

Not knowing why the young intern was ending the piece, but recognizing a sign-off when she heard it, Emerson stopped shooting. It was only when she took her eye away from the camera’s eye piece that she noticed their very own New York media diva had finally decided to grace them with her presence. Suspecting Jennings was about to be the recipient of an undeserved tongue lashing, Emerson lowered her camera to her side and stepped in between the two women.

Much to Emerson’s surprise, rather than recoiling at the sight of Amy Porter, Jennings stepped around her. “You’re just in time,” she declared brightly even as she was removing the earpiece Cardosa had given her before she managed to gain entry into the operations center using equal parts guile and sheer bull doggedness. “Here’s what we know for sure so far,” the excited young intern blurted out before Porter had an opportunity to say a word.

Eager to get on camera as quickly as she could and do her damnedest to make up for missing what was one of those once-in-a-lifetime media events, Porter set aside her righteous indignation at being outdone by a girl who was, in her eyes, a rank amateur. Instead, she listened attentively to everything Jennings was telling her while Emerson scanned the crowded operations center to see if she could get a better shot at what was happening without being in the way.

Taking advantage of this break, out in the satellite truck John Cardosa began uploading a copy of the video and audio feed of the faceoff and shooting that had taken place at the main gate just scant minutes before. It, as well as other material Maria Rivera had prepared beforehand, had been delivered to him by a member of her media crew together with a promise that more would follow as soon as it became available.

In New York Beth Mitchell ignored repeated calls from the network’s front office, focusing her full attention instead to relaying everything she was getting straight to the network’s newsroom where the early morning news anchor wasted no time running with the story. With no one able to keep up with the speed of the information coming in, the anchor needed to adlib, listening to the audio while watching the video feed being broadcast over the air, nationwide to all of the network’s affiliates, raw and unedited. Like Jennings and Mitchell, he saw this story as more than breaking news. It was his ticket to bigger and better things.

Chapter 7

*Fort Necessity, Arizona*

Designed to protect soldiers from roadside IEDs and not as an armored fighting vehicle, the MRAP rendered Ryder and the teams stranded between the rockslides all but helpless. What little protection the armor plates and bulletproof glass surrounding the vehicles’ weapon station provided, someone foolish enough to pop the rooftop hatch and man its machine gun was negated by the superior angle of attack that members of the Arizona Home Guard enjoyed. They were positioned on the hillside overlooking the road where the FBI MRAPs sat motionless like a pod of beached whales. It was a disturbing fact Ryder himself confirmed when he personally cracked open the hatch to assess their situation and caught a glint of sunlight reflected off a militiaman’s rifle. Whether that man had meant for him to see that or he was simply careless did not matter. What mattered was that he and his men were in an impossible, no-win situation.

After failing to spot any other positions occupied by militiamen he had absolutely no doubt were hidden somewhere on the hillside overlooking the road, Ryder ducked back down into the MRAP and keyed his radio mike. “Cougar element, this is Cougar Six. Does anyone see anything?”

One by one the senior agent in each of the vehicles trapped between the rockslides reported back that they too had no luck spotting the militia’s positions. “Cougar Five, is there any chance of getting around the roadblock at the rear of the column and going back out the way we came in?” When the senior special agent in the last vehicle belonging to Ryder’s column responded that was not possible, Ryder sighed. Lowering the hand mike he was holding, he took a moment to look over his shoulder at the men seated in the rear of his MRAP. At the moment each and every one of them were returning his gaze. No doubt, he imagined, they and the agents in the other vehicles were wondering how he intended to get them out of this fix.

His effort to develop a plan that made sense was interrupted by the crackling of the radio. “Special Agent Samuel K. Ryder of the FBI, this is Colonel Allen P. Devin, over.”

Ryder was stunned that the leader of the militia group knew that he was leading the raid, and that the Colonel had managed to broadcast over what was supposed to be a state-of-the-art military-grade secure radio set. Pulling his head back, he stared at the hand mike he was holding.

Without waiting for a response, Devin continued. “At the moment I expect you are assessing your situation. I have little doubt you will soon come to the conclusion it is untenable.”

Having no wish to acknowledge that brilliant flash of the obvious, while at the same time showing a bit of spunk, Ryder brought the hand mike up to his lips and keyed it. “This is Special Agent Ryder of the FBI. I am ordering you and your people to lay down your arms, assemble in the center of your compound, and surrender to myself and my agents.”

Devin didn’t bother asking the leader of the FBI raid to justify his demands or ask why they were there. To have done so would have been a waste of time. Instead, he issued a counter demand. “This is Colonel Devin. I am ordering *you* and your agents to dismount from the vehicles currently trapped by the rockslides and withdraw. You can take your personal weapons, equipment, and any crew served weapons you can carry with you.”

“And if we don’t?” Ryder shot back without hesitation.

Prepared for a show of defiance, Devin didn’t hesitate either. “The National Weather Bureau is calling for the temperature to hit ninety-five by noon. How long do you think it will take you and your men to go through whatever water you have on hand and start to succumb to dehydration?”

Before responding, Ryder again looked back at his men, all of whom were already sweating profusely in the buttoned-up armored vehicle. Their expressions reflected his own grim thoughts. He knew there wasn’t a single man among them or any of the other vehicles who wouldn’t abide by whatever decision he made. But he also knew Devin had a point. Sitting about baking in the MRAPs under a bright, mid-May Arizona sun and watching his men drop like flies would be a pointless exercise.

This, Ryder realized, was the price of adhering to Ethan Odam’s insistence that they go small in an effort to preserve operational security. With no backup on call ready to bail them out, nothing resembling a Plan B, and an appreciation that neither the Arizona State Police nor the National Guard would willingly come galloping to their rescue, Ryder sighed as he concluded he had no choice but to give in to Devin’s demands. The idea of asking the retired colonel for a guarantee his men wouldn’t be fired on as they emerged from the MRAPs was dismissed without a second thought. Having been afforded the opportunity to assess the situation and think through what Devin could have done, Ryder had already come to the conclusion that if the leader of the Arizona Home Guard had wanted to, he could have dropped the entire side of the mountain right on top of them. Besides, Colonel Allen P. Devin was a decorated Marine, a man to whom honor and integrity were more than mere words. To him they were a way of life, one Ryder imagined the people who had rallied to his cause shared.

Having come to the sad conclusion their position was untenable, and having no interest in being the person responsible for escalating an already explosive situation, Ryder decided to take advantage of the opportunity Devin was presenting him with a sop to his honor by peaceably withdrawing without the need to surrender their weapons. If the dumb sons-of-bitches back in D.C. who’d dreamed up this nightmare wanted to ratchet this rat-fuck up a notch, he’d leave it to them to make the call.

“Devin, this is Ryder. Let your people on the hillside know we’re comin’ out in five minutes.”

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On the other side of the high ground that separated Ryder’s column from Andrew Nebel’s was an Army surplus Chevy commercial cargo vehicle clearly marked as an ambulance. It inched its way around a curve in the access road that hid the center of the compound from where Nebel’s MRAP’s sat. Once the driver of the ambulance was sure he’d been spotted, he stopped.

Knowing what the driver of the vehicle was waiting for, and seeing no harm in letting it continue on after listening to the exchange between Ryder and Devin, Nebel rose up from behind the weapon station’s gun shield and waved it on without bothering to seek permission from Ryder.

Having no wish to take any chances, the ambulance’s driver moved toward the main gate ever so slowly. Once there, he and a militiaman wearing a Red Cross brassard dismounted. While the driver went over to where the militiaman who’d remained behind at the gate had managed to push himself up into a seated position, the medic made his way over to where Gunny Rojas lay.

Appreciating that there now existed what amounted to an undeclared truce, Nebel rose up and out from behind the sunshield he’d been crouched behind and called out to the medic. “How is he?”

Making no effort to check the anger he felt, the medic glared at Nebel as he spit out his response. “He’s dead.”

*Washington, D.C.*

As the conclusion of a hastily convened cabinet meeting during which Rowland and the heads of the various agencies had updated the President on the situation in Arizona, Rowland shot a quick glance at Presidential Press Secretary Eric Joiner. Without having to be told, Joiner left the cabinet room, stepped aside, and waited for Rowland.

“You do know what you need to do,” Rowland snapped as he emerged from the cabinet room and headed back to his office without stopping.

“Of course I do,” Joiner muttered as he hastened to catch-up with Rowland. “I *was* in the same meeting you were in just now,” he added curtly, making no effort to check his sarcasm.

“Forget what the President said,” Rowland counted brusquely. “Prevaricate. Admit to nothing.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Joiner shot back.

Stopping in mid-stride, Rowland rounded on the Press Secretary. “Do I look like I’m kidding?”

After coming to a quick stop, Joiner took a quick step back before returning Rowland’s glare. Planting his fists on his hips, he then leaned forward until the two men were nose-to-nose. “In ten minutes I’m going to step out in front of a room full of journalists and media hacks who are sitting about in the press room, sharpening their knives. They’re not going to be satisfied with the usual bullshit non-answers I’m forced to feed them every time someone in this administration says or does something certifiably stupid or, as I suspect is the case this time, way beyond the pale—even for this administration.”

Unfazed by Joiner’s tone of voice or demeanor, Rowland took up an equally aggressive stance as he bent forward at the waist and took to glaring at Joiner. “Well, you’ve picked one hell of a time to suddenly become self-righteous.”

“We’re not talking about some slick political maneuver that has gone south I can explain away with a few well-chosen words or glossed over as an unfortunate misunderstanding.”

“No, we’re not. What we’re talking about is a criminal act committed by a group of anti-government radicals, plain and simple.”

“That’s not the way some in the press are going to view this. Even if they do, every radio talk show in the country will do their damnedest to label this as another heavy-handed government raid resulting in the death of an innocent American.”

“You think the militiaman who was killed was innocent?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think,” Joiner shot back. “It’s what the people who tune into Rush Limbaugh—and see the video of the shooting—think.”

Unconcerned by the looks other members of the President’s staff were giving the two of them as they rushed by, Rowland jabbed his index finger into Joiner’s chest. “I don’t care what you need to do or say. Just make sure you toe the party line on this, otherwise you’ll be lucky if you manage to find a job shilling for a plastic pooper-scooper company in late-night infomercials.”

Joiner was tempted to tell the White House chief of staff that such a job wouldn’t be all that different from what he was currently doing, but he stopped himself. As much as he hated to admit it, Rowland was right. This was neither the time nor the place to turncoat on an administration he’d done so much to get elected. There’d be plenty of time later to explain away or justify his behavior while serving as the President’s mouthpiece when he sat down to write his memoirs covering his White House years.

*Phoenix, Arizona*

None of the small, select group of officials who made up the Governor’s crisis response team said a word as Christopher Burress entered the small conference room just off his office and took a seat at the head of the table. After resting his forearms on the table and clasping his hands, he leaned forward, looking down at the well-polished surface. He sat like that for a full minute before drawing in a deep breath and peeking up, taking his time to stare into the eyes of each and every person at the table, people who were more than simple political appointees or bureaucrats charged with enforcing the laws of Arizona. They were Burress’s friends, people he had grown up with, gone to school with and, when the time allowed, enjoyed spending time with at family gatherings. All were native Arizonans. All shared a love for their state’s rugged natural beauty and the pragmatism of its people. And all, without exception, were enraged that an outsider had seen fit to come into their state—their home—to kill one of their own. And then to slander the name of a man they all revered, on national TV, in an effort to justify what was, in their minds, an act that not only violated their state’s sovereign rights, but defied the very laws they, the Federal officials, were sworn to uphold.

“I just got off the phone with the President,” Burress stated in a low, menacing voice. “He told me because of who’s involved and the way they’re armed, one of the options his advisors are considering is federalizing elements of the state’s National Guard to go in and, using his wards, put a lid on this.”

After considering what that would mean, Major General Francis Acosta cleared his throat. He waited until the governor looked over to him. “And you said?”

“What do you think I said, Frank?” Burress shot back.

“I’d tell you, but there are ladies present,” he replied in the same manner he often used when he felt the need to take the edge off of an otherwise grim discussion.

Burress’ decision to appoint Francis Acosta state adjutant general, a man he’d gone to high school with, had been a real no brainer for the governor. Acosta was the kind of man who could be relied upon at moments like this to keep his head and think things through before rendering advice, which Burress seldom ignored. “If he does issue the order, what will you and your people do?” he asked carefully.

“While you were talking to the President, Jodie and I came up with a plan of our own.”

Looking away from Acosta, Burress cast his gaze over to where Jordan Wallace, a man he’d roomed with at Arizona State and had, over the years, served as his legal counsel, campaign manager, and chief of staff as well as godfather to his second child. “Okay, shoot. What have you two got in mind?”

“Oh, we’ll mobilize the Guard alright,” Wallace declared in an easygoing manner that belied the seriousness of the moment. “But it’s not the Home Guard Frank’s people and the state police will be laying siege to.”

Knowing them both as well as any man could know these two men, Burress already knew where this was going. “You all do understand what this means,” he stated flatly.

“We understand what it means if we don’t,” Sidney Cisneros, head of the state police replied calmly.

Easing back in his seat, Burress nodded. “Okay, lay it on me. What do the three of you have in mind?”

With that, Jordan Wallace laid out the plan he, Acosta, and Cisneros had come up with, a plan Burress hoped would serve notice to the administration in Washington that Texas wasn’t the only state in the Union that didn’t take kindly to being messed with.

Chapter 8

*Fort Necessity, Arizona*

Like a child seeking a safe, familiar corner in which to hide while her parents argued, Amy Porter took refuge in the satellite truck. There she did her best to ignore the flurry of activity outside and an occasional glance from Cardosa who was doing his best to pretend he was busy twiddling and turning knobs and dials as she went over the list of questions she had prepared. After tweaking them to fit the new set of circumstances, she reluctantly concluded the events of that morning had made every damned one of them irrelevant. With little choice, and not a whole hell of a lot of time before sitting down with Colonel Allen Devin, she deleted the whole lot and turned her attention to an entirely new set of questions she could use during a live broadcast she expected would be watched by everyone who was anyone.

This proved to be more of a challenge than she expected. None of her preconceived notions of what a retired Marine colonel and leader of a vigilante militia group was like had changed, despite everything she’d seen since arriving at the Arizona Home Guard’s base camp and the manner in which its members behaved in the wake of the morning’s confrontation with the FBI. If anything, they had reinforced them, for now she imagined rather than being someone who was nothing more than another angry white male determined to cling to quaint views that had no place in the America she was familiar with, Porter imagined the man she’d be sitting across from would be the personification of Colonel Walter E. Kurtz, the renegade colonel Marlon Brando played in *Apocalypse Now*. But Devin wasn’t a fictional character. He was a very real and a very dangerous one.

After watching Porter staring at the screen of her laptop for close to ten minutes as she mulled over how best to begin the interview, Cardosa couldn’t help but chuckle. “At a loss for words, boss lady?”

“Don’t call me that,” Porter snapped without taking her eyes off the screen of her laptop.

“Well *excuse* me, *Ms*. Porter.”

It wasn’t his sarcasm or an acknowledgement that she’d done anything wrong that caused Porter to turn toward him and apologize. Rather, it was an appreciation that, for better or worse, she was stuck with the lanky hayseed seated next to her and a camerawoman who gave a whole new meaning to the term “butch.” She would need them to put forth their best effort so that her interview with Devin, a piece she was convinced would all but guarantee her a Pulitzer, came off without a hitch. With that thought in mind and well-practiced ease, her expression went from petulant to piteous as she let out a sad little mew. “I’m sorry. It’s just that I’m still a bit rattled.”

“Aren’t we all,” Cardosa snickered. “It’s not every day that you wake up and find yourself in the middle of a Mexican standoff between the Feds and your neighbors.”

“You consider these people your neighbors?”

“Ms. Porter, this is Arizona, not New York.”

Having no wish to become sidetracked by asking the self-assured Arizonan what he meant by that, Porter swallowed her pride and asked Cardosa for his thoughts on how best to approach Devin. “Tell me, if you were in my position, how would you go about interviewing the Colonel?”

Spinning about on the stool he was perched on until he was facing Porter, Cardosa leaned forward, clasped his hands, and planted his forearms on his knees. Staring up into her eyes, he grunted. “I expected I’d start by doing a lead-in piece that pointed out what happened here this morning came as no great surprise to him. He knew this day would come. Hell, the President and his covey of like-minded minions have been telegraphing their intention to move against the Arizona Home Guard for months.” Pausing, Cardosa looked down a second, shook his head, and snickered before peeking back up at Porter. “The only thing that puzzles me is the way people like you are taken aback when something like this happens.”

Having grown accustomed to working with underlings who wouldn’t think of rounding on her as Cardosa had, Porter was at a loss for what to say to him. To her, his comment was nothing short of a slap in the face. Not that he gave her a chance to, as he quickly changed gears. “No doubt you’re sitting there, asking yourself what you should ask the Colonel when you finally sit down with him. If it was me, I’d ask the obvious.”

It took Porter several long seconds to set aside her righteous indignation. After she’d finally managed to regain her balance, she lifted her chin and gave her hair a quick, petulant toss that reminded Cardosa of an agitated mare. “Which is?” she clipped.

“What now? You see, a man with Devin’s background and experience doesn’t go jumping into the tiger’s cage and giving its tail a twist unless he knows exactly what he’s going to do when the creature rears up and turns on him,” Cardosa pointed out. Warming up to his subject, he suddenly leaned so close to Porter that she drew back.

Ignoring her reaction, he continued. “If I were the good Colonel, I’d start by reminding people of Ruby Ridge and Waco, pointing out that *he* is the aggrieved party.”

Porter sniffed. “I hardly think anyone who sees the video we shot this morning will buy that.”

A knowing grin lit up Cardosa’s face as he leaned back and crossed his arms. “Tell me, *Ms*. Porter, just what do the videos we have show?”

Before answering, Porter took a moment to review in her mind the images Emerson had been able to capture. While it was true the real drama had played out over on the other side of the mountain, other than the sound of two explosions and a brief glimpse of smoke and debris rising up over the far side of the compound, the every second of the confrontation between the element led by Special Agent Ryder and Devin’s militiamen had been recorded. It was, from a media standpoint, the only video of any real significance they had, compliments of the Arizona Home Guard’s spokesperson. And it was damning. In her mind’s eye, Porter replayed the incident. As much as she hated to admit it, she concluded the country bumpkin she was saddled with for a producer had a point.

Still, she couldn’t quite get over the idea that the man she was about to interview was more than a wee bit off in the head. Porter realized then that her usual tactic of using “gotcha” questions to put interviewees on the spot simply would not do. Instead, she decided it might not be a bad idea if, after opening the interview with a segment shot beforehand summarizing the events of the day, she simply gave Devin free rein to say whatever he liked. No doubt, she concluded, he’d hang himself with his own words, spewing forth vile hatred and intolerance dressed up as high-minded principles and patriotism. With that goal in mind, she gave Cardosa a quick thank you, spun about on her stool, and began to tap away on her keyboard—blissfully ignoring what Cardosa had alluded to as she prepared to jump feet first into the tiger’s cage.

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There is an old adage in the military that states people who “assume make an *ass* out of *u* and *me*.” This saying applied in spades to Amy Porter’s assumptions concerning the leader of the Arizona Home Guard. Having commanded men in combat, Allen P. Devin was not accustomed to blundering into battle unprepared. Before sitting down for his interview with Amy Porter, a journalist Maria Rivera jokingly referred to as the “high priestess of character assassination,” Maria provided him with several hours of recorded interviews and selected transcripts of interviews Porter had conducted in the past with members of the armed forces. Having been a naval intel officer who believed in being thorough, Rivera did not limit her selection to only those interviews with people Porter had set out to embarrass. She included several that could best be described as puff pieces, including one with the President in which his view on immigration and amnesty were addressed.

It was not so much the actual questions Devin was interested in studying. Rather, being an astute student of human nature, he focused on Porter’s body language, looking for those little habits and tells that would allow him to anticipate what she was thinking and, more important, the line of attack she was building up to.

Thus, both interviewer and interviewee were prepared for a confrontation only one was truly ready for.

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During the opening segment of the interview with a man Porter imagined a woman who favored the rough-hewn cowboy look might find handsome, she allowed Devin the freedom to set forth the goals and guiding principles of the Arizona Home Guard. The six-foot-five retired colonel with his rich baritone was almost as mesmerizing as were the pair of pale blue eyes he fixed Porter with in a steady, unflinching stare. “Our name says it all, Ms. Porter. Each and every man and woman who is part of this organization is a native of Arizona, either by birth or by choice. They are here for no other purpose than to protect their families and homes.”

“From?” Porter asked haughtily.

“People who, in the course of violating the laws of the state of Arizona and the United States, place our loved ones in danger.”

“You are, of course, referring to undocumented immigrants?”

“Illegal aliens, Ms. Porter. While many of them are people who want nothing more than an opportunity to build a better life for themselves and their loved ones, liberally mixed in with them are others who are nothing more than criminals, drug dealers, miscreants, members of crime organizations such as MS-13 and, *as you well know,* non-Latinos who belong to organizations hell bent on bringing terrorism to our shores. Regardless of their motivation for coming to the United States, all have violated the laws our elected officials are obliged to uphold and enforce but have chosen to ignore.”

A slight tugging at the corner of her lips informed Devin she was pleased with the direction this discussion was going, one she hoped to take advantage of. He was as well, for it put into play the very issue that was at the heart of a problem the people of Arizona had to deal with every day. “Isn’t that a job best left to the Border Patrol as well as state and local law enforcement agencies?”

“It would be, if the people in Washington allowed Border Patrol and others to carry out their duties and provided them with the manpower and resources to do so. But neither is true, a sad state of affairs I am sure you are well aware of.”

The next exchange left Porter sounding less like a journalist and more like a spokesperson for the Administration and its policy concerning the flow of illegal aliens across the U.S.-Mexican border. Throughout it, whenever she used the term “undocumented immigrant,” Devin reminded her that by crossing the border in the manner they did, regardless of their motivation, they were in violation of the law. After one such tête-à-tête, Devin surprised Porter by leaning back in his seat and smirking. “Tell me, Ms. Porter, would you call a family of homeless people who snuck into your Upper East Side apartment at night without your permission and took up residence in your guest bedroom an uninvited visitor?” he asked mockingly.

Thrown by his question, Porter visibly recoiled, a reaction Emerson was able to capture. After waiting for her to provide him with an answer, which she was unable to do, he waved a hand about dismissively. “I imagine you’d be on your smart phone before they could say ¡hola!, dialing 911 faster than a redboned hound chasing a pickup. Of course, doing so would be a waste of time if your mayor and city council had unilaterally decided unused bedrooms are sanctuaries where the laws that govern people like you and me do not apply, or the NYPD was under orders not to respond to calls involving homeless vagrants who had taken up residence in guest rooms.”

“That is a specious argument, Colonel Devin,” Porter countered, doing her best to keep her ire in check.

“Is it? Tell me,” he continued without allowing her an opportunity to formulate an appropriate response. “Have you ever heard of Reconquista?”

“No, I have not,” she sniffed, making little effort to hide the growing anger she felt over having lost control of the interview.

“It’s a term originally coined by the Spaniards to describe their efforts to reclaim Spain from the Moors. Today it’s being used by Mexican intellectuals and radical activists who are seeking to reclaim the American Southwest for Mexico. Whether they do so through an ever increasing and overwhelming shift in demographics in states like Arizona, Texas, and California, or through the intimidation of politicians who refuse to live up to the oath they took to uphold the laws of this nation does not matter to those who believe the Southwest belongs to Mexico.”

“And I suppose you and the members of the Arizona Guard intend to prevent them from doing so?” Porter shot back.

Devin’s grin returned as he lounged back in his seat, clasping his hands over his abdomen. “Unfortunately, that is well beyond our abilities, Ms. Porter.”

“Then what’s the point of engaging in what appears to be nothing more than an exercise in futility?”

“What we’re doing here is far from futile. Granted, up until now our efforts have had little impact. The Arizona Home Guard and other volunteer organizations like it cannot stop the flood of illegal aliens who will, if unchecked, change the face of America. If what we’re doing here is to succeed, we need help.”

“Help? Help from who?”

“From people who care about our country, men and women across the U.S. who are tired of politicians who have failed to defend them from what is nothing more than an invasion.”

Having no wish to see Devin avoid answering for the actions he and the members of the Guard were guilty of by steering their discussion off onto a tangent she had no interest in, Porter hit him with a series of questions she hoped would allow her to regain the upper hand. “Even if what you say is true, what gives you the right to take up arms against duly appointed agents of the Federal government who are attempting to enforce the very laws you claim to be defending?”

“The Constitution of the United States and the laws of this state, Ms. Porter.”

“Though I am not a constitutional scholar, I don’t believe it gives you the right to fire on Federal agents.”

“No, I don’t expect it does,” Devin replied before leaning forward, fixing Porter with an intense stare that caused her to flinch. “What it does guarantee we, the people, is the right to due process of the law, something Gunnery Sergeant Hector Rojas was denied before he was executed. That, and an oath I and everyone who has ever served in the armed forces took, a pledge to uphold the Constitution against all enemies, foreign *and* domestic.”

Both the low, almost threatening tone of voice with which Devin had responded, and the look in his eye left Porter wondering if her earlier comparison of him to Colonel Kurtz hadn’t been all that far from the mark.

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Having no wish to spend any more time in a state populated by people like Colonel Allen Devin, as soon as she was finished with her interview she headed straight out to the satellite truck. There she all put ripped the remote mike she’d worn for the interview and threw it at Cardosa who was still seated at his work station. “Pack everything up,” she ordered crisply. “We’re heading back to Tucson tonight.”

“The hell we are,” Cardosa responded without hesitation.

Porter was not used to having an underling refuse to do what she told him, so all she could do was stand there, looking up at the Tucson-based producer through the open doors of the truck, wondering what had gotten into the man. “I don’t think you understand,” she snapped. “I was sent here to get an interview with Colonel Allen P. Devin, USMC retired, period. I’ve done that. I need to get back to New York where I can properly cover this story with a follow-up piece.”

To her surprise, Cardosa shrugged. “Fine by me. Go. And don’t let the screen door bump you in the ass on your way out. Me, I’m staying here. This is where the story is. It’s where it needs to be covered from, not New York.”

“And who will you get to report this story?” she asked in the same haughty tone of voice that was so effective back in New York when dealing with unruly peons who didn’t know their place.

“I will,” Sarah Jennings offered as she stepped out of the shadow of the truck where she’d been watching this scene play out.

“You?” Porter spat incredulously as she rounded on the girl with deceptively innocent eyes. Jennings held the veteran journalist’s steady gaze without flinching.

When she realized the intern had no intention of backing down, Porter turned on Emerson, who was busily storing her camera back in its case. “What about you?” Porter all but growled. “Do you intend on staying here with the mad colonel and his collection of wing nuts?”

“Like John said, the news is here, not in Tucson or New York,” Emerson replied without bothering to look up from what she was doing. “Besides, if truth be known, I kind of like those wing nuts. They’re my kind of people.”

Grinning, Cardosa looked down at the enraged New York media diva from where he was seated even as he was reaching into the pocket of his trousers to fish around for the keys to the SUV. “Here,” he called out as he threw them onto the ground at Porter’s feet. “If you’re so all hell fired determined to leave, go. Tucson is that a’way,” he added as he pointed off into the distance.

Determined to have her way, Porter tried one last ploy. “You do know what’s going to happen here.”

“Yeah, I do,” Cardosa replied dryly. “And when it does, we’ll be here reporting on it, with or without you.” Then, leaning forward and craning his neck to see out the open door of the satellite truck where Jennings was standing and listening to their exchange, he chuckled before looking back at Porter. “If you want to know the truth, I wish you would go. I like working with the kid. She’s going places.”

It was more than what the man said that silenced Porter. It was her appreciation that in the world of broadcast media, careers were made by people who had the chutzpah to seize opportunities like this, just as surely as they tended to come crashing down around the ears of those who turned their backs on them.

Seeing she had no choice but to stay, Porter pivoted about on her heels and stormed off to the small but clean ten-by-twelve room that served as VIP quarters.

When he was sure she was out of earshot, Cardosa looked back over to where Jennings was still standing in the early evening darkness. “Sorry, kid. Looks like you’ll just have to wait a little longer for your big break.”

“That’s okay,” she replied while glancing over her shoulder to watch Porter as she stormed across the compound. Then, looking back at Cardosa, she flashed him an enigmatic little smile. “I’m sure something will come up.” With that, she headed back over to the compound’s operations center, hoping she’d be able to catch Maria Rivera and discuss an idea the head of the Arizona Home Guard’s media section had floated by her earlier in the day.

*World News Network Studios, New York City*

If Amy Porter wasn’t pleased by the way her interview with Devin had played out, Jan Fields-Dixon was. It was more than seeing a member of New York’s news elite taken down a peg by a media savvy interviewee. Jan was old school when it came to reporting the news, someone who believed a journalist’s one and only responsibility was to report the events they were reporting on, not shape or distort them to match their own views.

After leaving the control room from where she’d watched the interview, Jan made her way back to her office, closed the door, and took a seat at her desk. Glancing over at a row of clocks on the wall across from her desk, she fixed her gaze on the one set to Pacific standard, smiling to herself when she saw she wouldn’t be interrupting anything her daughter-in-law might be in the middle of and would be free to talk to her without needing to worry about her son hearing what they were discussing. Pulling the cell phone she used for personal and private calls out of the black, non-descript messenger bag that served as her purse, she scrolled through the list of contacts until she found the number belonging to Christina Dixon. Not only was she a woman Jan considered to be one of the best journalists she’d ever met who shared many of Jan’s views on journalism, Chris was tenacious, a quality that would be critical in the days ahead as the people who had initiated the events that had played out in Arizona earlier in the day scrambled to find a way of putting a smiley face on what could easily turn into a political and PR disaster. A disaster for an Administration enamored with creating a legacy for itself.

*Tucson, Arizona*

With the need to be at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base first thing in the morning where he would oversee the reception and marshaling of additional assets the Bureau and Homeland Security was sending in from across the U.S., Special Agent Steven Morelli gave serious thought to giving into his deputy’s insistence that he head home for a few hours. “You’ve been at it for forty-eight hours straight, living on little more than coffee, catnaps, and whatever there is in the break room vending machines,” Special Agent Sandra Fyre pointed out. “If you expect to be at the top of your game tomorrow, you need some serious down time. Besides,” she added as she made a show of wrinkling her nose, “you may not have noticed, but you’re starting to become a wee-bit ripe.”

As was often the case, she was right. Having worked flat out without a break to speak of during the run-up to the raid on the militia compound, followed by hours of harried activity in its aftermath, he was teetering on the edge. It was more than simple physical exhaustion. Watching a raid carried out in a manner he had advised against go as badly as it could have from afar had been difficult for Morelli, but not near as agonizing as the need to deal with a flood of orders, advice, recommendations, and demands for updates from the Phoenix office and agency heads and politicians in Washington.

And then there was the media. Whereas D.C.-based bureaucrats and politicians of every stripe could be fobbed off simply by informing them he had to rush off to an urgent meeting and hanging up the phone, reporters, journalists, bloggers, and news crews were all but unavoidable. They were everywhere. In a scene reminiscent of the eighth plague described in Exodus, they swarmed around the building where the field office was located. Like the heads of various agencies, most of whom Morelli was not answerable to, the members of the Fourth Estate demanded he provide them with answers he either could not—or was not at liberty—to disclose. Adding to the carnival-like atmosphere their presence created were activists representing a cornucopia of causes and organizations, contributing their own politically charged opinions, rumors, and speculation to the incessant chatter that passed as news being broadcast to all corners of the globe.

The need to get away from the office, if only for a few hours, was compelling. Seated at his desk, Morelli was going over the pros and cons of doing so in his head when, just before midnight, White House Chief of Staff Timothy Rowland called him directly. After peppering him with many of the same questions he had been doing his best to find answers for all day, Rowland then demanded to know why he, Morelli, had not gone down to the militia compound himself and taken charge. “Aren’t you the head honcho, the man who’s supposed to be running things?” Rowland asked in a sarcastic tone of voice that caused Morelli to all but snap. That he didn’t was due in large part to the incredulity he felt over the way the members of the administration were dealing with a crisis they had set in motion. But he was running out of discretion though. Trying to explain how things were done in the field to someone like Rowland was an exercise in futility, for he wasn’t after answers, he was looking for a scapegoat.

Realizing nothing he said would satisfy Rowland, Morelli sighed. “Things could have gone better.”

Following a protracted silence, Rowland growled. “That goes without saying. What the President needs to know is what you intend to do to sort this rat-fuck of yours out.”

It was Morelli’s turn to hesitate before answering. When he did, he avoided pointing out that the current situation he was dealing with wasn’t of his making. That would have accomplished nothing. Besides, Rowland did have a point, he was the special agent in charge. The botched raid had taken place on his watch and in a part of the country he was responsible for.

With no alternative, Morelli swallowed his pride as he promised to personally get back to Rowland as soon as he had answers to his question. “I will know more in a few hours once the additional personnel from the Bureau are on the ground here and I’ve had an opportunity to go over the current situation at the militia compound with Special Agent Ryder. Only then will we be able to come up with options I can forward to you and the Bureau.” He was tempted to add ‘options that make sense,’ butdismissed the idea, so that he could end this call as quickly as possible.

“I’ll be briefing the President at 8:00 AM Eastern,” Rowland replied crisply. “I expect to hear from you by seven.” With that, he hung up.

After slowly returning the phone’s receiver to its cradle, Morelli came to his feet and leaned over backward. “You’re getting too old for this shit,” he muttered to himself as he twisted and turned this way and that in an effort to work out some of the kinks in his back.

“I could have told you that,” Frye chuckled from the open door of his office.

“I hope you appreciate it’s not a good idea to sneak up on an old man like me,” Morelli replied as he straightened up. “You could give me a heart attack doing that.”

“I expect on a day like today that would be the least of your problems.”

“You’ve got that right. Listen,” he continued as he made his way around his desk to where his coat jacket was hanging. I’m going to take your advice and sneak out for a few hours. Call me if, and only if, there is a change in the situation at Devin’s compound. If Ryder should touch base with you, tell him he’s to do nothing other than observe and report until I get down there.”

“Any idea when that will be?” Frye asked as she stepped back and out of the way as Morelli left his office.

“None.”

With that, he slipped out of the building through a service entrance and headed home for a few hours of undisturbed sleep, a shower, and a change of clothes. Perhaps in the clear light of day, after he’d had an opportunity to let his brain regroup and catch up to the events of the last forty-eight hours would things start to look not nearly as bad as they did now, he reasoned as he was driving home. After all, this wasn’t the first time Federal agents found themselves dealing with a standoff. Given time, some distance, and an opportunity to let the severity of the situation sink-in, he was convinced the men and women members of the Arizona Home Guard would appreciate their position was untenable. They were, after all, reasonable people who had taken an oath to defend and uphold the constitution of the United States, just as he had.

The flip side of that argument *was* the nature of the people who had flocked to Allen Devin’s banner. Having reviewed the files of some of the more prominent members of the Guard and even met some of them, he knew they were not crazed domestic terrorists pursuing a radical agenda. Nor were they comic book villains thrusting for the blood of illegal aliens. Each and every one of them was an above average, intelligent person. In addition to being veterans with spotless service records, all were respected members of their communities. Outside of the usual traffic citations, none of them had a criminal record. Their numbers included business owners, ranchers, teachers, lawyers, IT specialists, and civil servants. One was even an ordained minister. Each and every one was a hardworking, taxpaying citizen with a family, the kind of people he met every day on the street, in stores, and at school events. And had he been completely honest with himself, he would have realized they were no different than himself and his own people.

No doubt, Morelli concluded as he pulled into the driveway of his suburban home, Allen Devin would milk the attention the media was showering on him for all it was worth for as long as he could in order to make a point before standing down. That he would submit to Federal authority after having accomplished that goal was a foregone conclusion, Morelli kept telling himself as he crept through the house, taking care not to wake his own children or disturb his wife as he undressed and slipped into bed. Until then, he would have to ignore the heated rhetoric of politicians and activists from both the left and the right—all of them out to take advantage of the situation and have their say. He would also need to avoid the media who would, in time, tire of this story and move on to one more exciting and sexier than this one. Only then would he be free to deal with Devin and bring the standoff to a quiet and peaceful end. As he was drifting off to sleep, he was sure of that much. It was, unfortunately, the only thing he was sure of right now. All he needed to do was to make it through the next few days without losing his cool and choking the ever loving shit out of a reporter.

The

Second

DAY

Chapter 9

*Fort Lewis, Washington State*

Tearing a page out of her husband’s manual on tactical doctrine, Chris Dixon took great care in deciding how and when she would inform him of her mother-in-law’s proposal and her decision. Having no wish to engage in a protracted row with Nathan the previous evening that might have upset the children, she waited until he was finishing his breakfast to broach the subject. “Your mother called yesterday,” she informed him in an offhanded manner as she was feeding the twins.

It was not so much what she said that caused Nathan to glance up at her from the bowl of oatmeal before him. It was her tone of voice, one that put him on notice something he wasn’t going to much care for was coming his way. “Oh? And what did she have to say?” he asked warily, well aware his stepmother would not take the time out of a busy news day in order to chit-chat with Chris unless she had something important to discuss with her, like a gig as a stringer covering the story unfolding down in Arizona.

“She asked how the children were doing and what we’ve been up to,” Chris replied without bothering to look over to where Nathan had put aside his spoon and eyed her like a hawk.

The idea of saying no before she even brought up the subject of her winging off to God-knows-where to cover a breaking news story, reminding her of responsibilities that were, in his mind, damned more important than keeping her hand in the game by renewing her press credentials from time-to-time was dismissed out of hand. Like his stepmother, Chris was fond of reminding him that even within the tightknit military community they were a part of, the concept of *Kinder, Kirche, Küche* had no place in Twenty-first Century America. He knew she had already taken into consideration how her leaving, even for a short time, would affect Wendy Marie and Little Scott. She was, after all, a caring and loving mother who would never think of compromising the happiness or wellbeing of her children for selfish reasons. At the same time, he also appreciated she was very much like his stepmother, a woman whose world encompassed more than home and hearth. His father had warned him on many occasions it was more than foolish to hold a woman like Chris back by pointing out that while the song of a caged canary might sound sweet to the ear, he doubted if it was a happy one.

With that thought in mind, Nathan pushed aside his unfinished bowl of oatmeal as he clasped his hands together, rested his forearms on the table before him, and leaned forward in a manner no different than that which he assumed when preparing to deal with a particularly important matter with any of his NCOs. “Where are you off to this time?” he asked, making no effort to moderate the disappointment he felt over having to yield, for he understood, better than Chris gave him credit for, what it was like to be raised by two dedicated parents whose professional responsibilities required them to drop everything at a moment’s notice and run off into harm’s way.

Relieved Nathan had chosen not to argue with her over a decision she’d already made, Chris thanked him with a big smile as she twisted about in her seat and faced him. “I don’t expect it to be but a few days,” she informed him. “I’ve already given Barbara a heads-up that I’ll be leaving later this evening.”

Ignoring the way his wife said she *would be* leaving rather than *might be,* he listened attentively as she pointed out Jan was sending her to Washington, D.C. and not Arizona where she suspected things were about to go to hell in double quick time. “At worse, the only hazards I imagine I’ll have to deal with are keeping from getting a broken nose from the doors that’ll be slammed in my face—or getting thrown in jail.”

Unable to help himself, Nathan chuckled. “If you do manage to run afoul of the law, again, it’ll be up to you to explain to the kids why their mommy needs to wear an ankle bracelet that beeps every time she goes to the commissary.”

The sound of a tiny hand slapping a highchair tray kept Chris from responding. Turning her attention back to her children, she scrunched up her nose. “Daddy’s being silly,” she cooed to them.

From where he was watching his wife finish feeding Wendy Marie and Little Scott, Nathan sighed. No, he told himself, he wasn’t being silly, just realistic, for he knew his wife far better than she liked to admit.

*Tucson, Arizona*

The chirping of his work cell phone jolted Morelli out of a sound sleep. Before answering, he instinctively checked the time displayed across the top of his phone just to make sure he hadn’t overslept. There was no need to bother asking who it was after clicking the answer button. He knew it would be Sandra Fyre. “What’s up?”

“You need to get in here, ASAP.”

Both the tone of his deputy’s voice and the curtness of her message swept away the last vestiges of sleep from Morelli’s tired brain. “Talk to me, Sandy.”

“The supervisor of the building’s security called up here a few minutes ago from the lobby and informed me there’s state police erecting barriers outside. At first he thought they were responding to our earlier request to help with keeping the media back and crowd control, that is until the trooper in charge entered the building and handed him a copy of an order signed by the governor that declares the building is to be closed, posthaste.”

It took all of Morelli’s willpower to keep from cursing for giving into his deputy’s suggestion that he go home and catch a few hours’ sleep. That he could very well find himself dealing with a second, even more ominous standoff, one in which he and his people were the besieged, was all but impossible to grasp. “Have you called the office in Phoenix and informed them yet?” he asked, ignoring his wife’s stirrings as he threw his legs over the edge of the bed.

“No.”

“Well why the hell not?”

Already exasperated from having to deal with the state troopers standing outside the locked doors of the FBI’s offices where she and the agents on duty had barricaded themselves, she snapped. “Because I called you first, like you told me.”

Assuming things could not possibly get any worse for him than they already were, after letting out an audible sigh and a muttering oath Frye couldn’t make out, Morelli saw no point in pressing his deputy. “Stall them as long as you can. I’ll call the Phoenix office and ask them if they know what in the hell is going on.”

Without waiting for her to acknowledge his orders, he came to his feet and hurriedly took to dressing, never once suspecting things were already well on their way to going from bad to downright disastrous.

*Near Fort Necessity, Arizona*

Having been forewarned of what was going on throughout the state, Sam Ryder was far better prepared than Morelli or Frye had been when a convoy of Arizona National Guard vehicles drove up to where he and the members of his team had withdrawn the day before. With everyone in his immediate chain of command waiting for clear instructions on how to respond to Governor Chris Burress’ order to close all Federal offices throughout Arizona, Ryder was on his own.

The idea of resisting, even if for no other reason than for show, never entered his mind. The last thing he or anyone else who had been involved in the previous day’s incident wished to do was make an already tense situation worse. Still, he wasn’t about to throw up his hands and meekly walk away from his assigned post without first demanding someone justify their actions.

When asked by what authority the National Guard captain in charge of the unit confronting him was operating under, the officer all but snickered. “I would have thought that was obvious,” the captain replied laconically. “I expect you’ve lived here long enough to know the people of this state don’t take kindly to watching outsiders go about killing someone like Hector Rojas, a man whose only crime was doing what the Federal government should be doing.”

Despite his determination to keep things from getting out of hand, Ryder drew himself up to his full height to glare at the National Guardsman. “As unfortunate as that man’s death was, he was interfering with the serving of an arrest warrant.”

The National Guard captain was unimpressed by Ryder’s efforts to overawe him with his physical stature or the point he was trying to make. Drawing himself up just as Ryder had, the captain placed his hands on his hips, leaned forward and looked up into Ryder’s eyes. “Bullshit.”

It took every ounce of Ryder’s strength to keep his anger in check as he returned the Guardsman’s scathing glare with one that more than matched it. Both could hear the sound of shuffling of feet and the distinctive rattle as their respective personnel brought their weapons to the ready.

Without taking his eyes off of Ryder, the National Guard captain drew back ever so slightly and assumed a relaxed position of attention. “Special Agent Ryder, pursuant to the order of the Governor of the State of Arizona, you and your people are to surrender your arms, climb into your vehicles and follow me to the state border where you will be free to go anywhere you wish, so long as it is not in Arizona. You have two minutes.”

Ryder was about to respond when the Guardsman manning the Cal .50 machine gun mounted on the top of the lead National Guard Humvee gave his weapon’s bolt a quick jerk back, chambering a round. Whether the person behind that weapon would actually fire didn’t matter. With tensions running high, and well aware how quickly a contentious situation could get out of hand, Ryder took a step back. Without looking away from the National Guard captain, he ever so slowly unslung his own weapon and lowered it to the ground by its sling before ordering his men to do likewise. Only later, when he saw the news after reporting to the FBI office in Albuquerque, New Mexico, did he become aware the confrontation between him and the National Guard earlier that morning had been filmed by the captain’s driver using his iPhone—before sending it to a pool of journalists who didn’t waste a single second broadcasting the unedited clip, to be the first to get it on the air.

Chapter 10

*Phoenix, Arizona*

After reading his prepared statement, Governor Burress made a show of acting as if he suddenly realized he had a few minutes to spare before addressing a hastily convened joint session of the state legislature. “Well, yes,” he muttered distractedly under his breath, low enough for the battery of microphones in front of him to pick it up as he dropped his gaze a moment. Then, looking up at the throng of journalists crowded cheek-to-jowl in the pressroom of the state capital building, he nodded his head. “Seeing that we have a minute or two before I need to address an emergency session of the state legislature, I don’t see why we can’t open the floor for questions.”

On hearing this, a shrilled chorus of questions thrown out by the assembled journalists, reporters, and correspondents shattered the silence of the antechamber. While most sought little more than an amplification to a comment the governor had already made, points that were perfectly clear to anyone who had been paying attention to what he had been saying, a few attempted to take this impromptu presser off and on to entirely new tangents. One in particular touched off a flurry of follow-on questions that caused a fair number of people in Washington who were watching to all but convulse.

Posed by Keith Hogan, who was from the Phoenix affiliate of World News Network, Amy Porter’s network, Governor Burress paused as he took to staring at Hogan for several long seconds before answering. Everyone assumed he was weighing how best to answer the question. The truth was, Burress was having to use the time to suppress a self-satisfied smirk, for what he was about to say would turn what some in the media had dubbed to be nothing more than a hissy fit by one state’s governor into something entirely different.

“Let me make one thing perfectly clear to you, Keith,” Burress began slowly in a tone of voice those familiar with the governor’s ways meant that he was deadly serious. “Though I issued the executive order that shut down those Federal offices where the raid on the Arizona Home Guard compound was planned as well as the facilities the FBI used to stage it, we are not alone. In taking action to curb what some have described as an unprecedented and unconstitutional over-reach of the Federal government, a response to Washington’s tyrannical policies that is long overdue, I have the support of the governors of our neighboring states, all save California.”

After a stunned silence during which the importance of what Burress had just said began to sink in, every reporter and journalist in the room started shouting out follow-up questions. The representative from Channel 5 News asked just what kind of support they were offering. A Fox News Network journalist wanted to know if the other governors were planning on shutting down Federal buildings in their states as well. A reporter from *The Arizona Republic,* unaware members of the state’s National Guard had been quietly assembling at their local armories, all but demanded to know if he, the governor, intended to mobilize them.

Even as he was raising his hands, motioning to the clamorous throng of journalists to quiet down so he could begin answering their questions, Burress couldn’t help but smile to himself. If “this” didn’t get the attention of the obnoxious little shits—who whispered in the ear of the President and the legions of unelected bureaucrats in Washington that they needed to take them seriously—nothing would. “This” was what would soon be referred to as the Revolt of the Governors.

*Fort Necessity, Arizona*

For Porter, watching the political firestorm Burress’ comment had set in motion on the satellite truck’s monitor was like being in the eye of a hurricane. All around her and the Tucson-based news crew she was saddled with were members of the Arizona Home Guard, who went about tending to various chores and duties in an unhurried, businesslike manner. It was as if the events playing out elsewhere at a breakneck speed were of little concern to them. With nothing to do until someone in New York got around to calling on her to report on the situation from her location, all she could do was monitor their network’s coverage as the rhetoric between Phoenix and Washington became ever more heated and strident.

Having achieved total surprise, Governor Burress had the initiative. In an early morning news conference broadcast live, he had presented his case for taking action to the citizens of Arizona. “In recent years we have seen a steady erosion of personal liberties and states’ rights as the Federal government continues to exercise extra-constitutional powers. By relying on an activist judiciary, executive orders, and an unchecked bureaucracy, the President has aggressively sought to replace the rule of law with governance by dictate. Efforts to check the onerous edicts that violate the Constitution through the courts and elections have proven futile. That is why today, in the wake of an egregious and unprovoked attack by agents of the Federal government on citizens of this state, I have ordered the closing of all Federal office buildings and facilities in Arizona, save those that are absolutely essential to the safety of the citizens of this state, such as the offices of the Border Patrol. It is my intent to keep them closed until such time as the President and Congress can assure me—and the people of Arizona—that they will respect the sovereign rights of this state and its citizens.”

Surprise and shock in Washington quickly gave way to a rapid-fire series of responses, few of which were particularly well thought out or coordinated. With border security being at the very heart of the crisis, one of the first directives the administration announced was an order for members of the Border Patrol throughout Arizona to stand down. Timothy Rowland, who had put forth that suggestion, was confident the resulting torrent of border crossers, seeking to take advantage of the situation, would cause Governor Burress to reconsider his actions. “If nothing else,” the White House Chief of staff told the President, “he’ll need to divert the National Guard and other state law enforcement assets to take the place of Border Patrol agents.”

What no one in Washington anticipated was how few of the Border Patrol agents obeyed that order. Their reasons for continuing with their duties varied. The head of one of the Border Patrol stations pointed out that, unlike the political appointees who ran the agency from within the Beltway, his people were dedicated professionals. “They understand what will happen if they walk away from their responsibilities,” he pointed out during an interview with a local TV news crew. “We live here. A day doesn’t go by that we see the results of a failed border policy. We’re tired of having our hands tied by politicians from other, faraway states who use the flood of illegal immigrants to score political points with their constituents, gain favor with special interest groups, or swell the ranks of an electorate beholden and dependent upon them in a manner no different than the way Tammany Hall exploited Irish immigrants in New York in the nineteenth century. Besides,” he added as a hint of a self-satisfied smirk tugged at the corner of his lips, “if nothing else is achieved by the governor’s actions, at least we’ll be free to do our job properly, if only for a while.”

*WNN Studios, New York City*

Border Patrol was not the only group of people defying an establishment they considered to be out of touch with the reality of people on the ground. In her own way, Sarah Jennings was ignoring the unbiased, evenhanded standards World News Network touted. The only reasons Jan allowed her rogue intern to get away with passing on the stories Maria Rivera was feeding her was that no one else, including Amy Porter, had been granted free rein to talk to any member of the Arizona Home Guard—or film those interviews wherever she chose to within the confines of their compound. In Jan’s professional opinion, the human interest stories Jennings was doing on the men and women who made up the Arizona Home Guard were invaluable. In addition to putting a human face on events unfolding in the American Southwest, they provided WNN’s viewers with an insight into why people no different from themselves were willing to follow a man like Allen Devin.

But not everyone at WNN agreed with her on this matter. This included her boss, Jake Brant. “There’s a lot of people who are expressing their displeasure with how that intern of yours has struck up a cozy relationship with the militia,” he informed Jan Fields-Dixon over her cell phone as she stood in the rear of the main control room for WNN’s news shows. “The optics look terrible.”

“From where I’m standing, the optics look just fine, Jack,” she replied as she ignored the peeved looks the harried producers and technicians kept giving her in the hope she would take herself and her cell phone somewhere else. “Would you give our viewers some credit? They’re savvy enough to know spin when they see it.”

“It’s not our viewers I’m concerned about,” Brant countered.

“What? Is the White House upset that we’re ruining the narrative their SPOX is trying to paint? You do realize the people in that compound aren’t the wacko nut jobs the press secretary is trying to make them out to be. I wouldn’t be the least bit surprised if I’ve met some of them either during my time in the field or at social gatherings when Scott was alive.”

“That’s just it, Jan,” Brant countered. “There are some folks on the executive board who think you’re not being objective.”

Having no wish to get into a row with him over a matter that cropped up from time to time, and eager to watch Jennings’ latest piece in its entirety before it was aired, Jan used a ploy she often relied on to end their exchange. “Listen Jack, I’d love to hear your thoughts on the matter, but at the moment we’re sort of busy here.”

Never knowing when she was being serious or simply using that line as an excuse to hang up on him, Brant let her go, but not without warning her first: “You need to tread softly.”

After slipping her cell phone into a side pocket of her messenger bag, Jan took a seat at the control panel next to one of the technicians. “Okay, let’s see what our own little desert fox has for us today.”

With that, the technician cued up Jennings’ latest batch of videos Cardosa had transmitted to them and the Tucson station that morning. Halfway through them, a producer who was standing behind Jan and viewing the video over her shoulder murmured her approval. “For an intern, she’s good.”

As much as she agreed with that statement, Jan wasn’t paying any attention to what Jennings or the militiaman she was interviewing was saying. Instead, her full attention was on what was going on in the background. The piece they were currently watching had been shot in the militia’s operations center. Having had the opportunity to spend time in a fair number of such facilities when she’d been reporting from the field, Jan could tell the one Allen Devin was relying on to keep abreast of the situation in Arizona and beyond was surprisingly sophisticated. “Do you realize how valuable these videos are to people who know what they’re looking at?” Jan declared midway through it.

Not fully understanding her point, the producer shrugged. “What the interviewee is saying pretty much sounds the same as what all the others have said.”

“I’m not talking about the interview. It’s where the interview is taking place and what can be seen during it. That facility and the equipment in its rival command and control setups are just like what the military use.”

After giving Jan’s comment some thought and switching his focus to the background, the producer grunted. “Well, I guess that’s to be expected. After all, Devin and the self-styled patriots he’s managed to gather around him are all ex-military.”

The temptation to point out that the people Devin had gathered around him were “patriots” was checked by an appreciation she needed to maintain an air of impartiality. Not everyone at WNN viewed members of the Arizona Home Guard in the same light as she did. Instead, she turned her attention back to taking a closer look at the impressive array of equipment the men and women of the Arizona Home Guard had at their disposal. If their collective skills sets and the weaponry at their disposal were just as sophisticated and up-to-date as the equipment she was seeing, she concluded, anyone sent in to take them down would have one hell of a time doing so.

Having no wish to dwell on that thought, Jan give her head a quick shake and came to her feet. “Send these pieces to the producers of the news room. Tell them to use them as they see fit.”

“What about the pieces Amy Porter did?” the producer asked as Jan was heading for the door. “Should I send them along as well or do you want to review them first?”

Without needing to give the producer’s question a second thought, Jan told him to send them along as well. “Make sure our studios in D.C. also get a copy. I want Chris to see them.”

With that, she made her way back to her office where she would wait for the call Porter was sure to make once she found out Christina Dixon was not only back on the job, but in Washington, D.C. where she wanted to be.

*The White House, Washington, D.C.*

“The time has come to quit screwing around people,” Timothy Rowland declared testily to the assembled department heads seated around the cabinet room’s conference table. “We meet with the President in two hours. When we do, he expects to hear options, viable options from each and every one one of you. Is that clear?”

In making this last point, he intentionally focused his full attention on the Admiral James Kincaid, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff who made no effort to check the disdain he felt for Rowland. That alone was enough to warn Rowland he would meet with fierce resistance from uniformed members of the armed forces if they were ordered to send troops up against a man Rowland had been informed they still considered one of their own.

Well aware of the animosity Kincaid had for Rowland, a dangerous state of affairs that could degenerate into a public row between the White House and the Joint Chiefs, Paul Hayes, the Secretary of Defense, buttonholed Rowland as he was leaving the situation room at the conclusion of the meeting. “Don’t push them,” he warned the President’s chief of staff.

Rowland had no need to ask who the *Them* were. “If I need to, I will.”

“You do appreciate if the media found out there was open dissension in the ranks, it could easily compromise our efforts to use a simple show of force to overawe the governors of other states who agree with what Burress is doing.”

Furrowing his brow, Rowland regarded Hayes for a moment. “Just what is it you’re trying to tell me?”

Unsure if Rowland was looking for him to spell out what he was saying or was simply being dense, Hayes sighed. “What I am trying to tell you is that if it comes to it, some of the generals may be reluctant to employ Federal troops against Devin.”

In no mood to argue with Hayes, or anyone else for that matter, Rowland drew himself to his full height, which still fell short of matching Hayes’ towering stature. Planting his fists on his hips, leaned forward, and glared. “They’ll damn well do what’s expected of them,” Rowland growled.

“They’re not like us, Tim. They’re not likely to turn on their own.”

“Are you telling me the military would refuse to follow the orders issued to them by their commander-in-chief?”

Hayes didn’t answer that question. Instead, he tried another approach. “It’s more than the military types I’m worried about. In case you haven’t noticed, there is a large portion of the American public who are already concerned about the way the President goes about exerting his authority every time he bypasses Congress through the use of executive action. Who knows how they will react if we send the Army against Devin and his people.”

Having already weighted the political fallout such a move would result in, and satisfied the Administration could weather it, Rowland brushed Hayes’ concerns aside with a dismissive wave of his hand. “Under the Insurrection Act the President is well within his right to employ the military to restore order in Arizona. It’s your job to make sure the Joint Chiefs and all their minions understand that. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got other, more pressing matters that demand my attention.”

With that, Rowland turned and walked away, leaving Hayes to wonder what could be more important than the idea of using combat troops against American citizens, citizens who had made it clear they had no intention of quietly submitting. The words one of the militiamen used to end his interview with a young female journalist in particular rang out clearly in Paul Hayes’ ears. “In April of 1775 Captain John Parker said it best when he and his fellow citizens stood up for their rights in the face of tyranny; *‘Stand your ground; don't fire unless fired upon, but if they mean to have a war, let it begin here.*’ It is a sentiment, Ms. Jennings, every man and woman here share." If Rowland didn’t understand what was really going on in Arizona, he did, for that shot had been fired. Now all that remained to be seen was whether Colonel Allen Devin and his band of militia would follow in the footsteps of their forefathers, the same forefathers who had created the government Timothy Rowland was part of, by turning the world upside down.

*Fort Necessity, Arizona*

The rapidity of events unfolding in an age dominated by the Internet left old guard doctrinaires like Rowland and Hayes scrambling to catch up to events being driven by a man who knew how to employ technology a twenty-first-century warrior had at his disposal. Even as the President’s most trusted advisors were debating and arguing over how best to deal with a crisis they had set in motion, a select group of men and women were hard at work tapping into the same social network ISIL used so effectively to spread their message and mobilize legions of sympathizers. All were highly trained professionals operating from a facility that rivaled Cyber Command and the NSA, organizations they had once been part of. Unlike Captain Parker, the volley they unleashed in response to what they considered to be an unprovoked attack by the Federal government came in the form of emails, prepared podcasts, announcements posted to websites, and entries to blogs Devin and his surrogates regularly contributed to. Every electronic missive was carefully worded in a manner that would keep it from being deleted by the filters various social networks relied on to censor unwanted or dangerous messages as well as keywords and phrases the NSA’s automated system cued on. Unlike the wild volley of one-ounce lead balls Captain Parker’s militia company fired, the small but well trained and disciplined cyber warfare section Devin commanded always hit their mark.

From the desk where she was monitoring their activities, Karen Stone looked over to where Devin was watching. “You do appreciate it won’t take the NSA long to figure out what we’re doing. Fact is, I’m rather shocked they haven’t shut us down already.”

Devin chuckled as he made his way over toward her. “Obviously you’ve never worked inside the Beltway or had to deal with politicians who are incapable of making a decision without first consulting the polls. We have plenty of time to accomplish what we need to.”

Stone drew in a deep breath. “I hope so,” she muttered as she let it out.

“Hope, Major, is not a sound basis on which to base an operation.” Then, after placing his hand on Stone’s shoulder in an effort to reassure her, Devin made ready to leave. “Keep at it as long as you can. I’ll have Maria check in with you in an hour to update you with what the media hacks are reporting so you can add it to the information your people are putting out.”

“Roger that, Sir.”

Satisfied things were playing out exactly as he had anticipated, Devin pivoted about and headed out into the cool night air where he would spend a few minutes alone to collect his thoughts and relax before turning his attention to the next item on his agenda.

The

Third

DAY

Chapter 11

*Washington, D.C.*

The ease with which Chris was able to set aside her domestic responsibilities and step back in front of the glaring lights of a portable TV camera came as no surprise to anyone who had worked with her. When asked by Keith Hogan, a correspondent for the *Washington Times* she’d often collaborated with in the past, how she managed to hop from one to the other, Chris gave her hair a quick toss and smiled. “It’s not all that difficult, really. Knowing I’d be a nervous wreck if I worried about what the kids were up to, I simply set all thoughts of home and hearth aside to focus on the assignment. When I’m in the field, from the moment I wake up in the morning until I’m too exhausted to go on anymore, I throw myself into whatever it is I’m covering.”

“Yeah, right,” Hogan snickered. “Here,” he added as he brought his right hand up and pointed its index finger toward her. “Pull my finger and tell me another one.”

After sharing a good laugh over his response, the two journalists got down to business. “Okay Keith, bring me up to speed. Who’s doing what to whom?”

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While her daughter-in-law was making the rounds and tapping into her network of fellow journalists and contacts in preparation for a story she was scheduled to file later in the day, Jan was busy in New York defending her decision to bring Chris onboard, rather than recall Amy Porter from Arizona and send her to Washington. “Amy is where she needs to be, where the action is, or will be once the President decides what he’s going to do,” Jan patiently explained to Larry Carter, the network’s senior producer and Porter’s staunchest ally.

When asked if she really believed the President would move against the militia compound, it took all of Jan’s strength to keep from groaning. “Come on, Larry. You can’t be *that* naive. Do the names Ruby Ridge, Waco, and Bunkerville ring a bell?” After pausing to give the matter some thought, Carter dropped the matter even though he suspected there was something else behind Jan’s reasons for keeping Porter in Arizona. Instead, he turned his attention to other, more important concerns he had over the way the network was covering the story, in particular why reports filed by a mere intern were being highlighted at the top-of-the-hour news segments.

Like her decision to keep Porter in Arizona, Jan’s preference for Sarah Jennings’ stories were part of an effort to knock the network’s darling down a notch or two. It was something she would never think of admitting to anyone, not even to her own daughter-in-law who would have done a damned better job in Arizona than either Porter or Jennings. Chris herself had made this point when she was discussing the matter with Jan. “Porter isn’t suited for the kind of reporting she’ll need to do in Arizona. I am.”

“Are you questioning my judgment?” Jan asked her daughter-in-law, feigning incredulity.

“No. Just your motivation.”

“Christina Dixon, do you think for one minute I would allow my personal feelings to interfere with how this network covers such an important story?”

“When it comes to keeping the mother of your grandchildren out of harm’s way, yes?” Chris declared crisply.

Knowing her daughter-in-law knew her better than she often gave her credit for, Jan gave up trying to convince her otherwise. Instead, she simply asked Chris if she was in.

“Of course I am,” Chris replied as if she’d just been asked the silliest question. As to what really lay behind the assignments she was being given and why Jan was keeping Porter in Arizona, Chris understood even in dire circumstances, people were still people, susceptible to all the petty foibles that plague the species. Like her mother-in-law, it was a trait Chris took advantage of when covering a story.

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After spending the morning making the rounds of the usual places journalists assigned to cover breaking news in the nation’s capital gathered, Chris began to reach out to her old contacts, people inside the administration, those who were part of various letter agencies, or were serving officers she’d met when Nathan had been assigned to the Pentagon. One of the first people she called on was Emmitt DeWitt, an officer whose career path frequently crossed her husband’s and was, at present, one of five military aides to the President.

“It’s not nearly as glamorous or exciting as the title makes it out to be,” he admitted to Chris over a quick lunch at the Old Post Office Pavilion. “Most of the time I find myself sitting on my ass, clutching the football while everyone you’d be interested in is sitting on the other side of a closed door doing whatever it is they do all day.”

“How in the world did you ever wind up with that gig?” Chris asked as she toyed with her chef’s salad.

DeWitt chuckled. “I asked my branch manager over at personnel that very same question. Do you know what he said? After pausing a good minute or two, he told me ‘into everyone’s life, a little rain must fall.’ ”

After sharing a good laugh over this, DeWitt turned serious. “Speaking of bad luck, I have to ask you not to contact me again, at least while I’m assigned to the White House.”

Chris didn’t need him to say another word. She was well aware that even in the best of times, officers assigned to accompany the President wherever he went, carrying the nuclear codes that authorized the release and use of America’s nuclear arsenal were subject to close scrutiny by any number of people, official and unofficial. It only took a single indiscretion, innocuous or not, to get thrown off the detail and, as a result, put an end to an officer’s military career. With that in mind, she turned to another subject, one she was just as interested in. “So tell me, how have you been bearing up?”

Happy to be moving onto another topic, DeWitt grunted. “Sometimes I feel like a long tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs. You know how the people in the administration feel about us.”

Chris understood the “us” referred to anyone in uniform.

After an awkward moment, DeWitt started to fill the silence by asking how Nathan was doing.

“About as well as any grunt who’s serving as the operations officer of a ranger battalion can be,” Chris replied.

DeWitt let out a derisive snort. “Do me a favor. Next time you see him, tell him he’s one lucky son-of-a-bitch.”

Understanding what was behind DeWitt’s comment, Chris gave him a sympathetic little smile. “With everything going on these days, I’m sure you’ll get your chance to strap on your battle rattle again and play John Wayne.” Then, wishing to change the subject before DeWitt had a chance to dwell on a posting even she felt was important, but totally unsuited for a muddy boots soldier like DeWitt, she asked him about his wife and children.

Flashing Chris a bright smile, he took to regaling her with stories about his family and the trials of raising two energetic boys. “You don’t know how lucky you are that one of yours is a girl.”

On hearing this, Chris cocked a brow. “Oh? Well, let me tell you something mister, it would only take ten minutes alone with Wendy Maria to change your tune on that score. She takes after her father.”

DeWitt laughed. “Not according to Nate. He says she’s her mother’s daughter.”

“And you believe him?”

“Faster than I believe it whenever a journalist says ‘off the record.’ ”

Putting down her fork, Chris folded her hands on the table before her and gave DeWitt a mock glare. “Why do I take abuse from you?”

DeWitt gave her a wink. “Because Nate’s not here for me to pick on.”

*The Pentagon, Arlington, Virginia*

Across the Potomac, in an office adjoining one Nathan had occupied while serving as a junior aide-de-camp to the Chief of Staff of the Army, General Samuel Morrison sat slouched down in his executive office chair with his hands clasped over his midsection. In much the same way his predecessor had whenever he had the need to take a moment and think, he was staring out the window, mulling over a problem he and his peers had often discussed in private.

The idea of employing ground combat troops on American soil against Americans was more than unsettling. Whenever he was required to consider that contingency during planning sessions and exercises, the images of a combat engineer vehicle tearing its way through the Branch Davidian compound played over and over in his mind like a looped film clip. Philosophically, he understood the President was not only well within his rights to use the Army in an emergency, but from time to time circumstances all but dictated it. And whether it was in response to a natural disaster such as Hurricane Katrina, the dispersing of the Bonus Army in 1931, or safe guarding the Little Rock Nine when state and local officials refused to do so, there were times when the Army was the only force the President had at his disposal that could be relied on to tackle a difficult and, all too often, onerous task. With the adjutant general of the Arizona National Guard refusing to respond to calls from the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the mission of containing and, if necessary, suppressing the revolt Devin and his people were in the process of fermenting had fallen to the United States Army.

What concerned Morrison was an appreciation that even if Colonel Devin and his followers could be coerced into peacefully submitting to a military show of force, the reputation of the Army—an institution Morrison had devoted his entire adult life to and loved with a passion only a soldier could understand—would be sullied in the eyes of a large portion of the American public.

If that had been the only issue in play, he would have issued the necessary orders without hesitation, personally distasteful as that would have been. Nor was the legality and necessity of employing Federal troops his only concern. The Insurrection Act as amended in 2007 gave the President the authority to use the military in a situation such as the one the President was facing.

But what really concerned Morrison were the instructions the SecDef himself had issued and what the troops ordered to go toe-to-toe with Devin and his people would do when they received their marching orders. Members of the Arizona Home Guard were not wild-eyed crazies or fanatical terrorists. As the reports being filed by the pair of journalists WNN had imbedded with them were making perfectly clear, each and every man and woman who belonged to Devin’s little band were veterans, patriotic Americans no different than the soldiers he’d be sending in against them.

“No,” Morrison thought. He corrected himself. That was wrong. Whereas a majority of his lower ranking enlisted had never heard a shot fired in anger, if the information he had concerning the members of Devin’s militia was to be believed, every one of them were combat veterans. They had undergone their trial by fire. In doing so, they had learned how to master the fear that closing with the enemy and engaging them gave rise to. Even more disconcerting was an appreciation that more than a few of the senior NCOs and officers not only had served with or knew members of the Arizona Home Guard, they were sympathetic to the stated aims of the Guard. What would happen, Morrison wondered, if the troops he dispatched to Arizona went over to Devin?

“You’re prevaricating, Morrison,” the general muttered to himself under his breath, repeating an admonishment his first company commander had often used whenever he felt the 2nd Lieutenant Morrison was hesitating to carry out a particularly odious order. Only the hope that the mere threat of military action against the Arizona Home Guard would be sufficient to cower them overcame his reluctance. That Colonel Allen Devin, U.S.M.C. was not the kind of man who could be easily intimidated with nothing more than a threat or a show of force was set aside as Morrison straightened up in his chair, pivoted it around, and called out to his secretary through the open door of his office to put a call through to Lieutenant General Alex Bohrn, commander of the XVIII Airborne Corps. “Once you’ve got him on the line, let the DESOPS know I need to see him, ASAP.”

Chapter 12

*Fort Necessity, Arizona*

The hint of a smile slowly began to soften the taut expression Willy Davis wore like a mask when concentrating. “I’m in,” he proclaimed without taking his eyes off the monitor displaying a real-time image of the Arizona Home Guard’s compound from an altitude of 30,000 feet set side by side with another image tracking digital flight data. “What now?”

When Davis’ immediate supervisor didn’t respond, Devin glanced over to where that former Air Force officer was standing. “What do you think, major?”

Bryant Czoski hesitated as he once more went over the options he’d laid out to Devin once Davis had managed to hijack control of the Air Force RQ-4 Global Hawk belonging to the 12th Reconnaissance Squadron out of Grand Forks. Having been a member of that squadron, he knew how the pilot flying the drone circling overhead would respond when he realized he was no longer in control of his aircraft. There’d be a brief moment of confusion, followed by panic. Eventually the pilot’s training would kick in. After scanning his instruments in an effort to see if he could pinpoint the problem, he’d quickly run through the emergency procedures that addressed the situation he was faced with. As each step he took to resolve the problem failed, dismay and frustration would set in.

Glancing over his shoulder to where Devin was watching, Czoski wondered if he should run down the options that were available to them. It wasn’t that he thought the Colonel had forgotten any of them. Devin’s memory for such things was superlative. What was driving his delay in making a final call were the consequences they, Davis, Devin and himself, would incur. To use a well-worn phrase, “this was no drill.” There would be no do-overs, no resets. What they were about to do was very real, as would be the price they would pay if they lost their war against the Federal government.

Realizing the former drone pilot was waiting for him to say something, Devin cleared his throat. “You do realize we’ve already crossed a line there’s no turning back from, major,” Devin intoned evenly as he watched Davis study how the pilot in Grand Forks was flying the UAV circling above them.

“I do, sir,” Czoski finally replied while he studied the digital display showing the drone’s instruments. “While hacking into the drone’s uplink is, in itself, a major Federal offense, hijacking the bird and flying it into the ground will be an open act of rebellion against the government that all of us here took an oath to serve.”

Devin had no need to ask the former Air Force major why he was taking this opportunity to point this out. In the wake of the standoff with the FBI he had had to weigh that very same question over and over again, struggling with the trepidations he imagined Czoski was wrestling with. Were it just him, Devin had little doubt he’d press ahead, consequences be damned. But it wasn’t just him. Every man and woman who’d thrown their lot in with him would pay a terrible price if things did not play out as he expected. Dealing with the burden of command, making decisions that would extract a terrible price from people he was responsible for was nothing new to Devin. Raising his hand against his fellow countrymen, even if it was only a drone pilot safely tucked away in a control room hundreds of miles away was something very different.

Realizing the time to engage in a philosophical debate had long since passed, and in an effort to move things along, Devin gave his head a quick shake before turning his full attention to the situation at hand. “We’ve been over this before, major. What’s the problem?”

With nothing more than a quick blinking of his eyes, Czoski set aside the last of his reservations and turned to the issue at hand. “Simply taking control of the drone would accomplish little more than demonstrating we have the capability to do so and nothing more,” he explained to Devin in an unhurried businesslike monotone. “Neither would bringing it down somewhere out in the boonies since no one, save the drone operators and their chain of command, know the Air Force have already deployed drones, an act some could argue was a prelude to direct military action against us. Crashing it on live TV, on the other hand, would not only get a rise out of folks back in Washington, it would give pause to the Joint Chiefs, causing them to wonder what else we’re capable of.”

Devin nodded. “I expect it would.”

“Then, there are the optics Maria would be able to exploit without much trouble,” Czoski continued after a brief pause. “It wouldn’t take any great leap of logic to make the argument that the Administration is targeting American citizens using the same weapons they use to kill Islamic terrorists on the other side of the world.”

Despite the seriousness of the discussion, Devin could not suppress a cynical chuckle. “That’s right up Captain Rivera’s alley. I can see her now, standing in front of the blond intern who’s latched onto her using the ‘hands-up, don’t shoot’ defense.”

Czoski didn’t share the humor the Colonel somehow managed to find in a situation that was, for him, rife with all sorts of risks, none of which were good, save one. Slowly, he made a quarter turn in place until he was facing Devin. “I expect a demonstration such as that would cause those who have thus far been sympathetic to our cause to rethink their support,” he pointed out to Devin in an effort to make him think hard before making a final decision.

In response, Devin took to pinning Czoski with a no-nonsense stare he often relied on to serve notice he would brook no further discussion on the issue. “The time has come for them to decide whether they’re with us, or against us. If this doesn’t do it, I don’t know what will, short of storming the White House.” Then, after coming to his feet, Devin slowly scanned the faces of the militiamen who had been watching and listening to the exchange between him and Czoski. “From this point on,” he declared in a loud, clear voice, “I expect each and every man and woman here to abide by the words Georges Jacques Danton had used to whip up his fellow Jacobites during the height of the French Revolution. *Audacity, more audacity, always audacity.*”

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The idea of trooping out to the edge of the plateau on which the militia compound was located in the midafternoon heat just to hear a lecture on the military significance of holding the high ground did not appeal to Amy Porter. No doubt, she told herself, whatever the militiaman had to say would be like so much else she and the annoying little intern were being fed. It was all bogus information intended to intimidate or mislead members of the Administration who, she suspected, were scrambling to come up with a plan to take Allen Devin and his minions down. Still, she knew that not doing the piece was unadvisable. Porter needed to remind people back at WNN that she was still there. To go silent, even for a short period, would leave Jan Fields little choice but to fill the airtime with stories from other journalists or stage a round-table discussion between talking heads and people who fancied themselves experts, but whose only real expertise was eating up airtime by speculating.

After putting on something of a show, debating whether they should bother doing the piece with Cardosa who was always in favor of taking advantage of whatever opportunity came their way to make a live broadcast, Porter had suddenly turned to Jennings. “Why don’t you do it?”

Having managed to get a fairly good handle on the way Porter operated, the eager young intern with big, bright eyes and a mind that was as cunning as Porter’s did not hesitate. She knew the veteran journalist was fobbing off what was nothing more than a background piece of no real significance to the unflattering narrative of Devin’s militia Porter had been working to create. The reason behind the woman’s decision not to do the piece didn’t matter to her. Jennings knew that at this point in her career there was no such thing as a trivial, throwaway piece not worth her time. Every second she stood in front of the camera was another chance to show the network’s management what she was capable of. With that in mind, after flashing Porter an overly pretentious smile and thanking her profusely for the opportunity, she and Samantha Emerson linked up with Devin’s deputy (that Maria Rivera had introduced them to) and tromped off to the edge of the compound. From there they would have a commanding view of several small hills that lie several kilometers from it, across open ground dotted by scrub brush and pathetic excuses for trees—their growth stunted by the glare of the hot Arizona sun.

With Jennings trying hard to appear as if she were interested in what LTC Aaron Brindle, retired, was telling her, Emerson was the first to hear a faintly familiar sound . When she finally realized what it was, she did her best to keep from jiggling the camera or shifting it away from Jennings and Brindle as she pulled her eye away from the camera’s eye piece and began to look around, searching for the distinctive whine of a jet engine that was growing louder by the minute.

It took Jennings a moment to notice Emerson’s inexplicable behavior out of the corner of her eye. At first she tried to ignore it. Only when the sound that was distracting her cameraman became too loud for even her to ignore did she begin to surreptitiously glance off in the same direction Emerson was looking. With the same presence of mind that had allowed her to keep up a running narrative on that first day’s series of explosions, when Jennings caught sight of the drone streaking toward them, she thrust her arms out, and pointed up at the object that was now clearly visible to her, Emerson, Cardosa, and the production crew in New York.

Without asking for permission or alerting the show then in progress, the producer at the darkened, air-conditioned WNN control room in the center of Manhattan switched from taping the feed from Arizona to broadcasting it live.

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Only when he was sure the journalists out in the compound had spotted the drone and had reoriented their camera on it did Czoski order Davis to execute a series of last-minute maneuvers that would leave no doubt in anyone’s mind that the crash they were about to stage was intentional. “We don’t want some Air Force spox trying to tap dance around this by claiming it was a mechanical malfunction,” he muttered to no one in particular.

Davis, who was ready for this, proceeded to bring the drone as close to the ground as he dared before executing a full loop. At its completion, he brought the drone back to level flight. Then, with a quick backward jerk on his joystick, he forced the drone into a near vertical climb before shoving the joystick forward until it hit the mechanical stops.

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Not knowing what to say, Jennings stood rooted to the spot, watching the drone’s graceful maneuvers. Fortunately, Emerson was not over awed by what she was seeing in the least. With a steadiness born from years of experience, she kept her camera trained on the drone as it made its final plunge, smoothly zooming in at just the right moment and capturing for all the world to see how easy it was to turn a $22 million state-of-the-art unmanned surveillance aircraft into a smoldering pile of junk.

*Fort Bragg, North Carolina*

Like everyone else who was keeping one eye on the news in Arizona, Lieutenant General Alex Bohrn, commander of the XVIII Airborne Corps, had watched replays of the drone crash and listened to the brief statement a DoD spokesman read to the journalists who covered the Pentagon. Unlike the journalists and the talking heads who relied on speculation to put events of the day into some sort of context—men who couldn’t find their ass with their own hands—he knew that everything the female major was telling them was pure grade A, government-inspected bullshit.

The Global Hawk had not suffered from a mechanical malfunction before augering into the ground like a lawn dart. Even to a man who often complained he was part of a dying breed of muddy boots warriors, that much was obvious. What Bohrn didn’t know was whether Allen Devin had orchestrated the filming of the crash as nothing more than a demonstration of what his people could do, or meant it as a warning. And while the email he’d received from an old friend via a personal email account was ostensibly an appeal to his honor as an officer who had pledged to defend and uphold the Constitution against all enemies, its purpose was the same. Devin and the people flooding social media with similar admonishment to serving officers and senior NCOs—in an effort to sow the seeds of doubt, not only of the wisdom and legality of taking up arms against the Arizona Home Guard and those Americans who stood with them, but of the moral obligations all members of the uniformed services had to the oath they and those who had gone before them had taken—were the same men and women who had shed their blood to secure the rights and privileges all Americans enjoyed.

Were it not for a section of the email that recited a portion of the speech General Douglas MacArthur had delivered to the corps of cadets at West Point in 1962, Bohrn would have dismissed it, just as he was obliged to ignore the implied threat behind the crashing of the drone. Those words, however, and the message they conveyed could not be easily brushed aside, not by an officer like Bohrn. After issuing his initial planning guidance to his staff, which included a warning order to both the commanding general of the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions, Bohrn sat bolt upright in his seat as he had often done when he was a plebe at West Point and took up the page containing the text of Devin’s email. With his staff looking on in silence, and his divisional commanders listening in on their speakerphones, Bohrn read aloud General Douglas MacArthur’s admonishment to the cadets who had willingly taken it upon themselves to assume the burden MacArthur was setting aside.

*“Others will debate the controversial issues, national and international, which divide men’s minds; but serene, calm, aloof, you stand as the nation’s war-guardian, as its lifeguard from the raging tides of international conflict, as its gladiator in the arena of battle.*

*For a century you have defended, guarded, and protected traditions of liberty and freedom, of right and justice. Let civilian voices argue the merits or demerits of our processes of government; whether our strength is being sapped by deficit financing, indulged by federal paternalism grown too mighty, by power groups grown too arrogant, by politics grown too corrupt, by crime grown too rampant, by morals grown too low, by taxes grown too high, by extremists grown too violent; whether our personal liberties are as thorough and complete as they should be. These great national problems are not for your professional participation or military solution. Your guidepost stands out like a ten-fold beacon in the night, Duty, Honor, Country.*

*You are the leaven which binds together the entire fabric of our national system of defense. From your ranks come the great captains who hold the nation’s destiny in their hands the moment the war tocsin sounds. The Long Gray Line has never failed us. Were you to do so, a million ghosts in olive drab, in brown khaki, in blue and gray, would rise from their white crosses thundering those magic words, Duty, Honor, Country.”*

When he was done, Bohrn looked up from the page he was holding and, with deliberateness that unnerved even the most battle hardened among them, he fixed each and every member of his staff with a long, lingering stare. When he had finished doing so, he stood up, causing all those in the corps conference room to spring to their feet. “Gentlemen, that is all.” With that, the commanding general of the soldiers who had been ordered to suppress what was being labeled as an insurrection against the federal government came about sharply and left the room, leaving in his wake senior officers who were more than a little puzzled and confused. It was a state of affairs that did not last long.

The

Fourth

DAY

Chapter 13

*The White House, Washington, D.C.*

Stunned by what he was hearing, Timothy Rowland slammed his hands on the desk before him, palms down, and half rose out of his seat as he screamed at the speakerphone in front of him. “What the hell do you mean they’re refusing to obey your orders?”

With a deliberateness that only served to further enflame an already infuriated Rowland, General Morrison repeated his previous statement. “I said, General Bohrn has declined the order.”

“What the *fuck* difference does it make what you call it?” Rowland snapped. “The bastard has just told us, and by extension the President of the United States, to fuck off.”

After a long, tense moment, Admiral Kincaid came up on the line. “I don’t think you appreciate the situation, Mister Rowland. General Bohrn . . .”

Rowland didn’t allow the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs to finish. “Oh, I appreciate the situation,” he thundered. “I appreciate that if you don’t get this sorted out in the next fifteen minutes, the lot of you will be, will be . . .” It took Rowland a moment to think of a suitable threat that would cause a military man to quake in his boots. When he did, he launched into a tirade that would have earned him the admiration of a Paris Island drill sergeant.

The men he was speaking to, however, were not fresh-faced Marine recruits. Each and every one of them had, for thirty years or more, served their country, enduring hardships few Americans could even imagine, much less tolerate. Reaching out from his seat at the Pentagon, Admiral Kincaid hit the mute button on the speakerphone sitting in the center of the small conference table in his office and turned down the volume. After easing back, and with a well-practiced and purposeful manner he had often used to convey to officers he had commanded in the past the seriousness of the venture they were about to embark upon, he looked about the table. His steady, unflinching gaze was met and returned by each of the senior officers who represented the uniformed armed services. “Gentlemen, if any of you have any reservations concerning my decision to stand by General Bohrn and the officers of the XVIII Airborne Corps, now is the time to say so.”

All understood the consequences of what they were about to do. Yet none wavered. With nothing more than a nod, Kincaid waited until Rowland had, by necessity, paused in order to catch his breath. After clicking off the mute button and turning the speakerphone’s volume back up, the Admiral filled the brief silence with a short but clear statement that all present had agreed to beforehand, one that left Rowland utterly speechless. “Please inform the President we serve at his pleasure.”

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Like a shadow that was always there, but seldom taken note of, Emmitt DeWitt bore witness to everything that went on around him. Normally he heard little of what went on behind the closed doors of the cabinet room as the important issues of the day were discussed, debated, and argued. On this morning, however, a person would have to be stone-cold deft not to hear enough to understand the situation and DeWitt, despite two tours of duty in Iraq where he had earned his first Purple Heart when an IED had flipped his Humvee, was anything but. What he wasn’t able to ascertain from what little he could hear through closed doors that muffled the heated debate, he was able to piece together from snippets of exchanges he caught as harried lower-tier White House staffers scurried to and fro, either to gather information for the President and the people he was meeting with, or find someplace where they could hunker down out of sight and mind and wait out the tempest—the one who had put an end to the early morning calm DeWitt enjoyed after spending an entire night ready to carry out a duty he prayed he’d never be called on to perform.

When the door of the cabinet room swung open with a bang, DeWitt instinctively clutched the leather covered metallic briefcase in his lap as he always did, ready to come to his feet if the President’s movements required him to follow. When only the President’s chief of staff, followed closely by the secretary of defense, together with the directors of Homeland Security and the NSA emerged and filed by without giving him a second thought, DeWitt relaxed his grip. For the first time since drawing an assignment that took him away from the sort of duty a soldier like him relished, he found himself thanking his lucky stars he was where he was and not, he suspected, in a position like Nate Dixon. He wouldn’t have to wrestle with his conscience if the battalion Nate was with was tasked with carrying out the mission the entire chain of command of the XVIII Airborne Corps had declined. Getting up close and personal with suicidal Hajis hell bent on becoming martyrs was one thing. DeWitt had no problem with that. If truth be known, like most of his peers, he wished he had been given an opportunity to finish a war he and his fellow officers believed they were on the cusp of winning.

Being sent to deal with Americans at bayonet point, fellow veterans no different from himself, was something altogether different. What he would do if he was ordered to take down members of the Arizona Home Guard was a question he would not need to answer. He had his orders, orders he could follow without reservation, without hesitation. Even if someone needed to access the codes in the briefcase he held on his lap, unlocking access to the nation’s nuclear arsenal, he had no doubt he would be able to do so. That grim thought, as terrible as the consequences of what would happen if the day ever came when he would need to turn the codes over to the President for his use was, at this moment, a comfort to him.

*Fort Lewis, Washington State*

Being jolted out of a sound sleep by a ringing phone at oh-dark-thirty was way up on Nathan Dixon’s list of the top ten things capable of rattling him, especially when the ringtone was the one he set for his wife and she was off covering a story for his mother’s news network. As tempting as it was to roll over and ignore the cheerful little tune that had catapulted him from a blissfully dreamless sleep, Nathan knew Chris would not call unless something was wrong or, more likely than not, she wanted something she thought she couldn’t ask him and get a straight, no bullshit answer from him during the day while he was at the office and within earshot of his subordinates.

Without bothering to sit up or turning on the lamp on the nightstand, Nathan blindly groped about until he found his cell phone. After taking care to hit the glaring green ‘accept’ key that lit up the dark room, he put the phone to his ear. “Yeah.”

His wife’s overly cheerful greeting stood in shape contrast to his near incomprehensible muttering. “Hi Honey. How are things?”

“They’ll be a damn sight better after a couple more hours of sleep,” Nathan growled.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Did I wake you?” Chris replied in an appropriately surprised tone of voice.

Rather than point out she, of all people, knew how to convert the hour of the day from one time zone to another, he simply asked her what she wanted.

This time the surprise her tone of voice betrayed was real. “Are you trying to tell me you don’t know what’s going on at Fort Bragg?”

Chris had no need to say another word. Like a thunderclap, Nathan knew what had happened, or thought he did, for the previous evening, when he had checked in with his battalion commander before leaving for home, Lieutenant Colonel Walter Shire had asked him to enter his office, close the door behind him, and take a seat. Normally those instructions were a prelude to a philosophical discussion or a conversation that was to be shared with no one outside Shire’s office. There were times, however, when Shire, who had never stepped foot inside the Pentagon, wished to pick Nathan’s brain, playing What If games with him, for Nathan was fresh from a tour of duty in Puzzle Palace on the Potomac. With the situation in Arizona going south at an alarming rate, Nathan knew without needing to ask what his colonel had on his mind, for he had been mulling over the same question after watching Colonel Allen Devin’s people seize control and bring down an Air Force drone in a most spectacular manner.

“Nathan, are you still there?” Chris’ voice reeled him in from a replay of the discussion he had had with Shire.

“Yeah, Hon, I’m still here. Are you going to tell me what’s going on?”

Her husband’s question was all she needed to hear, for it told her his unit was not involved in what a rival network was calling the revolt of the generals. After whispering a silent prayer of thanksgiving, she instructed him to turn on the TV. “Unless someone comes up with something that trumps my piece on the crisis du jour, I’ll be reporting live in ten minutes.”

After taking a quick glance over at the clock on the night stand and deciding he had enough time to take care of his personal needs as well as check in on the children, he bade her good bye. “You take care of yourself, Chris. And try not to get in trouble or do anything stupid.”

“Nathan Alexander Dixon, you know me better than that.”

“Yeah, I do. That’s why I’m telling you.”

“Okay, I’ll try. Love you.”

“I love you too.”

*Offices of the World News Network, New York City*

Finding former military types willing to go on TV and render an opinion on an event that involved the armed forces was never much of a problem. This was especially true in the D.C. area where there was a bumper crop of retired generals and colonels who were employed by various corporations, consulting firms, and think tanks in the city itself or located nearby in Northern Virginia and Maryland. For the most part, the value men and women fresh out of the military provided these companies and firms was an expertise only a recent end user could impart to engineers, technicians, and executives who had never stepped foot on a battlefield. Yet as useful as this knowledge was, it was their understanding of how the military worked, particularly the procurement cycle in the case of companies pushing a product, and the contacts the former-service-members-turned corporate-creatures scrupulously maintained that many companies were interested in. Use of the Old Boy network, while seldom decisive in securing a contract with the Federal government, often greased the skids for techies and corporate executives who had no feel for military culture or an understanding of the way men and women dedicated to the profession of arms thought, talked and responded to those who had never stood a watch on the wall.

The same held true for media types. Like a vast majority of Americans, soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen were an alien species. In order to understand what they were thinking and why members of the armed forces did things the way they did, journalists needed someone to translate military jargon, provide a quick tutorial on the technical details of a piece of military hardware, or explain the purpose of an operation then in progress and why they were being carried out the way they were. The problem for news bureau chiefs like Jan Fields was finding people who actually knew what they were talking about, which was all too often not the case, and who were willing to be open and honest when discussing military matters with a member of the fourth estate on TV. That was why Jan had reached out and tapped Chris. Not only did she know who could be relied on to provide honest and informative information on events concerning the military, being married to a serving officer and the daughter-in-law to a legendary general officer who had been killed in action made her an honored member of the close-knit military family. Even former officers who had never met her before knew she could be trusted not to twist their words, hit them with embarrassing gotcha questions, or manipulate the facts of a story involving the military in order to fit a political, cultural, or personal agenda. With the crisis in Arizona taking on a whole new dimension with the decision by the Administration to call on the military, Chris Dixon’s value to Jan, and by extension World News Network, became even more crucial.

This cozy relationship with the military, however, had its pitfalls. On several occasions Chris had found it advisable to step back from a story, if for no other reason than to protect her sources from retribution. She also needed to go out of her way when discussing ongoing events with her own husband, for like his father, Nathan was asked from time to time by his peers and superiors just how much insider information he fed his wife. It was a natural-enough conclusion for people who did not know the Dixons, but one that was irksome to both Chris and Nathan whenever someone brought up the subject. With an Administration noted for dealing harshly with its critics and whistleblowers madly thrashing about in search of a solution to a crisis it had set in motion, Jan reminded Chris on a daily basis to watch her back, and by extension, her husband’s. “There’s a lot of people in D.C. who’ll jump at the chance to muzzle you or find some excuse to come down hard on Nathan,” she warned Chris, as news that the commanding general of the XVIII Airborne Corps and his divisional commanders had declared they would not participate in any operations directed against the Arizona Home Guard (unless or until, in their collective opinion, it became a clear and present danger to national security). *“The actions of Colonel Allen Devin and the members of the Arizona Home Guard are a political statement,*” General Bohrn had personally pointed out at a hastily convened press conference held earlier that day. “*As such, it is my belief, one shared by the majority of the senior officers in my command, that the dispute between the Federal government and the citizens of Arizona (Americans who are entitled to the rights and legal protection guaranteed to them under the Constitution) needs to be resolved using all legal means available to the Federal government, short of armed confrontation.”*

After the airing of a quick but informative piece delivered by Chris from the nation’s capital using the White House as a backdrop, one that outlined the essentials of the story concerning General Bohrn’s decision (and could be repeated during the network’s morning lineup of shows), Jan set up a conference call with her key correspondents in New York and Washington as well as network management to discuss how they would cover the story. In what proved to be an animated, and at times heated exchange between some of the network’s executives and those who were responsible for reporting the news, she took advantage of every opportunity that came her way to remind all parties they needed to be selective on who they called on to comment on the growing crisis. “The President is relying on the Insurrection Act to justify his actions,” she pointed out at one juncture. “This allows him a great deal of latitude as to the means he uses to suppress the Arizona Home Guard and bring the governors of the southwestern states to heel.”

Taking her meaning, a network VP was quick to point out no politician in their right mind would even suggest interfering with the operation of a network such as theirs. Jan was just as quick to disabuse the VP, and everyone else who was party to the conference call, of that notion. “May I remind you that Abraham Lincoln, a man who spent his life fighting to free the slaves, had no qualms about shutting down newspapers or having journalists arrested if he or members of his administration felt their stories were detrimental to the war effort in violation of the principle that the Federal government cannot suppress the press—even if it is believed what is being reported endangers national security. The 1931 Supreme Court ruling in the case known as *Near v. Minnesota* that we rely on today to protect the press against undue interference from the government can be ignored by the government—simply by using the provisions of the Insurrection Act. And if the past record of this President is any indication, it’s possible.”

“He wouldn’t dare,” a senior producer seated at the table with Jan growled.

“Does anyone here want to put money on that?” Jan replied tersely.

In an effort to put an end to a discussion he feared was on the verge of becoming heated, Jack Brant chuckled. “I see you’ve been studying your constitutional law, Jan.”

Picking up on what he was doing, Jan smiled. “Only when I can’t fall asleep at night.”

After allowing everyone who was in the mood to do so to enjoy a quick, if nervous laugh, over this exchange, Brant returned to the matter at hand. “So, where does that leave us? Do we pull our horns in, or shout out ‘damn the torpedoes!’ and forge ahead as we have been?”

“Unless someone has serious objections, I’m all for doing our job, consequences be damned,” Jan declared, glancing about the table at those seated around her as she was doing so as if to dare someone to voice their concerns over that course. When no one did, she turned her attention to how best to cover a story that was evolving at breakneck speed. “The next order of business concerns a point Larry has brought to my attention,” Jan stated evenly.

“And what point would that be?” Carter asked warily.

Admitting she was wrong was not one of Jan’s fortes. When she needed to, she did her best to dress it up as something other than an outright acknowledgement she’d erred. This was especially true when it came to dealing with Amy Porter, for she was the type of person who would never let her forget she had. Still, in the internal war Jan often found herself waging between her professional judgment and her personal feelings when it came to that woman, professionalism usually won. “With the standoff between the Federal Government and the Arizona Home Guard morphing into a more complex story, leaving two journalists with the Arizona Home Guard is, in my opinion, a waste of talent.”

Carter choked back the temptation to point out Sarah Jennings was not a full-fledged journalist, at least not in his eyes. Instead, he jumped at the chance to placate his star journalist, just as Jan had hoped. “I agree,” he proclaimed with a glee derived from the relief he felt over being offered an opportunity that would put an end to Porter’s nonstop badgering. “Where were you thinking of sending her?”

“We need someone with Porter’s credentials in Phoenix,” Jack Brant interjected before Jan had a need to answer Carter’s question. “I have a feeling things are going to start heating up there.”

Brant’s timely intervention was a blessing, sparing Jan the need to point out the nation’s capital was already well covered. She would leave it to Carter to inform Porter of Brant’s decision and, as a consequence, be the recipient of her ire. By the time it became necessary to contact her in order to go over the interviews she would need to line up, Jan hoped the woman would have accepted her fate. Not that it mattered to Jan if she did not. The important thing was, for the moment at least, Amy Porter was one less problem Jan had to fret over.

Chapter 14

*Fort Necessity, Arizona*

Sarah Jennings and the Tucson crew greeted word that Amy Porter was to head off to Phoenix with thinly concealed joy. “I don’t expect any of Devin’s people will miss her either,” Cardosa intoned under his breath as he and Emerson watched Porter climb into a pickup truck being driven by a member of the Arizona Home Guard.

“I expect that’ll mean less live airtime for us,” Emerson countered.

Cardosa nodded. “That would have been true even if she’d stayed. This story has become bigger than what’s going on here or in Phoenix. It won’t be long before the people in New York forget we’re still here.”

Neither said a word for several seconds as they watched the pickup pull out of the compound as if they were fearful celebrating her departure too soon might cause Porter to suddenly change her mind and order the driver to turn around and take her back. Only after it was out of sight did Emerson glance over at Cardosa. “Have I thanked you for getting me out of driving her back to Tucson?”

“No need to,” he snickered. “I didn’t do it out of the tender mercy of my heart. Knowing her, she’d have taken you to Phoenix with her, if for no other reason than to get back at me for the way I treated her. Then where would I be?”

“You really think she’d try to pull something like that?”

Cardosa made a show of turning toward his camera operator and regarding her with an incredulous look. “Is the Pope Catholic?”

“That’s the rumor,” Emerson shot back.

The appearance of Jennings at the open side door of the satellite van brought an end to the good-natured banter Cardosa and Emerson were enjoying. “Are you guys ready for my sit-down with Colonel Devin?”

As one, Cardosa and Emerson shot each other a questioning glance before Cardosa turned toward Jennings and asked the young intern the question that was running through both their minds. “What sit-down?”

“Oh! Didn’t I tell you? While I was having breakfast, the Colonel stopped by my table and asked if we would be interested in hearing his views on the latest developments.”

Cardosa concluded that asking Jennings if she had informed Porter of this before she had departed would have been a waste of time. In the short time he’d known the fetching blond with lively blue eyes, he’d come to the conclusion she was a fast learner, perhaps a little too fast for his liking. So rather than giving her the opportunity to play cutesy with him, he simply asked her when and where they needed to be. “Ten minutes, in his office,” she informed him in a very businesslike, matter-of-fact manner. “Oh, and don’t forget to remind New York I’m the one who’ll be doing this exclusive, just in case they forgot Ms. Porter is no longer here.”

Forgotten in the flurry of activity that accompanied Amy Porter’s sendoff and the need to prepare for their next interview with Allen Devin was a cautionary note Jan Fields had personally included in her early morning instructions to Cardosa. Used to having the freedom to cover unfolding events without undue interference or restraint, the importance of the words, *‘for as long as they were able to’* had not registered.

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With her handheld recorder in hand, ready to describe what she saw as she was leaving the militia compound, Amy Porter looked out the pickup’s passenger window at a scene so very different than the one she had expected to come across. Despite knowing the FBI had been withdrawn, she still expected to see more than a single Arizona National Guard Humvee and one State Police car parked at the intersection where the gravel road leading to the militia compound met the main highway. What made this paltry presence even more baffling was how the National Guard vehicle was parked. Rather than oriented toward the militia compound, it and the large machine gun mounted in a rooftop turret were pointing out, away from the militia compound as if they were guarding it.

Yet as perplexing as this was, it the way the state trooper behaved when the driver of the pickup truck slowed down and stopped before pulling onto the main road. “Why so early?” the trooper called out after the militiaman lowered the driver’s side window.

“I need to a run one member of the news team to Tucson before swinging by home to check on the kids. Little Katie is cutting a new tooth and Karl Junior is acting up. Betty told me if I didn’t come home and straighten the boy out, she was going to box him up in a crate and ship him off to his granny.”

The state troop chuckled. “Well in that case, you better get a move on. If your wife is anything like mine, she isn’t the kind of woman who makes idle threats.”

Porter’s driver grinned as he shook his head. “No, she doesn’t. You take care.”

It wasn’t until after they’d pulled onto the road that the militiaman took note of the way Porter was staring at him. With no need to ask what was going through her mind, he grinned. “This isn’t New York. When I’m not with the Colonel or tending to honey-do chores around the house, I’m a deputy sheriff. Mike and I, the state trooper back there, have known each other for years.”

“I can’t help but notice that the lot of you don’t seem to be taking this seriously,” Porter sniffed. “Tell me, what do you think is going to happen when the President finds a general who hasn’t forgotten how to follow orders and brings down the full weight of the military on your Colonel and everyone who isn’t smart enough to leave while they can?”

Rather than being unnerved by the thought of going toe-to-toe with the military or insulted by the New York journalist’s suggestion that people like him were stupid for standing with Devin, a small, self-assured smile lit up the driver’s face as he shot her a quick glance out of the corner of his eyes. “We’re not alone, you know. The Colonel has a lot of friends, not only here in Arizona, but across the country. A lot of people are tired of waiting for the politicians we send to Washington to put the brakes on the downhill slide this country is on.”

Porter set aside the temptation to ask the militiaman what he meant by friends. It was a question similar to one analysts at the NSA had been asking themselves for days as they struggled to put together a coherent picture of a flurry of activity on the internet that could be traced back to IP addresses belonging to people known to be members of the Arizona Home Guard. So taken aback by the exchange between her driver and the state trooper, the lack of anything resembling a cordon restricting access into and out of the militia compound and the comment concerning Allen Devin’s influence, it wasn’t until they were halfway to Tucson that Porter realized they had not come across a single news crew. Having been part of many a media scrum covering an important story, she found herself wondering why there wasn’t one forming to report on the takedown of Fort Necessity from a safe distance. It never occurred to her that she had been so focused on the twin goals of covering events as best she could from the militia compound while haranguing her producer in New York with pleas and threats every chance she could to put pressure on the network’s senior management to get her out of Fort Necessity that she had failed to take the time to step away from what she was doing and take in the large story that was unfolding around her. Had she done so, she would have noticed the way other networks had been covering events, for unlike her own, anything related to events in Arizona were receiving the broadcast media’s version of page six treatment.

Even if she had, she would have missed the way people who were part of the Administration were reaching out to their friends and contacts in the media, warning them in typical, heavy-handed Washington fashion that it would be advisable if they refrained from giving people associated with or sympathetic to the Arizona Home Guard and the rebellious state governors too much air time. As Timothy Rowland explained to Bruce Edgars, the CEO of World News Network’s chief rival, “The last thing we want to do is to provide that miscreant a platform from which to spew his anti-government message. We need to put a lid on this as quickly as possible.”

Like many who had hailed the President in the early years of his administration, Edgars had reluctantly come to the conclusion he was not the person all had thought, or more correctly hoped, he would be. As a proponent of the philosophy once burned, twice shy, he informed Rowland he intended to give the story the attention it deserved. “I have every intention of having my people there, cameras in hand, filming its final act.”

Without missing a beat, Rowland rounded on Edgars. “You do that, Bruce, and I’ll see to it the welcome mat to the Oval Office is pulled the next time one of your people come looking for a sit-down with the President.” Left unsaid in this exchange and others he was having with other key members of the media was he had no wish to have television cameras present when, as Edgars put it, the final act played out.

*Fort Necessity, Arizona*

Leaning forward with her head slightly tilted off to one side, as much to highlight her profile as to strike a pose that complemented her next question, Sarah Jennings asked Allen Devin, who even she had begun to refer to as The Colonel, a question she expected he was growing tired of hearing. “If the rumors concerning the Federal government’s intention of sending the Army against you and the members of the Arizona Home Guard are true and you chose to resist, what do you hope to achieve by engaging in what can only be a hopeless cause?”

If Devin was growing wary of answering that question, he didn’t act like it. Quite the contrary, the hint of a smile tugging at the corner of his lips and a glint in his eyes caused Jennings to suspect he relished the opportunity. He began as he had often done in the past by repeating a mantra popular with right-wing commentators and talk-show hosts. “The vast majority of the people in this country have grown wary of Washington politics. Efforts by the electorate to affect real change by supporting politicians who claim to be sympathetic to their wishes have proven to be futile, as the men and women they send to Washington forget why they were sent there the second they are sworn into office.”

Having no wish to listen to a long winded diatribe describing the abuses of power the President was guilty of, a detailed enumeration of Congress’ failures to check him, or criticism of the Federal judiciary, Jennings was about to interrupt Devin when he surprised her by following an entirely new tact.

“In a democracy, a citizen’s power derives from his or her ability to put pressure on their elected officials,” Devin began before Jennings could get a word in. “In the past, Americans have relied on the ballot box to exert their collective pressure on politicians to govern in a manner that meets their needs and desires. With recent elections showing this to be increasingly ineffective due to the extra-constitutional powers the Presidency has assumed, Congress’ failure to rein him in and the extraordinary influence of special interest groups that have come en mass to Washington, the citizens of this country will have to resort to other means to exert pressure on the Federal government—if they wish to restore the rule of law as defined by the Constitution. Never forget, Ms. Jennings, the purpose of the Constitution is to protect we, the people, from government, not the government from the people.”

When Devin paused to catch his breath, Jennings jumped at the chance to regain the upper hand in this exchange, not realizing just how skillfully he was leading her on. “Short of taking up arms and overthrowing the government, as some in Washington seem to believe your actions to date are encouraging, what exactly do you have in mind?”

“It’s rather simple, Ms. Jennings. The time has come for the American people to march on Washington and take back their government.”

“By force of arms?” Jennings asked incredulously.

“No, of course not. Taking up arms on a massive scale would lead to a crisis unlike anything we have seen since the Civil War. Recent events have shown that is not only unnecessary, but is highly unlikely.”

“Then what, another Million Man March?”

Leaning forward, Devin fixed the young intern in a stare that was, for her, beyond unnerving. “Why not?” he murmured in a tone of voice that matched the audacity of his proposal. “In May of 1971 thousands of protestors who opposed the war in Vietnam descended on our nation’s capital with the expressed purpose of shutting it down. While they didn’t quite succeed in doing so, they delivered a message the President and Congress could not ignore, just as Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1963 March did. Maybe, just maybe, if enough concerned citizens converged on Washington and made their dissatisfaction with the Federal government known, our elected officials would turn a deaf ear to K Street lobbyists, big money donors, and activists and begin to act as true representatives of the people who elected them.”

Taken aback, as much by Devin’s behavior as his words, Jennings blinked. “Just how would you manage to organize such a movement?” she finally asked after she’d managed to collect herself enough to continue.

Easing back in his seat, Devin smiled. “Faith, Ms. Jennings, faith.”

“In what, a miracle?” she blurted out before she was able to check herself.

“No, Ms. Jennings, faith in the American people and those sworn to defend and uphold the Constitution of the United States, against *all* enemies.”

Chapter 15

*Fort Lewis, Washington State*

The value of 24/7 news channels as a source of real-time intelligence was not truly appreciated by decision makers until the First Gulf War. It was a lesson that was brought home with a vengeance on 9/11 when live broadcasts by journalists and news crews in Manhattan, Northern Virginia, and Pennsylvania provided officials and first responders with need-to-know information faster and in greater detail than situation reports sent up to them by subordinates on the ground using established channels, communications links that all too often failed at critical moments on that eventful day. As a result, the presence of televisions and computer monitors tuned to news programs became an ubiquitous feature of every office occupied by anyone who was, or thought he was, in the loop.

This reliance on live news reports did more than simply keep military and civilian officials abreast of unfolding events. A visitor to an office waiting room knew the occupant’s political leanings based on what the TV channel was set to, revealing the occupant’s political leanings. There were, of course, exceptions. Captain Chuck Randall, the intelligence officer of Nathan’s battalion and a happily married man, had a thing for female news anchors, causing him to hop from one news network to another, depending on who was on. Once, when Nathan asked him if his dark-haired, brown-eyed wife knew about his fondness for blond anchors, Randall looked him straight in the eye and, in a low voice, informed him that was strictly need-to-know information. “Remember,” he added using the same admonishment he always delivered in a no-nonsense tone of voice at the conclusion of a classified briefing to the battalion’s commanders and staff, “what happens in the battalion, stays in the battalion.”

Naturally enough, the television monitor in the S-3 shop was always tuned to World News Network. The only time anyone dared to change the channel was when someone was working in the office on a Sunday during football season. On this day, when Nathan returned from his noontime run and a quick shower, after drawing a cup of coffee from an ancient coffee maker no one ever cleaned, he stopped next to the battalion ops sergeant’s desk to watch a replay of his wife’s piece concerning the stance the Joint Chiefs had taken.

Master Sergeant Martin L. Jefferson, who was ignoring the draft company training schedule he should have been reviewing, didn’t bother to look away from the program as he spoke. “Well, that shoots to hell my theory concerning officers assigned to the Pentagon.”

“And what theory would that be, Sergeant Jefferson?” Nathan asked, knowing full well beforehand his senior NCO’s answer, like the vast majority of his views concerning officers who held positions well behind the pointy end of the spear, was going to be sarcastic.

“I was under the impression they were all geldings.”

Nathan chuckled. “Not all. Just some of them.”

Shooting a quick glance over his shoulder, Jefferson grinned. “Could’ve fooled me.”

In no mood to engage in a lively exchange with Jefferson, Nathan made a show of looking down at the stack of training schedules for the following week company commanders had forwarded to him for his review and approval. “Falling behind, are we?”

Taking the hint, Jefferson spun his chair about and took up the draft schedules. “I’ll have these on your desk within the hour, sir.”

“You do that, sergeant,” Nathan muttered as he was turning away and heading out of his office on his way to his commanding officer’s.

There he found Colonel Shire, like Jefferson, glued to the TV in his office. Without bothering to knock, Nathan wandered through the open door, took a seat and, while sipping his coffee in silence, listened to a replay of his wife’s report on the situation in Washington for the third time that morning.

*“In the wake of rumors concerning a disagreement between members of the Administration and the Joint Chiefs about the use of the armed forces to bring an end to the standoff in Arizona, there have been a growing number of reports of massive sick-outs by Department of Defense civilian employees at military posts and bases throughout the Southwest. As the sick-outs continue to grow, many here in the nation’s capital wonder if the armed forces can, in fact, be used to meet a crisis that threatens to spill over beyond the borders of Arizona.”*

“Disagreement?” Shire snorted loudly without looking away from the TV and over to where Nathan was seated. “The way I hear it, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs told the President to all but piss off.”

“I think the use of the term piss off is frowned upon by the network’s senior management, at least during a broadcast,” Nathan intoned as he listened to his wife go into greater detail by listing some of the key installations that were being impacted by actions that were being orchestrated either by Colonel Devin or people and organizations who were sympathetic to his cause.

She was still doing so when Shire suddenly sat upright in his seat, spun his chair about, leaned forward, planted his forearms on his desk and fixed Nathan with a gaze that sounded alarm bells in his head. “Get with Captain Randall,” Shire snapped. “Find out if he’s heard anything through his channels concerning threats against this post or tenant organizations.”

Nathan had no need to ask him what kinds of threats he was concerned about. In addition to a sudden slowdown or complete stoppage of administrative actions personnel assigned to the battalion might encounter if the DoD civilians on Fort Lewis joined the sickout affecting other posts, critical functions such as the dining facility, post security, the post motor pool and range control were all managed and operated by civilian employees. While a unit like a ranger battalion could always find a way to work around a slowdown or complete work stoppage at facilities that had an impact on training and day-to-day operations, if the battalion needed to suddenly deploy, such actions would make doing so more difficult.

Coming to his feet, Nathan was about to ask if there was anyone else he needed to check with when Captain Nick Tewell, the battalion adjutant, stuck his head in the door. “Sir, someone who claims to be from the Secretary of the Army’s office is on the secure line.”

After sharing a long, hard stare with his commanding officer, without another word Nathan pivoted about and took off for the S-2 shop, stopping briefly along the way to inform his Ops sergeant he could forget about the training schedules and instead, turn his attention to getting the operations section ready to pack up and move out. Somehow Nathan suspected those training schedules wouldn’t be needed after all.

*Washington, D.C.*

The decision by the Joint Chiefs that effectively sidelined themselves, left the President, his chief advisors, and those agencies responsible for national security headed by political appointees scrambling for a way to work around the senior leadership of the uniformed services. Only Timothy Rowland, who fancied himself a political operative par excellence, saw this as another opportunity born of a crisis. Having no wish to waste it, rather than trying to bring the Joint Chiefs back into line, he advised the President to ignore the reticence of his generals to use force of arms to suppress the Arizona Home Guard and, instead, use his authority as commander-in-chief and bypass them. “You don’t need them,” Rowland pointed out. “Not only would you silence those who have been critical of your leadership, you can demonstrate to the world you are able to rise to the occasion when called on, meeting any challenge by overcoming any obstacles, no matter how daunting, your opposition throws in your way.”

Politically, this was sound advice. It was not, however, the only reason Rowland wished to take this approach. Like the President, he had a deep-seated distrust coupled with a thinly disguised animus of anyone in uniform, an attitude that permeated the Administration. By their way of thinking, the fewer military types they had to deal with, the better.

With the need to be at the President’s side at all times advising, guiding, and keeping him from wavering from the course he was charting for him, Rowland had little time to deal with those elements of the armed forces that could not be ignored, commanders and organizations whose support and cooperation were critical to a swift and decisive resolution to the growing anti-government insurrection Allen Devin was fermenting. That bothersome task was delegated to other Presidential advisors and members of the National Security Council. In assigning those responsibilities, not all his choices were well thought out. This turned out to be the case when he instructed Ann Lucas, the President’s domestic advisor, to look into the feasibility of severing Devin’s access to the Internet. Lucas, like Rowland, was a political operative, not a technocrat, though her selection to take part in this effort was, in Rowland’s mind, a no-brainer. As a member of the President’s campaign staff responsible for mobilizing grassroots support during his first run for the office, she had relied heavily on the Internet to organize and marshal the ground troops needed to go from door to door delivering campaign flyers, singing the praises of their candidate in chat rooms and on their Facebook pages, or turning out and cheering their candidate at mass rallies.

Knowing how to use a system as complex as the Internet, however, did not automatically translate into an understanding of how it worked. It was a truism Lucas was quick to appreciate, leading her to call on help in putting together a viable strategy that would fulfill the mandate she’d been handed. She could rely on Ethan Odom to help deal with situations of this magnitude that required an immediate resolution.

As the Deputy Director of the Office of Operations Coordination and Plans at Homeland Security, Odom was uniquely staffed to plan for and coordinate the activities of Federal, state, and local agencies as well as numerous organizations required to handle serious incidents and disasters, natural or manmade. Never shy when afforded an opportunity to flex his bureaucratic muscle, especially when it promised to earn him brownie points with prominent members of the President’s political party, Odom threw himself into the task. He began, as most undertakings in the nation’s capital did, by bringing together all concerned parties on a conference call. In addition to the director of the National Cybersecurity Center, which was part of Homeland Security, and the commanding general of United States Cyber Command headquartered in Fort Meade, Maryland, Odom included the Deputy Attorney General, the Executive Assistant Director of the FBI who headed up the Bureau’s Criminal, Cyber, Response, and Services Branch, head of NSA’s Operations Directorate and, almost as an afterthought, the Commanding General of the Defense Intelligence Agency.

An exchange that Lieutenant General Matt Mathis, commander of the DIA, thought would only take fifteen minutes turned into a grueling marathon, an excruciatingly slow and irksome one. Listening to Lieutenant General Cunningham, the commander of Cyber Command, eat up a full twenty minutes walking Lucas through the intricacies of the Internet even before he explained why his command was not able to deny the Arizona Home Guard access, was exasperating to Mathis. Were it not for the fact Lucas was in the White House and he was in his office on Joint Base Anacostia–Bolling, he would have been sorely tempted to come to his feet, reach out, and choking the ever-loving shit out of the President’s domestic advisor—if for no other reason than to keep her from asking another inane question.

As Cunningham droned on, Mathis hit the mute button of his speakerphone and turned to the senior members of his command who were gathered in his office, listening in on the conference call. “My position concerning this issue has not changed,” Mathis declared. “It is my opinion any effort to block Internet traffic emanating from Allen Devin’s compound in Arizona would not only be futile, it would deny us intelligence that could prove useful in keeping things from getting any worse than they already are. The NSA needs to identify who Devin’s people are talking to and what they’re planning so the FBI and local authorities can shut them down before they act. Does anyone here see things otherwise?”

Making a show of looking at the men and women to his left, then to those on his right, Mathis’ deputy expressed a sentiment many of them shared. “If Devin is as switched on as we’ve come to believe, and the NSA is right, then not only will he be able to work through anything Cunningham’s people can throw at him, whatever mischief they are capable of initiating from their compound has already been done. Besides,” he added reluctantly, “denying him access to the Internet isn’t going to stop a man like Devin from getting his message out, so long as he’s permitted to make live television broadcasts, compliments of the World News Network.”

“He’s right, you know,” Mathis’ chief-of-staff intoned. “If the goal is to keep Devin from whipping up support outside the state of Arizona, we need to shut down all forms of communications going into and out of the entire state of Arizona, possibly even the whole Southwest. Given the architecture of the Internet, even if such a thing is possible, it would be a move that wouldn’t sit well with a lot of people.”

“And you know what that would lead to,” the DIA’s General Counsel added. “Insurrection Act or not, clamping down on that network like a bunch of jackbooted storm troopers is going to raise a hue and cry from every civil liberties activist, conspiracy nut job, and every head of every media outlet in the country.”

“That may be true,” Mathis shot back before hesitating. Then, after giving his head a quick shake, he corrected himself. “That probably *will* be true. How the press and others respond to the actions of this Administration, however, is a political calculation we have not been asked to consider, and therefore it’s not our concern. The only question we must answer is whether the information this agency obtains via the Internet is worth the risk of continuing to allow those people in Arizona unfettered access to it.”

“One thing we do need to be conscious of,” he added quickly, “are other, less obvious consequences that such an effort will have. I have no doubt that should the Administration launch cyber attacks on Devin, the Russians, Chinese, and terrorist cyber warfare commands will gain valuable insight into our cyber warfare capabilities. We all know they’re watching everything we do. They’d be fools not to. If we’ve learned anything from recent operations Cunningham’s people have taken part in, when it comes to cyber warfare, neither the Chinese nor the Russians are going to pass up an opportunity to study our methods and capabilities like the one the President is contemplating.”

Finished, Mathis leaned forward. “Does anyone else have anything they feel they need to contribute that is germane to this discussion?”

When it became clear no one else had anything of value to contribute, Mathis once more set his gaze on each and every one of his subordinates as they pondered the question he had put to them, finally settling on the deputy director who reiterated his previous assessment. “Like I said, the damage is done.”

Acknowledging his deputy with nothing more than a curt, tight-lipped nod, Mathis rejoined the teleconference that had been going on nonstop, cutting in the second there was a break in the exchange between the other participants. “Ms. Lucas, General Mathis here. I stand by my previously stated position on this matter. What little Devin gains in spreading his message is more than offset by the intelligence we glean from the Internet traffic emanating from Arizona.”

“I concur,” the director of the NSA quickly added. “It’s the only way we’ll be able to track who he’s communicating with and tap into the network Devin is using to muster support for his efforts. The number of IP addresses receiving emails directly from the Arizona Home Guard and the IP addresses they, in turn, are contacting, have more than doubled so far today. We sent these to Homeland Security and the FBI last night. Any overt action on our part, such as blocking access to the Internet or launching an attack on their platforms, will likely cause Devin and groups he’s in touch with to resort to other means of communication, methods we might not be able to monitor and track. That would deny us any insights into who’s talking to whom—and what they’re saying.”

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After listening to another ten minutes of back and forth between Odom and others responding to Mathis’ stated position, Lucas decided she had heard all she needed to. “Thank you for your input,” she suddenly blurted out. “I will advise you of the President’s decision within the hour.” With that, she dropped out of the conference call and reached for her personal cell phone. Even before she had a chance to scroll through its directory, Odom’s name appeared on the call screen just before it rang.

“Well?” she asked without bothering with a salutation of any kind.

After listening to Odom’s take on the just concluded conference call, Lucas nodded to herself. “I agree. After what the Joint Chiefs did, I don’t think we can trust anything someone in uniform is saying.”

There was a pause as she listened to Odom ask if he needed to join her when it came time to brief Rowland before going into the President with their recommendations. “No, there’s no need for you to put yourself through that. I’ll take care of filling Tiny Tim in on the gist of what we heard. The real problem I see looming on the horizon is what he’s going to do about the news crew from World News Network that is broadcasting from Devin’s compound. Who needs the Internet when he can broadcast his message to the nation live on TV whenever he wants? I, for one, think it would be advisable if we said nothing about them and left *that* one to Rowland.”

Odom seconded that motion before asking if there was anything else she needed from him at the moment. “No, not that I can think of. I’ll call you back before we pull the plug on them. Oh, and Ethan, watch your back. I have a feeling if this doesn’t go down like everyone here thinks it will, the President and Rowland will both be looking for a scapegoat. I’d hate to see your stuffed head mounted on Rowland’s wall.”

Chapter 16

*WNN Studios, New York City*

Having reached that point of the day when she felt her presence was not only no longer needed, but was beginning to interfere with the smooth running of the news programs she was responsible for, Jan Fields made one last round of the control rooms and studios before leaving for a well-deserved rest. If the next day proved to be anything like this one had been, she told herself, she’d need a good night’s sleep. First, however, she needed a drink. At the moment it didn’t matter what it was. A glass of Rhein wine, scotch on the rocks, or even domestic beer, provided it was cold, would do. Anything to take the edge off and allow her to ease into a peaceful, dreamless slumber and still the urge that always manifested itself at times like this, a longing to toss aside everything on her desk and run off to cover a breaking story.

It was foolish to even think of doing something like that, she told herself as she slipped out of her heels and curled her toes. Reporting from the field on an evolving crisis was for young, hungry journalists like her daughter-in-law and Sarah Jennings, she told herself as she was fishing a pair of cross trainers out of the lower left hand drawer of her desk. “Not that I couldn’t do it,” she muttered to herself, ignoring the stiff, achy muscles in her neck, shoulders, and back that made bending over slowly to pull her shoes on and tie them an onerous ordeal. Only after she’d stood up and slipped the expensive, but practical messenger bag she used as a purse over her shoulder did she dismiss that thought. “Who the hell are you kidding, Fields,” she grumbled under her breath. “The only thing you’re fit for after a day like this are slippers, a pair of trackies, and a cup of tea. All I’m missing is a bloody cat curled up on my lap.”

Then, with a shake of her head and a wry smile on her lips, she made for the door of her office. She’d wait until she was back at her apartment, with drink in hand before checking in with Chris to see how she was holding up and, more important, if she’d heard anything from Nathan. Having addressed everything she needed to concerning the story Chris was covering from Washington during the course of the day, that call would be devoted strictly to personal and family concerns. Like the drink Jan so desperately needed, it would be a pleasant way to end the day.

*Fort Lewis, Washington State*

The mood that greeted Nathan when he returned to the battalion conference room after slipping out to fetch a fresh cup of coffee from his own office’s pot was somber. There was none of the easygoing banter between company commanders and primary staff officers that served as a prelude to the issuance of an operations order. Even when they had been in Afghanistan, waiting to receive the details of a mission that would send their companies out beyond relative safety of the wire, there was always a company commander in the room who could be relied on to lighten the mood by engaging in a bit of irreverent graveyard humor or eager to share a joke he’d heard from a former classmate in another unit.

It was this absence of idle chatter, not to mention the looks the company commanders gave him as he reentered the room, which served to ratchet up a sense of foreboding that had plagued him since receiving his initial planning guidance from Colonel Shire earlier in the day. This operation, unlike any he’d ever engaged in, would demand more from the officers and soldiers of the battalion than anything they’d ever found themselves having to deal with in the past, for the people they would be going against where not radical Islamic fighters who embraced beliefs so at odds with those held by Nathan and his peers. Nor were they enemy soldiers of a foreign state. The men and women who stood with Colonel Allen Devin were, in every way imaginable, no different from themselves. If what he knew of them was anywhere close to being accurate, Nathan imagined any of the members of the Arizona Home Guard could walk into the battalion’s conference room, take a seat, and blend right in. Even the old timers who had been seduced by Allen Devin’s patriotic rhetoric, men who’d served under his father when he’d been a shit-for-brains second lieutenant going into combat for the first time, would have been hauntingly familiar. It was this affinity he and every officer in the battalion felt for the veterans they would soon be pitted against that made what they were about to do so damned hard to reconcile, let alone accept. By the way most of the company commanders were staring at him as he was taking his seat, Nathan realized he was not the only one present who felt that way.

When all the members of the battalion’s command group were present and in their assigned seats, Major Jesse Melick, the battalion XO, stepped to the front of the room and counted heads one more time. Melick was a West Pointer and a noted stickler for old school protocol so at odds with the easygoing attitude most special operations units took pride in. Only when he was satisfied they were ready did he look over to the adjutant who was posted at a side door and nod. Sticking his head around the corner, the adjutant called out to the battalion commander who had been nervously pacing to and fro in the adjutant’s office, waiting for his commanders and staff to assemble.

Stopping in midstride, Colonel Shire took a moment to steel himself for what he was about to do by closing his eyes and slowly taking in a deep breath. Deciding he was as ready as he could possibly be, he exhaled and opened his eyes, stepping off smartly to the sound of his adjutant calling the room to attention with a crisp announcement that cut short what little chatter there had been and bringing everyone in the room to their feet. “Gentlemen, the battalion commander.”

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After the officers and senior NCOs who made up the battalion’s command group had resumed their seats, Melick gave Chuck Randall a curt nod, his cue to take his place before them. Randall began the briefing by going over the second paragraph of the operations order he had written and Nathan’s NCOs had plugged into the five-paragraph order they’d assembled and distributed. Randall’s portion of it covered all aspects of intelligence pertaining to the battalion’s mission to include a description of the terrain the battalion would be operating over, prevailing weather during the course of the operation and, of course, the enemy situation, a term few in the conference room were comfortable with, given who that enemy was.

“In many ways the Sonoran Desert in southwestern Arizona is similar to the terrain at Yakima,” he began as one of Nathan’s NCO’s clicked on a split screen image being displayed on the oversized monitor Randall was standing next to. On one side was an image displaying a standard military topographical map. Next to it was a satellite photo of the same area that matched the scale of the map. “One of the biggest differences, one that is of importance to this operation, is the existence of a geological anomaly known as sky islands, mountains that are not part of a range. In addition to rising up from the surrounding area, their chief characteristics are vegetation and an environment distinctly different from the flat, open terrain they dominate. Fort Necessity, the base camp of the Arizona Home Guard, is located on one of these. In addition to providing them with excellent all-around observation, three sides of the mountain—the southern face, the western face, and the eastern face—are near vertical, making any effort to scale the mountain and approach the militia compound from those directions difficult, but not impossible.”

Without needing a cue from Randall, the NCO operating the projector moved onto the next Power Point slide that was part of the S-2’s portion of briefing. This one showed a more detailed photo of the mountain, one clear enough to see buildings within the compound and the access routes leading up to it. “Other than a gravel road connecting the compound to the main north-south highway located on the northern side of the mountain, the only other established access route is a dirt road made up of numerous switchbacks located on the southeastern side of the mountain. It was on this road here,” Randall pointed out using a collapsible pocket pointer, “where an attempt by the FBI to assault the compound was stopped by the simple expedient of dropping the side of the mountain down in front of and behind the assault column.”

Randall’s use of the term assault column caused more than a few officers to cringe. Both Nathan and Colonel Shire were among those who did. Granted, the term was appropriate, given the way the FBI special agent in charge had opted to take on Devin’s people. Still, the thought of launching a full-blooded assault on fellow Americans within the territorial boundaries of the lower forty-eight was not going down well with those who were listening to Randall’s briefing—as evidenced by the way they were squirming in their seats.

Taking note of this, Randall quickly moved on. “The Intel annex contains a more detailed description of the terrain as well as a diagram of the compound itself,” he pointed out before turning his attention to the next, and most important, portion of his briefing. “What is missing, what I cannot provide, is the exact number of personnel who are in or around it and how they are armed. In selecting this site for his operating base, Colonel Devin chose wisely. In addition to a number of abandoned buildings that have been repurposed without altering their external façade, there are a number of mine shafts scattered about the mountain that provide members of the Arizona Home Guard with readymade bunkers. That, coupled with Colonel Devin’s draconian operational security measures, makes locating and assessing the full extent of their infrastructure and capabilities exceedingly difficult with any degree of accuracy.”

“Enough with the hyperbole, captain,” Melick growled impatiently.

Without skipping a beat or acknowledging the XO’s admonishment in any way, Randall continued. “What information we do have is drawn from information provided to us by what the FBI has accumulated over the past few months, as well as what they were able to ascertain during their failed attack. Neither they nor Homeland Security have reliable sources on the ground who are able to provide us with detailed information on the capabilities of the Arizona Home Guard. What real-time intelligence I have been able to obtain from them is derived from infrequent flyovers by reconnaissance satellites. Even this is highly suspect since members of the Arizona Home Guard know when those satellites will be overhead, allowing them to either reduce their activities in and around Fort Necessity while a satellite is overhead or, if they wish to create a false impression of their capabilities, ramp it up.”

“Given that, Chuck, what is your best guess as to what they do have, number wise?” Shire asked ,as though he was almost afraid to hear what the battalion intel officer would say.

“Best guess, and it’s only a guess sir, the total number of militiamen within the compound itself is less than one hundred, with another one to two hundred manning strong points dug into the side of the mountain. Of that number, maybe a quarter to one half are support personnel, techies like the person who brought the Global Hawk down or are busily working their way through efforts by NSA and Cyber Command to knock them off the Internet, an effort, I might point out, that has so far done little to communicate with the outside world.”

“Three hundred good ’ole boys,” Major Melick asserted derisively. “That’s not too bad.”

“Begging the major’s pardon, ‘every member’ of the Arizona Home Guard is a veteran,” Randall countered, doing his best to keep his voice neutral, “Not only have they been bloodied, the technicians Devin has recruited are intimately familiar with the electronic platforms and systems currently being employed against them. And to top that off, his deputy is a former ranger battalion commander, Aaron Brindle, which means he is well aware of our tactics, our capabilities, and how we will be coming at them.”

On hearing this, Shire grunted and then twisted about in his seat in order to look about the room. “I was Brindle’s S-3 during my first tour in Iraq. They don’t come any tougher or smarter. Nor is he the type of man who, once he’s made up his mind on something, is going to change it. Do not count on his having lost any of his flair for tactical operations and motivating people simply because he has r-e-t after his rank.” After allowing the import of his statement to sink in, Shire turned back to the front and gave Randall a curt nod.

The battalion intelligence officer didn’t miss a beat as he picked up where he’d left off. “The Arizona Home Guard is not the only opposition we may encounter. If news reports and what Homeland Security is saying are to be believed, we have no way of knowing how the Arizona National Guard will react if . . .”

“When,” Melick blurted.

“When we are inserted,” Randall declared while regarding the XO with a look that was as close to being insubordinate as he was willing to go. “One company of the 1st of the 158th Infantry, Arizona Army National Guard, in cooperation with the Arizona State Police and Highway Patrol has established roadblocks in the vicinity of Fort Necessity for the purpose of controlling access to it. The rest of that battalion, along with elements of the 1st and 2nd battalions of the 285th Aviation Regiment, are on standby at Davis–Monthan Air Force Base outside of Tucson.”

On hearing this, Shire shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “I thought Davis–Monthan had been shut down as the result of an agreement the governor of Arizona and the commanding officer of that base reached that would not permit it to be used as a staging area for another attack on the militia so long as the governor promised not to cut essential services to the base.”

“It is my understanding that agreement only applies to units under Federal jurisdiction,” Randall explained. “The Arizona Air and Army National Guard have been operating out of Davis–Monthan unhindered.”

“Under whose orders?” Melick asked.

Knowing what the XO was driving at, Randall replied with a straight face. “The Adjutant General of Arizona has publically repeated his refusal to honor the President’s order to place the state’s National Guard or Home Guard units under Federal authority, sir. They are, and I expect they will continue to remain, under the command of their duly appointed and elected commander-in-chief, Governor Burress.”

The mood of the gathered officers, already somber, became even more morose on hearing this. “Great,” Captain Hank Cole, commanding officer of A Company muttered. “Got any more cheerful news to share with us, Chuck?”

Ordinarily Captain Randall, known to all as the silver tongue warrior, would have responded with a snappy comeback. Even he appreciated this was not the time, nor the circumstances, for levity. Instead, he glanced over at the battalion commander.

Knowing what his intel officer was asking him using nothing more than his eyes, Shire cleared his throat. “That’ll be all for now, Captain Randall.”

“If you ask me, I’d say that’s more than enough,” Captain Wade Modjeski, the commanding officer of C Company, grumbled under his breath, earning him a dirty look from the XO before he turned his attention to Randall and indicated with little more than a nod he could take a seat.

Without needing to be told, Nathan stood up and took Randall’s place between the video monitor and a map displaying the graphics for the operation. He paused a moment before starting, using the time to gaze out over the gathering of officers and NCOs who, by their expressions alone, told him they shared the trepidation he felt over what they were being asked to do.

No, he corrected himself mentally. They weren’t being asked. They were being ordered to move against Colonel A.P. Devin and the Arizona Home Guard, an order issued directly to his battalion commander by the Secretary of Defense himself. And while this was, in Nathan’s mind, a most egregious circumvention of the established chain of command, every officer in the room was obliged to carry it out.

Suspecting he knew what was going through Nathan’s mind, Major Melick cleared his throat. “Major Dixon.”

After giving the battalion XO a long, hard look that was just this side of being contemptuous, Nathan launched into his portion of the briefing. “This operation will be conducted in three phases,” he began with more conviction than he felt. “With the situation as uncertain as it is, we have to be prepared to deploy the battalion to Naval Air Facility El Centro in Southern California and then, overland, to a forward assembly area using transportation provided by the Navy or, if feasible, execute an airborne assault in the immediate vicinity of the militia compound.”

“Who’s responsible for making that call?” Hank Cole asked.

Unable to answer with any degree of certainty, Nathan glanced over at Shire who was just as clueless concerning who they were taking their orders from. “To be determined,” Shire replied for Nathan in a manner that betrayed his uneasiness with the disarray the upper echelons of battalion’s chain of command was in.

The silence that followed was broken by Richard Pelham, the commanding officer of Company D who had, until then, been silent. “Oh, I get it. One of by land, two is by sea.”

Not at all pleased with Pelham’s attitude or the allusion his comment evoked, Melick shot him a dirty look. Unfazed by the XO’s attempt to censure him, Pelham shrugged. “Why not? It worked for the patriots before.”

“Yeah, true,” Cole quipped innocently. “My only question is, are we the patriots or the British?”

Realizing the briefing was about to get out of hand, and not wishing to see Melick get into it with the company commanders, Nathan continued before anyone else had a chance to make a comment. “Regardless of how we get there, once on the ground and have rallied, the battalion will establish a perimeter around the high ground occupied by the Arizona Home Guard for the purpose of isolating and containing it. The third phase, to be executed if and when the National Command Authority deems it necessary, is an assault on Fort Necessity.”

Again, Nathan paused as he allowed the importance of what he had just said to sink in. This time there were no comments from any of the company commanders, for they shared the same trepidation he felt over having to carry out a mission they were uniquely qualified to carry out, but one that would, forever, live with them and in the annals of their unit’s and nation’s history, a history that had, until then, been a straight and unbroken line that began on Lexington Green, ran through Fort Sumter, and continued on unblemished to the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates in the wake of 9/11. Only this time they would not be the determined band of Americans standing their ground, defending rights they believed in. Though the color of their uniforms was not red, Nathan could not help but wonder if the purpose of the operation he was laying out and would soon be responsible for implementing was no different from that which Major Pitcairn of the Royal Marines had embarked upon on that long ago April morning.

*Washington, D.C.*

Chris Dixon was fully awake and sitting up in bed before her cell phone had an opportunity to ring a second time. Mentally prepared to hear the who-and-what behind a sudden and unexpected development in the story she was covering, it took her a second to regroup when she heard Nathan’s voice. Automatically, she leapt to the only reason behind his calling her at this hour that popped into her mind. “What’s wrong with the children?”

Thrown by her question and tone of voice, Nathan frowned. “As far as I know, nothing is, why?”

“Why? What do you mean why, Nathan Dixon?”

“Why would you think there’s something wrong with the children?”

“Because it’s . . .” Chris paused as she glanced over at the digital clock on the nightstand of her hotel room. “Do you happen to know what time it is?”

“Yeah, of course I do. Why do you ask?”

Realizing she wasn’t about to get a straight answer out of him if she chose to pursue that issue, she moved onto a more substantive line of questioning. “Is there a reason you’re calling me at this hour?”

“I need to let you know the children will be staying with Hank Cole’s wife for the next week or so,” Nathan informed her in a laconic, no-nonsense manner so at odds with the way he normally spoke to her when discussing their children.

The change in Nathan’s tone of voice, together with his hesitancy as he spoke, was all Chris had to hear to know his battalion was about to be drawn into the crisis she was reporting on. Ignoring the thousand and one questions that were tumbling through her mind, questions she knew he could not answer without betraying the trust his chain of command had in him, Chris asked if he was alright.

This time he paused for a long, lingering minute before answering. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

Again, he had no need to say another word, for that response was part of a private code they alone shared. It told Chris things on his end of the line were about as bad as they could get. “Nathan, you take care of yourself, you hear?”

“Don’t I always?” he chirped in a futile effort to waylay her fears.

Chris didn’t answer. She had no need to. Nathan was a Dixon and inheritor of a proud warrior tradition that had cost his ancestors everything they held dear simply by obeying their chieftain and standing shoulder to shoulder with their fellow Highlanders in the face of daunting odds.

After sharing a few carefully expressed sentiments, Nathan hung up, leaving Chris to wonder if he would follow his family tradition as James William Adair Dixon had when he had drawn his broadsword and charged troops commanded by the Duke of Cumberland or chose, instead, to do the King’s bidding. It was a choice she expected he would soon need to make, for Nathan was more than a soldier. Like his father, he was a man of principles, a quality she admired and cursed, for he had a habit of doing what he believed was right, not what was expected or expedient. It was a quality that did not always go over well with his superiors and had, over the years, cost him dearly.

Drawing up her knees up to her chest, Chris wrapped her arms around her legs before placing her head on her knees, wondering if she should call Jan. After deciding there was no point in waking her mother-in-law and causing her to lose sleep over something that was beyond their control, Chris sighed, eased back down, and prepared herself as best she could for a long, sleepless night of tossing, turning, and worrying.

The

Fifth

DAY

Chapter 17

*Tucson Air National Guard Base, AZ*

Having finished his briefing, Colonel James Holt felt the need to reiterate the rules of engagement to the F-16 pilots belonging to his squadron who would be on strip alert that morning. “Gentlemen, and Lady,” he added quickly with a weak smile and nod to Captain Juanita Alvarez, the only female pilot in his squadron, “we are weapons hold. No one, under any circumstances, is to return fire without first obtaining permission to do so.” Pausing, he drew in a deep breath, held it a second, then let it out as he continued. “I have no need to remind you the people I may be asking you to go up against are Americans, men and women who volunteered to serve their nation as we all did and, in doing so, took the same oath as each and every one of us did. If things do come down to it and we have no choice but to go against them, it is my hope a simple show of force will be sufficient to dissuade any overt action on the part of the Federal Government against citizens of this state.”

With tensions as high as they were, and threatening to become even worse, no one bothered to ask their commanding officer if his orders negated the right all American servicemen and women had to defend themselves. To a man, the pilots belonging to the Arizona Air National Guard had agreed among themselves that if someone did fire the first shot, it would not be one of them. While each of them prayed in their own way it never came to that, all were ready to stand by the decision of their governor to put an end to the growing lawlessness and anarchy the President’s policy of open borders was resulting in. “I refuse to leave it to my children and grandchildren to restore law and order,” Governor Burress declared repeatedly during interviews with various news agencies and radio talk show hosts. “As one former presidential candidate once said, ‘a nation without borders is not a nation.’ ”

*Naval Air Facility El Centro, California*

After conferring with the base commander, Colonel Shire ordered Major Melick to assemble all officers and senior NCOs, platoon sergeants, and above. There was little chatter as they were gathering in a small room that was part of the hangar where the bulk of the battalion that had been airlifted to the naval base was waiting on the go-signal. On entering the room, Shire hesitated a moment as he looked around the crowded room for something to stand on so all could see him as he spoke. Eventually, he settled for climbing up on the only stable table in the room that would support his weight.

“We’re a go,” Shire announced crisply without preamble. “The same transports that brought us here will deliver us to our objective once they have refueled, been reconfigured for a drop, and their pilots have been briefed. Major Dixon will issue instructions concerning enplaning and further details to the company commanders once I have been informed the Air Force is ready.”

After pausing to allow the assembled leadership of his battalion to take this news onboard, Shire cocked his head back slightly as he drew himself up to his full height. “In the hours to come, I may need to call upon each and every one of you to do something that was, a few short days ago, unthinkable. I expect… no,” he paused as he dropped his chin and took to looking at the tabletop at his feet before once more meeting the gaze of the rangers he commanded. “I demand that you follow my orders and those of your officers without hesitation, without question, no matter how onerous or distasteful they may be. What we do in the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours will be our legacy.”

Again, Shire looked down at his feet as he struggled to come up with something to say, anything that would make what they were about to do more palatable. When he couldn’t, he once more looked down at the tabletop he was standing on and gave his head a shake. Unable to look back up into the upturned faces of his own officers, he sighed. “That is all,” he muttered before carefully climbing down off the table.

There was silence as the officers and NCO’s watched their colonel make his way through them toward the door. Other than giving Nathan and Melick a quick nod and asking if he could have a word with the two of them in private, not another word was spoken as the officers and NCOs filed out of the room behind him.

*Phoenix, Arizona*

Amy Porter was not in the least bit disappointed her interview with Governor Burress had been canceled at the last minute. Unlike the night before, when she’d waited the better part of an hour before the state Adjutant General canceled her sit-down with him, at least someone in the governor’s office had had the courtesy to call the producer she was now working with and inform him the governor would not be available that morning. Not knowing what time the governor would be available, Porter informed the producer assigned to arrange for interviews and live reports not to schedule anything until later that afternoon. “I could use some downtime,” she declared haughtily.

With other demands on her time and the need to run down leads resulting from a spate of wild rumors flying around the station, the producer accepted Porter’s decision without question. After hearing Porter hang up on her, he tossed his cell phone on the studio control panel before him. “Fine by me,” he muttered to himself as he stared at the phone. Then, without missing a beat, he swiveled his seat about to face a technician seated next to him. “Okay, Billy, what have you got in the cue that we can use for the midday news?”

*WNN Studios, New York City*

Emails and text messages are indispensable tools to journalists in the field, allowing them to communicate critical details and background information pertaining to stories they’re covering. There are times, however, when a conversation using a good old-fashioned cell phone was, as the commercial declared, “priceless,” for the tone of a person’s voice and the emphasis they placed on certain words could often convey more meaning then the words themselves.

In the same way Nathan had relied on Chris to understand what he was telling her during his short, but very informative, early morning call without actually needing to spell things out, Chris was able to alert Jan to something that was about to go down. “I’ve decided to chuck the entire schedule of interviews for today I sent you last night and instead, just wing it,” she informed Jan airily.

Without her needing to say another word, Jan knew Chris was onto something. Like her, she wasn’t the kind of journalist who was comfortable with ‘winging it’ when covering a major story. When it came to preparing herself for an interview or doing a piece on a breaking story, she was more than a bit obsessive-compulsive in in her background work during the run-up to it. Nor did Chris need to do anything more than tell her mother-in-law about the call she’d received from Nathan or an exchange that, on the surface, consisted of little more than family-related chitchat. “Ellen Cole, the wife of a company commander in Nathan’s unit, is a dear,” she informed her mother-in-law with a casualness that was anything but. “She’s often told me she doesn’t mind watching Wendy or Little Scott when the battalion is down range.”

Jan had no need for a codebook to decrypt the meaning of that statement. Down range was military slang that could mean advancing down a firing lane during training or, as Jan suspected was the case, going into combat. If her son found it necessary to farm his children out, she had no doubt Chris was referring to the latter, and more ominous definition. Nathan’s battalion was either on its way to Arizona or would be within the next twenty-four hours. Having already done several stories on the way members of the armed forces who were still on active duty were feeding information, and in some cases actually assisting Allen Devin and his people, Jan suspected the Administration would commit Nathan’s ranger battalion without delay, lst word got leaked to Devin or the governor of Arizona. What they would do, either before the rangers arrived if they had sufficient heads-up to prepare something or after it was on the ground was anyone’s guess.

Having shared all she could over her private cell phone, Chris informed Jan she needed to go. “I’ve got a few doors I need to knock on and rocks to kick over to see what I can find.”

“Careful you don’t stub your toe on any of those rocks,” Jan intoned.

“Oh please, Mom, you know me,” Chris declared with a sangfroid that was uncomfortably familiar to Jan, for it reminded her of the way she used to fob Nathan’s father off whenever she was about to embark on an assignment that put her in harm’s way. But unlike her son, she merely reminded Chris to stay in touch. With that, the two women ended their call.

After she put down her cell phone on her desk, and despite the sensitive nature of the subject she’d just discussed with Chris, Jan couldn’t help but snicker. “Let’s see if the NSA can figure *that* call out,” she muttered to herself before coming to her feet. She headed out to alert the producers of various shows’ schedules that in the next few hours, they’d need to be ready at a moment’s notice for a sudden change in the line-up. But she didn’t dare give a heads-up to Amy Porter and Sarah Jennings. To have done so would have been risky, but for different reasons. Eager to get a jump on everyone else so she could lay claim to having an exclusive, Porter’s actions would alert government watchdogs the operational security measures they had in effect to protect the pending assault on the Arizona Home Guard had been compromised. Jan didn’t need to be told even the dullest bulb at Homeland Security would be able to figure out where that leak had originated.

Sarah Jennings was an entirely different kettle of fish. Despite having done an exceptional job covering the story from inside the militia compound, Jan judged her to be too much of a novice to be able to maintain a cool, calm demeanor if she was informed she was about to find herself in the middle of a fight that pitted members of the armed forces against armed Americans for the first time since the Civil War. Unlike Chris, who Jan knew could be discreet when tapping into sources in advance of a story that had yet to break, she believed Sarah Jennings didn’t possess the savvy necessary to do likewise. With her son on the very tip of the spear that was about to be hurled, if it wasn’t already in flight, she wasn’t going to take any chances on an unknown like Jennings. The eager young intern would just have to follow Chris’ example and wing it.

Chapter 18

*Fort Necessity, Arizona*

Had any of her classmates from Columbia School of Journalism even suggested to Sarah Jennings that she would find herself enjoying the company of members of a militia group, she would have laughed in their face. Yet she was, unabashedly so. This unexpected volte-face was due to more than the shared experience of the circumstances they found themselves in, though it did play an undeniable role in this most unlikely rapport. Nor could she pass it off as nothing more than an ability to identify with the people at the heart of the story she was covering. But Jennings dismissed the idea that this tendency (that many journalists experience when on assignment), was her own experience. She had absolutely nothing in common with the men and women who made up the Arizona Home Guard. When she finally did take a moment to ponder this unexpected and, for her, most troubling development, she concluded it was the people themselves. With few exceptions, they were friendly, honest, easygoing and, in a quirky sort of way Jennings often didn’t quite know how to handle, funny.

As astonishing as it was for her to discover she could actually like people who were dedicated members of a militia group, she also grew to appreciate the omnipresence of weapons of every kind, from small caliber pistols no bigger than squirt guns to sinister looking machine guns that fired bullets twice the size of her thumb. More surprisingly, the weapons did not unnerve her in the least. During an unguarded moment, she made mention of this in an offhanded manner to Cardosa as the two of them sat in the satellite truck watching news coverage from WWN in New York and the Tucson station where he worked. “Until we arrived here, the only people I had ever seen with guns were police officers,” she informed him.

Having been raised on a ranch outside of Tucson where he’d been taught how to shot a .22 at age five, at first Cardosa found this difficult to believe. Only after concluding she was serious did he slowly shake his head in utter disbelief as he took to staring at her as if she had suddenly sprouted a second head. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

Taken aback, as much by the incredulity in his voice as by his question, she frowned. “Of course I am,” she countered crossly. “Guns are dangerous. They’re not the sort of thing people where *I* come from have a need for.”

Ignoring his own deep-rooted belief that her observation on the need for guns in a place like New York City was felonious based on what he knew of life in a big East Coast city, Cardosa attempted to point out it wasn’t the weapons that were dangerous in a way he expected she might better understand. “A gun is like a tool,” he informed her in much the same way his father had when he’d been teaching him how to handle one. “Like a camera, it’s as useful or as deadly as the person operating it makes it.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Jennings countered sharply. “Unless it fell on someone, a camera couldn’t kill a person.”

Pinning the young New Englander a hard look through narrow eyes, he snorted. “You of all people should know better than to say something like that. As I recall, it was folks like you who believed, and probably still do, that it was a YouTube video that led to the death of an American ambassador in Benghazi back in 2012.”

Stunned, Jennings drew back as if she’d been slapped in the face, for this was the first time he had rounded on her in such a manner, reminding her in a most direct manner that despite outward appearances, there were differences between herself and people like him, ones that could never be reconciled.

Realizing he’d made his point, and not wishing to sour the easygoing working relationship the two of them had settled into, Cardosa turned his attention to a more pressing matter. Looking away from her and out through the open side door of the satellite truck they were seated in, he made a show of scanning the militia compound before grunting. “Something’s up.”

“What do you mean, something’s up?” she asked, even as she was turning her gaze away from him in an effort to see what he was talking about.

“When Sam and I showed up for breakfast this morning the mess hall was near empty. The few militiamen who were there belonged to Devin’s support staff, the techies, hackers, and such who had just come off the night shift. Even they went about wolfing down their breakfast quickly and in silence before dashing back to their posts. It’s as if they’re expecting something to happen.”

“Like what?”

After looking back at Jennings, Cardosa shrugged. “Can’t say. I asked a couple of them, but no one was in the mood for chitchat, another reason that’s got me thinking there’s something in the wind.” Pausing, Cardosa turned his attention away from Jennings, swiveled his stool about, and began to go over the settings of the control panel he was seated at. “Whatever it is, I suggest you hang loose and be ready for anything.”

Spooked as much by the Arizonan’s tone of voice as his admonishment, Jennings continued to stare at him as he quietly went about making sure they could broadcast live at a moment’s notice, wondering what she could do to prepare herself to deal with whatever it was that had the otherwise laid-back producer so on edge. Seizing upon the first thing that came to mind, she sprang to her feet. “I’d better go and do something with my hair,” she declared.

“You do that,” Cardosa muttered absentmindedly without taking his eyes off the satellite uplink control panel. “As soon as I’m finished here, I’ll check on Sam and make sure she’s ready.”

With that, Jennings stepped down out of the satellite truck and headed to the room where she’d been staying, looking about as she went in an effort to see if she could detect any clues as to what was about to go down, never realizing her focus was far too narrow, that the new threat to the Arizona Home Guard would come, quite literally, out of the blue.

*In the Skies Over Southwest Arizona*

The exhalation Juanita Alvarez usually felt whenever the order to scramble sent her rocketing down the runway and up into a near vertical climb as her F-16 clawed its way skyward had been absent. So, too, was the sense of unfettered freedom she felt whenever she broke her bonds with the earth below. The mission she and her wingman were on this day was no drill, no weekend joy ride whose sole purpose was to log hours or sharpen their proficiency. Nor did the bogies they had been dispatched to intercept belong to a foreign power or a drug cartel. What she would do when the moment came, a moment that was growing closer every second, was still very much in doubt. It was not a question of how she could execute the maneuver her squadron commander had prescribed, it was a question of “Would she?”

Having reached operational altitude and leveled out, Alvarez turned her attention to making a quick check of her instruments before turning onto the heading that would lead them to an intercept of an inbound flight of bogies that had originated in California. She was in the midst of this when the voice of her wingman, using the call sign her squadron mates had tagged her with, sounded in her ear. “Al, are you ready for this?”

Looking up from her instruments, she glanced over to where Dickey Sinclair, an airline pilot in civilian life and her wingman on this day, had taken up station just off her right wingtip. With his sun visor up, she could clearly see he was staring at her, waiting for her to answer his plaintive inquiry.

Unable to reply, for she still did not know if she could go through with what was expected of them, she simply stared back.

“Neither am I,” Sinclair stated when he realized her silence told him all he needed to know.

Yet despite the doubt both shared, the two Arizona Air National Guard pilots continued to vector in on the flight of C-17 they had been dispatched to challenge.

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The oppressive weight of his battle-rattle and parachutes, the steady roar of the transport’s engines, and the normal uptick in heart rate that always preceded a jump, whether it was training or combat, were the furthest things from Nathan’s mind. As they grew closer to the computed air release point, or CARP, which was nothing more than an invisible point in the sky one thousand feet above ground level where the battalion would begin spilling out of the lumbering transports, his thoughts were on what Colonel Shire had shared with him and Major Melick after he’d addressed the battalion’s officers and senior NCO’s earlier that morning. For once Nathan found himself thankful he was a staff officer, the military version of a technician responsible for one of several staff sections that were part of a lethal killing machine made up of highly trained professional soldiers armed to the teeth. While it was true he was the officer who had devised the detailed plan that set that machine in motion, it was Colonel Shire’s concept that had shaped it and his responsibility to set it in motion.

The plan Nathan had come up with the day before was little different from other plans he had cobbled together in the past. It was the nature of their objective that made this one so difficult to wrap his head around. Like Juanita Alvarez, he was wondering if Shire would be able to follow through with his stated intentions, both those in the written operations order he had signed and the special instructions he had personally issued to Nathan and the XO he expected them to follow once they were on the ground. “Gentlemen,” Shire had intoned gruffly, “we have our orders. If either of you have any reservations, any trepidations, this is the time to tell me. No one will hold it against you if you believe you find you cannot obey them.”

That, Nathan told himself as he listened to this colonel, was bullshit. His father had told him when Nathan had been a cadet at VMI there would be times when he’d find himself having to make a call that’ll test him. *“Most of the time those crises of conscience will involve nothing more than fudging a report or rendering an answer you know to be less than honest. Unfortunately,*” his father continued as his voice took on a solemn tone, *“the day may come when you’ll find yourself facing the same dilemma Robert E. Lee did when he had to decide whether he would abide by the oath he took when he was commissioned, or stand with his fellow Virginians. On that day, son, nothing I or anyone else can say or do will be of any help in guiding you. You’ll be on your own.”*

Nathan’s somber ruminations and reflections were brought to an abrupt end when the transport’s crew chief informed him and Hank Cole, who was seated across from him near the doors at the rear of the transport, they were ten minutes out.

As the majority of the personnel onboard the C-17 Nathan was on belonged to Cole’s company, Nathan deferred to Cole when it came time to assign jumpmaster duties. He also gave the easygoing Virginian the privilege of being the first out the door. Having nothing to prove, Nathan was content to wait until the last man had exited the aircraft before stepping out into thin air.

Cole, on the other hand, did. Unlike Nathan, who was a staff officer, Cole was a company commander, an airborne ranger company commander. As such, he was expected to lead the way, just as every man in the battalion knew without needing to be told Shire, who was in the lead transport, would be the first man in the battalion out the door. It was more than an article of faith that commanders of airborne troops were the first to exit the aircraft, whether it was a training jump or into combat. It was a proud tradition established by men like James M. Gavin and Maxwell D. Taylor during the Second World War and upheld by every commanding officer who was worth a damn since then.

The drill leading up to a jump never varied. Advances in technology and the way America waged war had little impact on the procedures a jumpmaster followed as he readied his charges to put their faith in foliage green low-porosity nylon and hurled themselves out of perfectly good airplanes. Arrayed in four rows, with two on the left side of the aircraft facing each other and two likewise seated on the right, after crying out “GET READY,” the first command Hank Cole gave was “OUTBOARD PERSONNEL, STAND UP!” This order, accompanied by arm gestures for the benefit of those who could not hear him above the roar of the transport’s engines, brought the row of rangers seated with their backs to the outer fuselage to their feet and, following a quarter turn, facing to the rear of the aircraft. Cole, repeating the same visual hand and arm signal, then called out “INBOARD PERSONNEL, STAND UP!” causing the two rows of rangers seated back to back in the center of the transport’s cargo bay to merge with those already on their feet; there were now but two lines, or sticks, of rangers facing him at the rear of the aircraft, all grasping one of two anchor line cables running down the length of the transport’s cargo bay.

Once he saw everyone had stopped jostling about and was ready to continue, Cole raised his hands, cocked the index fingers on each of them, and gave the command “HOOK UP!” Up and down the length of the cargo bay the rangers he commanded removed the six-inch static line snap hook from where it had been attached to his reserve and hooked it onto the line cable they were hanging onto for balance.

Even as the last of his people were giving the fifteen-foot static line that connected the static line snap hook to the deployment bag of their parachute a tug, Cole commanded “CHECK STATIC LINE!” Over the roar of the transport’s engine, the sound of a hundred static lines’ snap hooks rattling against the cable they were fastened to could be heard as his men gave the static line a tug before tracing it from the snap hook down as far as each man could reach.

The same thrill that always sent Nathan’s heart racing just prior to a jump ticked up with each command Cole shouted out. It was a visceral response brought on by the anticipation of what he was about to do, enhanced by the blast of air, dubbed “the hawk” by military jumpers, that filled the transport’s cargo bay when the aircraft’s crew chief opened the side doors, even as Cole was barking commands. For the next few minutes what they would need to do once on the ground was forgotten. Nathan’s whole being was squarely focused on preparing himself to follow Hank Cole’s men out the door.

Lost in going over his own mental checklist, it took the transport’s crew chief several tries to get Nathan’s attention. When she finally saw him turn his face toward hers, the crew chief covered her boom mike with a hand and leaned toward him. Though they were almost nose-to-nose, she had to shout in order to be heard. “My pilot says the lead aircraft is being challenged by Air National Guard fighters.”

“Challenged? What kind of challenge?”

“To turn back, or else.”

The military has its own version of urban legends, stories seldom recorded as part of official unit histories. Like all urban legends, they are passed on by word of mouth by someone who was ‘*There*.’ The one that popped into Nathan’s mind upon hearing the message the transport’s pilot was relaying to him through his crew chief concerned the combat jump made by the 1st and 2nd Ranger battalions during the 1983 invasion of Granada. It tells of how the pilot of the lead aircraft, spooked by triple-A fire being thrown up by the forces defending Maurice Bishop International Airport, was about to abort the jump when the battalion commander in the lead aircraft *persuaded* him it would be unwise to do so in a most direct, if unorthodox manner. Whether the story was true and the method the ranger battalion commander had relied on to convince the pilot to continue on was accurate, did not matter. The consequences Nathan imagined he’d suffer as a consequence of the actions he was contemplating did not matter either. What was important was doing whatever it took to see that his battalion, or at least the part that was with him, made the jump.

With his eyes firmly fixed on those of the crew chief, he snaked his right hand under the webbing of his parachute’s harness, unsnapped the strap securing his pistol in its holster, and drew it in a manner that was both obvious and deliberate. Holding it aloft next to his head with the muzzle pointed up so it was clearly visible to the crew chief, without ever taking his eyes off those of the crew chief, he cocked the hammer with his thumb. “Inform your pilot he *will* maintain a heading to the CARP and, when we reach it, give the signal to go.”

Paying no heed to Hank Cole who was doing his best to ignore what was going on between Nathan and the crew chief as he continued to shout out his pre-jump commands, the crew chief looked at the pistol Nathan was holding up, then back into his eyes. Removing her hand from the boom mike, she relayed his message.

When she heard her pilot’s response after several long and very tense seconds, she put her hand back over the boom mike. “My captain says he will comply, provided doing so does not endanger this aircraft or its cargo.”

With a nod, Nathan acknowledged the crew chief, but did not re-holster his pistol, a fact he made sure she was well aware of.

*Fort Necessity, Arizona*

The distinct whine of jet engines belonging to aircraft boring in from the west, growing louder and nearer with each passing second, provided Cardosa with the answer to the question he’d been seeking all morning. “It’s showtime,” he shouted to Emerson who’d been seated on the floor of the satellite truck with her legs dangling out its open side door.

Without having to hear another word, she grabbed the camera that had been sitting on the truck’s floor next to her, hoisted it up onto her shoulder, and came to her feet. It took her but a moment to orient herself to the same sound that had alerted Cardosa. Spinning around until she was facing west, she caught sight of a cluster of black dots that were growing larger and nearer with each passing second.

From the truck, she heard Cardosa call out, “We’re live,” both to her and Jennings who had suddenly appeared as if out of nowhere. Reaching into the truck, the young intern snatched the hand mike she’d left on Cardosa’s console and ran past Emerson until she was in front of her. Executing a quick quarter turn that allowed her to be in the shot, but off to one side and in profile, Jennings thrust her arm skyward and began describing what she was seeing.

*WNN Offices, New York City*

The call from Jack Brant, the owner of the network, concerned Jan. When asked if she could tone down what the White House Communications Director called the network’s pro-militia rhetoric and take up a stance more favorable to the administration, she informed Brant all she could do was follow the story and go wherever it led. “We’re not a public relations firm,” she reminded him. “You of all people know better than I that the news is what the news is. As they say in baseball, I call ’em as I see ’em.”

Brant was mulling over her response when her assistant threw open the door. “You need to get down to the main control room, *stat*.”

Without needing to ask why or what, Jan interrupted her boss’ ruminations. “I gotta go,” she snapped, then hung up on him. She knew he wouldn’t mind, not really. Brant understood the news business and the need for those he put his trust in to keep their priorities straight. Besides, the TV monitor in his office tuned to one of several networks he owned told him all he needed to know as to why Jan had bailed on him.

*Washington, D.C.*

Standing just outside the satellite truck parked near the White House, Chris Dixon watched the images being broadcast live from Arizona through its open side door. No one needed to tell her what was going on. She not only knew what was about to happen, she knew who would soon be tumbling out of the lumbering transports crawling across the monitor’s screen. The only thing she did not know, what she could not know, was what would happen when the rangers who were part of her husband’s battalion landed. With tensions as high as they were, and the resolve of Devin’s militia as firm as it had been the first day, the only question that remained, one that caused Chris to hold her breath, was just how far both sides would go before one backed down or . . .

A quick shake of her head kept her from going any farther down that road. Having no wish to think about what would happen if shots were exchanged, all she could do was watch and wait, just like millions of Americans were doing. That, and be ready when Jan got around to calling on her to cover the story from her location.

*Fort Necessity, Arizona*

The sound of a pair of fighters behind her streaking in from the east caused Emerson to spin about. With measured ease that belied the excitement she was experiencing as she witnessed the unfolding drama through her camera lens, Emerson ever so slowly opened up the focal view to capture the fighters she was now tracking as they approached the compound. They passed overhead at low altitude, and made straight for the gaggle of slow moving transports coming from the opposite direction.

Jennings, who was doing all she could to keep the pitch of her voice in check and her running narrative from matching her heart rate did her best to describe what she was seeing. And while she had no clue as to what the aircraft she was watching were called, even she was able to grasp what was about to happen.

*In the Skies West of Fort Necessity, Arizona*

With her eyes focused squarely on the lead C-17 that was growing larger and larger at an alarming rate, Juanita Alvarez held the joystick of her F-16 steady in a death grip. “Here we go,” she cried out to her wingman who had one eye on the approaching transports and the other on Alvarez’s F-16 as he struggled to ignore the urge to break right in check. Instead, he stayed glued to her four o’clock.

Only in retrospect did Alvarez realize she had no need to worry, for the pilot of the lead C-17 understood what his aircraft could and could not do. He also knew waiting until the last possible second to see if the oncoming Arizona Air Guard pilots would flinch first was a non-starter, not with a hundred plus soldiers lined up and on their feet in the cargo bay with nothing to keep themselves from tumbling about all over the place during a sudden maneuver—save the tentative grasp they had on nylon web static lines attached to a thin wire cable. Fighting every instinct that demanded he juke sharply to the right in order to avoid the oncoming F-16s, the pilot of the lead C-17 eased into a slow, steady turn, hoping as he did so that the pilots of the oncoming fighters would do likewise. What the transports behind him did was not an immediate concern. Saving his ass, those of his crew, the rangers he was responsible for, and even the lives of the Air National Guard pilots coming straight at him was.

Without having to be as careful as the transport’s pilot needed to be, the second Alvarez saw the lead transport’s right wing begin to dip, she called out to her wingman. “BREAK, BREAK, BREAK,” over the radio a split second before giving her joystick a quick jerk to the right. Though the controls of her F-16 were fly-by-wire that did not rely on physical strength to control the aircraft’s flight surfaces, this was not the time to hold anything back. She put her all into this effort, hoping as the G force of her radical maneuver began to push her into her seat her wingman was doing likewise.

On the ground, all Jennings could do was stand agog, watching the lumbering transport go one way while the sleek fighters went the other. From where she stood, it looked as if they had barely missed, when in fact there had been a fairly comfortable margin of safety.

At first Emerson didn’t know where to aim her camera as the distance between aircraft involved in the near collision grew. Then, with the instincts that made her such a valuable asset to her station manager, she pointed her camera at the second transport. Seemingly unfazed by what had just transpired ahead of it, the lumbering aircraft and those behind it continued to serenely come on, growing larger and more ominous with each passing second.

When Jennings saw Emerson’s camera was still pointed skyward, she swiveled her head about to see what the camera was focused on. She managed to pivot about in place just in time to see the parachutes of the first jumpers falling away from the second transport blossom. Rather than being over, she realized this story, like her career as a journalist, was just beginning.

Chapter 19

*In the Skies North of Fort Necessity, Arizona*

Watching Hank Cole’s men shuffle past him and disappear out the door only added to Nathan’s urge to go, to go now and get on with it. As tempting as it would to say the hell with proper order and procedures by pulling rank and bulling his way to the door, for an officer to disrupt the well-honed drill that was rapidly emptying the transport’s cargo bay of rangers would have been more than unseemly. In Nathan’s case, it would have deprived him of a brief, yet important view of how close the lead element of the battalion was going to land near its intended drop zone. Having carefully studied the satellite photos of the undistinguished patch of desert he expected to see once he was clear of the transport and was under canopy, the sight that did greet him when it finally came his turn to exit the aircraft and he’d completed a hasty but thorough check of his canopy to ensure all was as it should be was something of a jolt.

A CARP, or calculated airborne release point, was just that, a calculation that depended on a number of factors. When some of those factors, such as winds aloft over the DZ, could not be measured with any degree of accuracy, the ‘C’ in CARP became an ‘E’ for estimated, making the designated point where the pilot turned on the green light more of a WAG, short for wild ass guess.

Selection of the drop zone had been an issue much debated during the planning for the operation. In order to eliminate any possibility of a mis-drop scattering American rangers south of the territorial boundaries of the United States, Colonel Shire had been directed to look for a DZ north of the mountain Fort Necessity was located on. To give the battalion time to assemble immediately after the drop without any interference from either Devin’s militia or members of the Arizona National Guard, it was deemed prudent to stay well west of the main north-south highway where the National Guard and State Police had set up roadblocks to control access to the militia compound. Given these parameters, Nathan was limited to finding a DZ that was relatively flat and clear of any major obstacles or native vegetation somewhere in the northwest quadrant of the battalion’s zone of operation that achieved the first of the objectives Shire wished to achieve without undue risk. He needed a DZ that would prevent Devin’s militia from interfering with the battalion while it was sorting itself out after the drop while, at the same time, being close enough to where they could see the drop.

Initially, Nathan thought this would be easy. Fort Necessity and the mountain it was on, after all, was in the Senora Desert. Chuck Randall quickly disabused him of that assumption. “If you’re looking for a nice level patch of ground covered with soft sand, I’m afraid you’re out of luck. The chief characteristic of the area we’ll be operating in is rocky and broken ground, covered liberally with mountain yucca, saguaro cactus, Arizona barrel cactus, prickly pear cactus and organ pipe cactus, all of which will ruin your whole day if you happen to land on top of it. Whoever decided to go with a drop instead of turning us into truck-borne rangers didn’t do their homework.”

“Either that, or they’re in league with the Colonel Devin,” he added under his breath. The thought that someone back in Washington, D.C. or worse, on the DoD staff, had intentionally set out to hamstring the battalion was disturbing. It did not, however, change the requirement Nathan had to find a suitable drop zone that met all his commanding officer’s needs.

In the brief time he had under canopy, he saw that all his efforts to find the least worrisome drop zone had been for naught, for the pilot of his transport had delayed signaling Hank Cole to commence sending his people out the door until he, the pilot, was sure the Air National Guard F-16s and the lead C-17 were well clear of his flight path. This placed the actual airborne release point just north of Fort Necessity rather than well to the northwest of it. This momentary lapse in judgment on the pilot’s part was made even worse by a serious miscalculation of the winds aloft, an error that was causing the men who’d been first out the door to drift toward the militia compound.

Having no wish to land right in Devin’s lap with them, and with little more than half a minute left before he landed, Nathan brought his canopy around until he faced to the northeast. Even before his canopy had ceased oscillating, he grabbed its two front risers and pulled on them, hoping the air he spilled out of the rear of his canopy would be enough to propel him away from the militia compound.

The only bright spot he could latch onto just before landing was the sight of the transports trailing the one he had exited, making their drop farther to the west, pretty much where they were supposed to. Perhaps, Nathan thought to himself before turning his full attention back to what he was doing, all was not lost. “Famous last words,” he muttered bitterly a split second before boots, butt, and helmet hit the ground in what passed as a parachute landing fall for him.

*Fort Necessity, Arizona*

The sight of a paratrooper coming down right over top of the satellite truck almost left Sarah speechless. Almost, but not quite. “The attack on Fort Necessity by the Federal government seems to have gone awry,” she declared in a tone of voice she hoped was calm and clear. Emerson, who’d spun about to focus her attention on the soldier Jennings was looking up at caught him just as he caught sight of the two women and the satellite truck. Deciding the truck presented the greatest danger to him, he ignored Jennings and Emerson as he executed a quick turn that carried him away from the truck, but caused his parachute to oscillate. And while he did manage to steer clear of the truck and the two women managed to scramble clear of the patch of ground they expected him to hit, his radical last second maneuver left him no time to recover. The result was a hard landing that broke one of his ankles.

Emerson’s temptation to turn back around and aim her camera to the northwest where the sky was now alive with green parachutes trailing away from huge transport planes was checked by the drama playing out right in front of her. The paratrooper who’d almost landed on top of her had been stunned by his injury, leaving him all but helpless as his canopy ever so gently settled to the ground before it was re-inflated by a gust of wind, dragging him across the compound.

Jennings, who’d been doing her best to describe the chaotic scene unfolding around her, suddenly forgot the first rule of journalism. Rather than remaining aloof of the events she was reporting on, she ran toward the stricken paratrooper. Like everything she’d done since arriving here, she was responding to the situation at hand without taking the time to think ahead. Just what she expected to do when she reached the stricken paratrooper was a question both Emerson and Cardosa were asking themselves as they watched her, Emerson through the lens of the camera she held trained on the young intern and Cardosa who was watching the image being relayed from Emerson’s camera, to the truck’s receiver, then directly to WNN’s studios in New York via a satellite uplink.

It wasn’t until she had almost reached the paratrooper that Jennings finally got around to asking herself how she intended to save the stricken paratrooper from being dragged across the compound. Fortunately, a militiaman who’d been standing guard just outside the entrance to the compound’s operation center came to the rescue. After slinging his weapons over his shoulder, he threw up his hands and ran head long into the billowing canopy, latching onto the first handful of nylon he was able to grasp. Like a seaman hauling in a billowing sail, he gathered the parachute up into a ball until the last of the wind had been spilled from it and the ranger, who was still attached to it, was no longer being dragged. On reaching the ranger, Jennings dropped to one knee and, remembering at the last second she was still miked up, asked him if he was hurt in a voice she hoped showed her concern.

Having come to a stop, despite the gear that made doing so difficult, the ranger had curled up into a ball. Wrapping both hands around his left shin, he pulled his leg up until that knee almost touched his chin. Without opening his eyes, which were screwed shut due to the excruciating pain he felt, he let out a string of expletives that were caught on the mike attached to Jennings’ blouse. Every one of them was picked up and sent along to the producer in New York who had no time to edit them out before they were broadcast to WNN’s viewing public.

Unschooled in first aid, the young intern did what came natural to her: She called for help. All around her, as the compound came alive with armed militiamen racing about, gathering up those rangers who’d had the misfortune of landing right on top of their objective, the cry “Medic,” rang out. Having seen enough movies to know what this meant, Jennings reached out and put a comforting hand on the injured soldier before her. “Don’t worry, help is on the way.”

On hearing this, Captain Hank Cole opened his eyes and looked up at a face he’d seen on TV. Behind her another woman appeared, one with a camera resting on her shoulder that she was aiming directly at him. In the span of a single heartbeat the pain caused by his broken ankle was forgotten as Cole once more closed his eyes. With a groan, he launched into a fresh string of expletives that, together with the others he had uttered, were the first words the world heard from the men who had been sent to suppress Allen Devin and the Arizona Home Guard.

*The White House Situation Room, Washington, D.C.*

Mashing the mute button on the television’s remote, Timothy Rowland spun about in his seat and thrust his chin out as he slapped the flat of his free hand on the conference table. The scathing glare with which he fixed the Air Force brigadier across the room who was the liaison between the White House and Pentagon didn’t faze that officer in the least. What was causing him to squirm in his seat was the way the pilots of the transports were botching a drop being broadcast live to every corner of the globe, compliments of World News Network.

“What in the hell do you call *that*?” Rowland thundered.

Not sure whether the President’s chief of staff was referring to the drop itself or the way the rangers who’d landed inside the militia compound were behaving as they were being rounded up, the brigadier turned to an Army special ops colonel dispatched to the White House by the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations. Having drawn the short straw, the colonel was tagged to be present in the situation room to answer any questions the President or his staff had concerning the operation playing out in Arizona. Having never been a fan of politicians who dabbled in military matters, the colonel returned Rowland’s contemptuous gaze. “I’d say they were conducting themselves in a manner befitting members of the armed forces who’d been thrown headlong into a tough situation on short notice, a situation that had been created by a bunch of people who haven’t a clue as to what they’re doing.”

Not used to having someone talk back to him, Rowland all but jumped out of his chair. Leaning over as far as he could, he planted one hand on the tabletop for support while pointing the TV remote he was still holding in the other at the Army special ops colonel. “*You!* Get out of here.”

Coming to his feet slowly, the colonel drew himself up to his full height. After giving the hem of his uniform blouse a tug, he smiled. “With pleasure.” With that, he executed a smart about-face and left the room.

When the colonel was gone, Rowland turned his gaze back to the Air Force brigadier. “Is there anyone in uniform who knows what he’s doing that doesn’t talk back?”

Before the brigadier could answer, one of Rowland’s assistants who was seated behind him cleared his throat. “I believe one of the presidential aides, a Major DeWitt, served in a ranger battalion once.”

Glancing behind him, Rowland scowled. “Get him.”

*On the North Lawn of the White House, Washington, D.C.*

Watching events unfold before her very eyes or being beamed in real time to a battery of TV monitors in a satellite truck was nothing new to Chris Dixon. Seeing someone she knew, a man who enjoyed engaging her in a war of wits at battalion functions and played with her children at backyard barbeques, however, was a new experience for her, a very unsettling one. What made it even more unsettling was the knowledge that her husband was somewhere nearby, perhaps even one of the figures in the background the Arizona news crew was aiming at with their camera. The only comfort she could latch onto at the moment was the way Allen Devin’s people were treating the men belonging to Nathan’s battalion.

The behavior of both rangers and militiamen struck her as being at odds with the circumstances that had literally thrown them together. Rather than dealing with them as if they were deadly foes, after disarming the rangers who had landed in their midst, the members of the Arizona Home Guard were treating the rangers who’d gone astray as if they were nothing more than neighbors who’d unexpectedly dropped in on them for no other reason than a friendly visit. Just how close Chris’ analogy came to being true was something no one who was watching events in Arizona unfold from afar could possibly imagine. As the old saying goes, *you just had to be there.*

Chapter 20

*The Objective Rally Point, Northwest of Fort Necessity, Arizona*

Nathan was feeling more like Moses leading the Chosen to the Promised Land than an officer in command of rangers. After gathering up A Company personnel who’d managed to keep from landing within the confines of the militia compound, Nathan led them to the battalion’s ORP located five kilometers northwest of Fort Necessity. This Biblical allusion was made complete when a pair of National Guard Humvees appeared. Fortunately, unlike Pharaoh’s chariots, they made no move to interfere with Nathan as he and Cole’s officers and NCOs who were with him went about organizing the rump of A Company into some semblance of a tactical formation. As the M2 machine guns mounted on the National Guard vehicles were turned off to one side and pointed skyward in what Nathan took to be a sign by their crews they didn’t consider the rangers an imminent threat, he reciprocated by having the rangers with him sling arms when it came time to move out.

Upon arriving at the ORP late in the afternoon, Nathan wasn’t in the least bit surprised to discover that Captain Wade Modjeski, the commanding officer of C Company, was the senior officer present. The relief on Modjeski’s face and his tone of voice when he reported to Nathan was palpable. “Jesus, sir, am I glad to see you.”

As much as he shared Modjeski’s sentiment, having had ample opportunity to sort himself out and think things through during his trek to the battalion’s ORP, Nathan was better able to keep his own feelings in check, allowing him to respond to the young captain’s animated greeting in a no-nonsense, businesslike manner. “Okay Wade, what have we got?”

Reassured by both the presence of someone who could relieve him of the burden of command he’d been shouldering and Nathan’s calm demeanor, Modjeski took to describing the situation at the ORP as the two officers made their way to a spot located its center where he had established a makeshift headquarters. There Nathan found people belonging to his own company headquarters element and those members of the battalion staff who had been scattered about in other transports. Among the latter was Master Sergeant Jefferson, who greeted him with grin and a cup of coffee. “We were beginning to worry about you, major. I was just telling the captain here it’s not like you to go wandering off just when things are about to get exciting.” When Jefferson saw the look of concern on his major’s face, the sergeant cast a quick glance off to one side to where the pair of National Guard Humvees that had been following the stragglers Nathan had gathered up and brought in. Both were stopped several hundred meters short of the defensive perimeter Modjeski had established.

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about them,” Nathan informed both Jefferson and Modjeski. “In fact, they’re just what I need at the moment.”

Both Jefferson and Modjeski shared a quick quizzical glance before turning their full attention back to Nathan.

“It’s going to be dark soon,” he explained. “Before that happens I need to speak with their commanding officer and see if we can come up with some kind of agreement that will keep his people and ours from bumping into each other in the middle of the night and doing something we’ll all regret.”

After taking a moment to mull this over, Modjeski nodded. “Makes sense.”

“That it does,” Jefferson agreed. “Why don’t I wander over there and do a little liaising?”

With a wry grin and nod of appreciation, Nathan hoisted the cup of coffee he was holding by way of acknowledging his NCO’s suggestion. “I’d appreciate that.” Having taken care of that necessary chore, he turned to Modjeski. “Okay Wade, how about giving me a quick rundown on what you’ve been able to collect and the dispositions of the battalion while it’s still light.”

“Not sure if A Company was going to close up on us, I spread my company out to cover its sector,” Modjeski explained. “B and D companies are where they should be.”

Satisfied the young captain had the situation well in hand, Nathan affirmed his approval of Modjeski’s decision with a grunt. “Show me.”

“Right this way, sir,” Modjeski replied as he stepped off smartly with Nathan in tow.

*The Offices of the Governor of Arizona, Phoenix*

Amy Porter feared that leaving the militia compound when she had and going to Phoenix instead was proving to be a mistake, the kind that would haunt her for a long, long time. It was a serious lapse in judgment on her part, made worse by doing what she was told and leaving the annoying little brat Jan Fields had saddled her with there, together with a news crew and satellite truck. As the lead journalist on site, Porter could have insisted on staying where the only story outside of Washington that mattered was. She’d done it before and had been right to do so. Making those kinds of calls and having the chutzpah to stand by them was what had made her career. Not bothering to do so this time, she feared, could just as easily bring it to an ignoble end as word of her faux pas spread within the tight-knit but professionally incestuous little world where journalists like her lived.

Determined to make up for this mistake, Porter set out to snag the first one-on-one interview with the governor of Arizona in the aftermath of the decision by the President to send a ranger battalion against Allen Devin’s militia. Doing so was not as easy as she had hoped it would be. After giving a short statement to the press shortly after being briefed on the situation, Governor Christopher Burress had locked himself away in his office with a covey of advisors and state officials where they had remained all afternoon, plotting and debating, Porter imagined, over how they were going to extricate themselves from the mess Allen Devin had dropped them in.

Ignoring every effort to shoo her away as well as repeated calls from the local affiliate who wanted to use the news crew she had with her to go with one of their own reporters to assess the sentiment of state legislators and Burress’ political rivals, Porter refused to abandon her quest. “Please tell the Governor I would appreciate a moment of his time when it’s convenient,” she repeatedly informed the governor’s executive assistant. Efforts to impress the woman by reminding her who she was and making it clear she had every intention of waiting as long as it took to see the governor were for naught. When politeness failed to rid herself of the annoying New York journalist by informing her she was wasting her time, Burress’ assistant resorted to sarcasm by looking over to where Porter was seated from time to time and acting as if she were surprised to see her. “Oh!” she’d chirp. *“You’re* still here?”

It wasn’t until early evening that Porter’s persistence was rewarded. When the door to Burress’ office finally opened and harried officials sallied forth to carry out their governor’s orders, Porter leaped to her feet and made for the open door like a hound that had caught a scent of blood.

Having expected this, the executive assistant rose up from behind her desk and was about to throw herself in front of Porter when the governor himself emerged from his office. His only reason for doing so had been to ask his assistant if she would call down to the executive dining room and have them send something up for the two of them, for they still had a great deal more to do before either could call it a day. Upon seeing Porter headed his way with a cameraman on her heels, he made the kind of snap decision he was famous for.

Pausing in the open doorway of his office, he reasoned now would be as good a time as any to make public the plan he, his chief political advisors, and a number of other state governors had spent the afternoon cobbling together. After waving his assistant off, with more effort than such a simple gesture required, he prepared to greet Amy Porter with a smile as she approached. “Ms. Porter, your timing is impeccable.”

Having expected an entirely different response from a man besieged by the overwhelming weight the Federal government was to bring down on him, Porter was momentarily thrown by the governor’s manner, a point he picked up on, but kept to himself. “I was about to ask my assistant to have dinner brought up to my office. Would you care to join me and, if you would like, have a nice quiet chat while we wait?”

Burress’ charming manner, coupled with his invitation to join him for an impromptu dinner, threw Porter. This, she told herself as he was ushering her and her crew into his office, was not the way a politician facing a crisis behaved, especially one who had to deal with a Federal government that had clearly demonstrated earlier that day it was prepared to go to any length to bring his state back into full compliance with the law. This led her to wonder if he really understood the true magnitude of the consequences his support of Devin would be for him and the people who had put him in office. The idea that it was the Federal government and not the state of Arizona that needed to be worried never occurred to her. In the world she was familiar with, one in which the Federal authority was an important and often times dominant part of every aspect of twenty-first century American life, things didn’t work that way.

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“No doubt you have a number of questions for me,” Burress began once he saw Porter was about ready to begin, but before she had a chance to speak.

“Well yes, of course,” she blurted without thinking. “For starters I, and the American people, would like to know how you intend to respond to the day’s events.”

“I assume you’re talking about what happened down in the southwestern corner of the state.”

“Yes, of course,” she shot back without betraying the astonishment she felt over the governor’s dismissive attitude and the easygoing manner so at odds with the serious nature of the subject they were discussing.

For Burress, this was an act, an opportunity to calm the jangled nerves of his own electorate as well as communicate a picture of his serene confidence in a plan he and a number of other state governors he was in close contact with were piecing together. Easing back in his seat, Burress clasped his hands in his lap and smiled. “There’s really no need to become overly concerned with the kerfuffle involving members of the Arizona Home Guard and troops belonging to the 75th Ranger Regiment that landed near the compound they refer to as Fort Necessity.”

“I wouldn’t call the use of Federal troops to suppress an uprising a kerfuffle,” Porter countered.

“What would you call it, Ms. Porter? An invasion?”

“No, of course not,” she quickly countered.

“Well it was,” Burress declared sharply as he suddenly dropped what his friend’s, associates, and political opponents called his downhome country charm. Lurching forward, he planted both hands on the arm of his chair and took to staring at Porter in a manner that was intended to convey the anger he felt. “Without so much as a warning, with no prior consultation or coordination with my office, and contravening the very laws he is obligated to follow, the President of the United States violated the rights of citizens of this sovereign state, first by staging a raid on an organization that is recognized by the laws of this state, then by threatening to use the military to punish it for the crime of attempting to enforce laws the President and his administration have a policy of ignoring.”

Porter was unfazed by this sudden change in Burress’ demeanor. “As I understand it, under the Insurrection Act the President is well within his rights to employ elements of the armed forces when the government is in danger,” she countered sharply.

“Just what government are you referring to, Ms. Porter? The government by the people, for the people, and of the people of the United States, or the one politicians and bureaucrats in Washington have created for themselves and their special interests?”

“You talk as if there are two governments, Governor Burress.”

“Oh, there most definitely are, Ms. Porter. I contend the current structure of the Federal government and how it exercises its authority bears no resemblance to that which our founding fathers set forth in the Constitution. Every branch of the Federal government, the executive, the congress, and the judiciary has lost its way. The why and the how doesn’t matter, not really. What does matter is that it no longer represents the will of *we the people*.”

“In your opinion,” Porter murmured snidely.

“You have been spending far too much time in New York City and not doing what a journalist of your acumen should be doing, Ms. Porter. I dare say if you spend time with the people of this nation and listen to what they are saying, I mean really listen, you’d find that it is you and people like you who are sadly out of step with what the hard working men and women who are the heart and soul of this country want for them and their children.”

Having no wish to lose control of this interview or allow Burress to use it to promote his agenda, Porter checked her natural combativeness. In a manner that had served her well in the past when dealing with politicians when she needed to knock them off their rhetorical soapbox, she attempted to steer the conversation away from where Burress was taking it and back to the crisis at hand. “By siding with Colonel Devin and members of the Arizona Home Guard, you are pitting the people of your state against the Federal government. What do you possibly hope to gain from such a confrontation?”

Having expected the New York journalist to ask a question along those lines, Burress was more than prepared to respond, for this was a point several of the governors he had been in touch with had put to him. “As I was saying, Ms. Porter, when we use the term Federal government we must be careful not to confuse it with what passes for a government these days in Washington. Like I said, the bloated bureaucracy the President presides over bears no resemblance to what was envisioned by the men who framed the Constitution of the United States.”

“Even if what you say is true, Governor, you cannot ignore the fact that the President, as the chief executive, has the duty, responsibility, and authority to enforce the laws Congress enacts. This includes punishing criminal behavior, which is what the FBI was prevented from doing by Colonel Devin.”

“Ignoring for a moment the fact the President is failing to faithfully carry out his duties by being selective as to what laws he chooses to enforce and how he does so, particularly when it comes to border security and immigration, the biggest problems most Americans have with how this nation is governed is the way this President and many of his predecessors have resorted to the use of executive action, judicial activism, and bureaucratic regulations to bypass Congress and follow an agenda that is all too often counter to the will of the people.”

“You’re sounding like a politician, Governor, not a chief executive,” Porter shot back. “While I expect that would make a wonderful stump speech, what I want to know is what you intend to do to resolve the conflict that has brought your state to the edge of the abyss.”

With a better appreciation on how things currently stood in the southwestern corner of the state than Porter obviously had, the temptation to inform her neither he nor his state was in immediate danger of falling into what she described as an abyss, Burress chose this time to make public a plan he and a growing number of governors were signing on to. Pausing, he eased back into his seat in a manner that reminded Porter of a college professor about to deliver a lecture. “The Constitution of the United States was written and adopted in an effort to replace the government brought into existence by the Articles of Confederation, both of which were seriously flawed. And while I do not consider the Constitution to be flawed, rather than adhering to it, generations of politicians have sought to subvert it by interpreting it in ways our founding fathers would have found unfathomable or, in the case of the Federal judiciary, discovering new rights and privileges that simply are not there.”

“That’s your opinion,” Porter interjected.

“It’s more than just my opinion, Ms. Porter. I’ve been in contact with a number of governors who agree with the supposition that the President’s assault on the sovereignty of this state and his administration’s efforts to subvert the Constitution cannot be tolerated. That is why they have agreed the time has come to do something we should have done a long time ago. Over the next few days we will be calling on our state legislatures to select from their number-one men and women who will gather at a location yet to be determined for the purpose of convening a convention of states as specified by Article Five of the Constitution.”

When he saw the blank expression on Porter’s face, Burress couldn’t help but smile. “For those members of your viewing audience who are unfamiliar with that passage, Ms. Porter, Article Five describes the process by which the states can modify and alter the Constitution. While it has only been used in the past to amend it, we, the governors, do not see why we cannot do what the original framers of the Constitution did and redo the whole thing in order to form a more perfect Union.”

Had Amy Porter been holding a hand mike, Burress imagined she would have dropped it. As it was, her gobsmacked expression, complete with gapping mouth and bug eyes captured by the Phoenix native who was operating the camera, was just as precious to those who were not fans of the New York reporter. This included the producer at the local WNN affiliate who was responsible for editing the interview, for she made a point of including that shot in the final product that was repeatedly aired by WNN.

*The White House, Washington, D.C.*

Timothy Rowland was fortunate there were no cameras in his office to record his reaction to Burress’ revelation when he first saw the full, unedited interview. Not that anyone who knew the President’s chief of staff would have been surprised by his antics. Excitable did not begin to describe his behavior; stunned disbelief over what he was hearing morphed into a fit of rage he took out on his office furniture and anyone who was unfortunate enough to be within shouting distance. As he was not the kind of person who was able to let a challenge such as this go unanswered, his next response was to do what came naturally to him, a trait that made any bearer of bad news hesitant to approach him with it, for he had a reputation of shooting the messenger. In this case, the messenger was a news network that had been a thorn in the side of the President for years.

Having no wish to listen to a bunch of shit-for-brains commentators, news anchors, and talking heads speculate on how a convention of states would work and what it would mean to the country, Rowland plopped down into his chair, took up the TV remote, and turned off the set. Shutting down a major news network would not be easy. Nor would it go over well. Even members of the mainstream media who were big fans of the President would have to choose between supporting his actions as they had so often done in the past or defending the right of a free press enshrined by the First Amendment.

Once he’d managed to calm down and had taken the time to think things through, he yelled out to his secretary to call Ann Lucas, the President’s domestic advisor, Peter Frye, the President’s legal advisor and Eric Joiner, the press secretary and inform them he wanted to see them in his office, stat. They’d need to be careful, he had concluded as he sat there mulling over how best to proceed, relying on a scalpel rather than a sledge hammer in silencing what he viewed as treasonous rhetoric World News Network was airing.

Rowland’s blood pressure had just about returned to what passed as normal for him when his assistant stuck her head around the corner of the doorway connecting her office to his, reminding him of the lateness of the hour. By doing so, she became the unfortunate recipient of all the vitriol he felt for World News Network and everyone associated with it by informing her he didn’t give a damn what time it was. “You make it clear I want them or their resignations here, in my office, within the hour.”

*Office of the Chief of Police, Washington, D.C.*

Deciding there was nothing she could do given the lateness of the hour and the non-threatening behavior of the people who were openly flaunting the law by failing to follow the orders of her officers and disperse, Patricia Nowak decided to put a halt to all efforts to evict a growing number of people who were refusing to leave the Mall and other open parks throughout the city. The crowds were simply too big for the officers of her department and park police then on hand to deal with. It was, as one police lieutenant informed her when he reported in on the progress, like herding cats. Every time the officers under his command managed to clear one area of the Mall, they simply rolled up their sleeping bags, picked up their ice chests, and migrated to another where there was insufficient police presence to keep them from settling in again.

Why they were there and what they hoped to accomplish was of no interest to the head of the Metropolitan Police Department. Maintaining order and keeping them from interfering with the smooth functioning of the Federal government and businesses were her only concern. At the moment she reasoned this modest goal could best achieved by allowing the people crowding the city’s parks to remain where they were for now. Coming up with a viable solution and mobilizing the necessary manpower and resources to implement it could wait until morning. Besides, without having the need to be clairvoyant, she already knew if the crowds continued to grow at anything resembling the rate they had over the past twenty four hours, she would need to call on outside help if she had any hope of keeping the city from descending into chaos the likes of which the nation’s capital had not witnessed since the Vietnam era protests.

The

Sixth

DAY

Chapter 21

*Fort Necessity, Arizona*

Alerted by the colonel who was in charge of the National Guard troops in the area one of his patrols was bringing the officer in command of the ranger battalion to meet with him, Colonel Allen Devin was ready when a pair of Humvees rolled up to his operations center in the predawn darkness and stopped. Having no wish to poison what he hoped would be a productive meeting, he issued strict instructions to Maria Rivera to keep the news team from World News Network under lock and key until further notice. “I know if I were in that officer’s place the last thing I’d want to see is a camera watching my every move,” he explained to Rivera. “Remember, the rangers out there are not the enemy.”

The temptation on Rivera’s part to ask him what the rangers were was set aside. So far every call the former Marine had made had played out to their advantage, leading her to believe the way he planned on dealing with the ranger battalion that was hunkered down within easy striking distance of Fort Necessity would be no different. Besides, Rivera told herself after acknowledging his orders and heading off to see they were carried out, this was no time for second guessing. For better or worse she, along with every other member of the Arizona Home Guard, was committed to see this through to the end.

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The sight of the leader of the Arizona Home Guard alone and waiting under the exterior light of one of the building as the National Guard Humvee he’d ‘borrowed’ made its way toward him did not surprise Nathan in the least. It was, he figured, Devin’s way of saying *‘Here am. I have no need of an entourage, armed or otherwise’*. It also was a show of good will, for the absence of straphangers and the news crew that had been broadcasting live from the militia compound meant he, like Nathan, would be free to be frank and open when they got around to discussing their respective intentions and coming to some sort of accord that would prevent unnecessary bloodshed. Assuming this to be the case, and wishing to acknowledge the colonel’s refusal to use the occasion of this meeting to further his agenda by making it public, when the lead Humvee bearing him came to a stop, Nathan dismounted, stepped up to Devin, and rendered a crisp hand salute.

With a smartness that matched Nathan’s, Devin returned the salute, then took a step forward and offered him his hand. “Major Dixon, it is an honor to meet the son of a soldier like your father.”

There it was, Nathan thought to himself as he suppressed a groan while taking the proffered hand. Returning the Colonel’s firm grip with just enough resistance to make it known he was not in the least bit intimidated or awed by a man who was something of a legend himself, he could not help but wonder if the day would ever come when senior officers he was meeting for the first time would not find it necessary to remind him he was the son of a renowned soldier. Despite having proven himself to be a competent officer in his own right, Nathan could almost count the number of times he had met a senior officer who didn’t go out of his way inform him they had either known his father or knew of his reputation. Not that he was alone in having to put up with living in his father’s shadow. The sons of well-known and highly regarded general officers he knew often shared their own tales of woe with him. Most had advised to soldier on, enduring that ancestral burden with as much grace and humility as was possible and. For Nathan, this meant acknowledging the senior officer’s greeting and tribute to his father with a slight nod and hint of a smile before moving onto the business at hand as quickly and as tactfully as possible. It was an approach that had become so second nature to him that he was able to do so without needing to give any thought to what he was doing. “I expect you already know why I am here, colonel.”

“If you’re here to ask me to surrender, I’m afraid you’re going to be sadly disappointed, major,” Devin replied evenly while sporting a wary grin.

Devin’s response, tinged with a hint of humor, didn’t surprise Nathan in the least. He recognized the colonel’s comment for what it was, an effort on his part to lessen the tension created by the circumstances the two of them found themselves having to deal with. By way of acknowledgement, Nathan shot back with what he hoped was an appropriate repartee. “Only a fool with a serious death wish would ask a Marine with a reputation such as yours to do something like that, colonel, and be warned, I am neither a fool or someone with a death wish.”

The congenial half smile with which Devin had greeted Nathan transformed itself into a full facial grin as he took a second to mentally parsed the full meaning of his last comment. Regardless of what the declared purpose of the ranger battalion was, this man, Devin told himself, had no intention of carrying out the orders that had been issued to him by the President himself, a pirated copy of which sat on his desk. With that established, and eager to find out just what the major’s intensions were, Devin invited Nathan to join him for breakfast.

“I appreciate the offer, sir, but I’ve already eaten with my men. However, I would not find it at all objectionable to share a cup of coffee with you as we go over the situation we both find ourselves in.”

“Oh, I think I can manage that major. If you will, right this way.” With a sweep of his hand, Devin ushered Nathan through his operations center and onto his office where he shut a door that was seldom closed. It was a sign to his people who made up his operations and intelligence staff he was not to be disturbed.

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The appearance of two National Guard Humvees and the scene that had played out across the compound caught John Cardosa’s attention. “Something’s going on out there,” he muttered as he continued to stare out the high, half window of the room Maria Rivera had taken them to where they had been fed breakfast and told to wait until she returned for them.

“No shit.” Emerson sniped. “What was your first clue, Sherlock?”

Like Emerson, Sarah Jennings knew right off there was something going down that Devin did not want them to see, let alone report on, at least not until he was ready to have them do so at a time and under circumstances he deemed appropriate and suited his needs. The early morning call to wake up and a friendly invitation by the female who was serving as a spokesperson for the Arizona Home Guard that was not an invitation at all to have breakfast in a small, barren room sans Emerson’s camera or either of Jennings’ phones was ample evidence enough that something big was in the wind. Just what it was, and when, not if, she’d be a liberty to report on it was making their confinement all but unbearable for the young intern who saw herself coming away from this gig with the freedom to pick the network where she would launch her career as a journalist, earning a salary she could all by dictate.

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After exchanging a few minutes of small talk while Devin personally poured a cup of coffee for himself and Nathan in the privacy of his office, both men got down to the business at hand. For Nathan, the first item on his agenda what finding out what had happened to the rangers who were unaccounted for. “When we are finished here, Colonel, I would appreciate it if I was permitted to speak to those members of my battalion who were policed up by your people yesterday.”

As he had outside, Devin took note of how the major seated across from him was being careful in his choice of words. Rather than saying ‘taken prisoner,’ he had made it sound as if the rangers who had landed within the confines of Fort Necessity were wanderers who’d lost their way his people had found quite by accident. “As soon as we’re finished here, I’ll take you where they’re billeted” he replied evenly. “In fact, you can take them along with you when you leave, though I do insist they leave their weapons here.”

“Yes, of course,” Nathan replied dryly as he peered over to where Devin was seated before taking a sip of coffee.

“Might I suggest you leave those who were injured here. I expect my medical staff and our facilities are better able to look after the needs of your men than what you can provide.”

It was clear to Nathan the Colonel was taking as much care in how he said something as what he actually said, leaving unstated that which did not need to be spelled out. In the case of their last exchange, Devin was making it clear to him he was well aware the follow-on drop led by Major Melick consisting of the combat service support elements of the battalion scheduled for later that morning had been canceled due, no doubt, to the threat posed by the Arizona Air National Guard. This also meant Colonel Shire and the personnel who had been in the lead aircraft that had aborted its drop would not be making another run. “If you’ve no objections, colonel, I would like to check in on them myself before making that call.”

“Of course, major, of course.”

Having addressed his concerns over the welfare of his men who were being held by the Arizona Home Guard, Nathan took a sip of coffee before moving onto the main purpose of his meeting with Devin. Doing so was not going to be easy, for when it came to dealing with an insurrection involving people he and the majority of his men identified with and, to a large extent, were sympathetic to their declared goals, Nathan was venturing out into uncharted waters. “I expect you appreciate the situation I find myself in is as awkward as it is perplexing.”

“I don’t envy your dilemma,” Devin intoned judiciously when Nathan paused to take another sip of coffee and consider how best proceed.

Deciding there was little to be gained by avoiding the obvious, Nathan took a deep breath, held it a moment, then slowly exhaled before sharing his thoughts and concerns with Devin, hoping that by doing so he would reciprocate. “I expect you have no illusions as to why I, and my battalion, are here or what our orders are. Those orders are quite clear and unambiguous. They leave me little discretion.”

“I was always told the commander on the ground had a great deal of discretion when it came to interpreting his orders,” Devin stated evenly. “As Clausewitz so eloquently state, a plan never survives initial contact, forcing the office in command to assess the tactical situation and adjust his plan accordingly. That’s why they pay us the big bucks.”

Unable to help himself, Nathan chuckled. “I always thought it was von Moltke the Elder who said no battle plan survives contact with the enemy.”

Devin shrugged. “Never having been able to make it through more than a few pages of Clausewitz’s *On War* without falling asleep, and having little interest in what either von Moltke the Elder or his name sake said, you could be right. Be that as it may, given the orders you have been issued, what *do* you intend to do, major?”

Setting aside his coffee, Nathan sat up straight and met Devin’s steady, unflinching gaze. “Well, there in lay the rub. The orders issued to the 2nd Battalion, 75th Rangers by the National Command Authority directs it to restore the full and unimpeded authority of the Federal government by suppressing all elements that are engaged in insurrection and rebellion.”

“You are, of course, talking about the members of the Arizona Home Guard.”

“Yes sir, I am.”

“Is that what you intend to do?”

“If I were to follow those orders if, after calling on you and your people to stand down, I would have no choice but to use all means available to me to carry out those orders.”

Just as Nathan had, Devin set aside his cup of coffee before leaning forward. “I dare say you would find doing so wouldn’t be as easy as the people who gave you those orders expect, for the men and women who stand with me with me are just as determined to see this through to the end as I am.”

“If what I have been told about the composition of your command is anywhere near accurate, I have no doubt it will be difficult, and bloody.”

“I expect it would be,” Devin stated laconically.

With their respective positions clearly delineated, both Nathan and Devin mentally and physically pulled back. Taking up their coffee, each took to a sip as they reflected upon them.

After a long , tense moment, Devin broke the silence. “You said *if* you were to carry out the orders issued to your battalion by the people in Washington, major,” Devin pointed out. “Was that simply a slip of the tongue?”

Rather than answer, Nathan dropped his gaze before coming to his feet and making his way over to a side table where the coffee maker sat. Without looking over his shoulder as he was pouring himself a fresh cup, he answered Devin’s question. “As you pointed out, colonel, there is a serious disconnect between the orders issued to the battalion and the situation on the ground.”

After coming about in place, rather than returning to his chair, Nathan eased back until his butt was resting against the edge of the side table. Nor did he bother to meet Devin’s eyes when he spoke, looking down at the coffee in his cup instead. “Colonel Shire and I discussed in some detail what we would do if that proved to be the case. We covered every conceivable contingency the two of us could come up with. In the end, he made it clear he would have to wait and see what happened once we were on the ground.”

“Did he by any chance tell you what his druthers were?” Devin asked cautiously.

Peeking up at the marine colonel, Nathan hesitated before answering. The exchange he was engaging in with Devin suddenly reminded him of the obligatory scene in an action movie where the villain lays out his cunningly sinister plan to the movie’s hero. That he found himself mentally casting himself in the role of the villain sent a shiver down his spine. He was supposed to be the good guy, the real world version of Luke Skywalker, leader of the forces fighting for freedom and justice, not the cruel, heartless hatchet man sent to carry out the will of the evil Emperor.

With a suddenness that caused Nathan to blink, he gave his head a quick shake as if to cast aside what was, given the situation he found himself in, a juvenile analogy. Silently admonishment himself, he made his way back to his seat where he took a long, lingering a sip of coffee as he struggled to settle himself, both physically and mentally.

“In addition to majoring in history at VMI, I imagine you’re like your father was, a history buff,” Devin stated when it became clear Nathan was not going to answer his question.

“I am,” Nathan replied warily, wondering where the former Marine colonel was going.

“Are you by any chance familiar with Japanese term gekokujō?”

“Can’t say that I am.”

“It’s one of those terms we in the West have a hard time translating, much less understanding. A literal translation for it is the overthrowing of one’s superiors. Another, one lower ranking Japanese militarist used to justify their actions with in the 1930s, is the concept of lower ruling the higher. Unfortunately, both those translations miss the point of gekokujō,” Devin explained. “At its heart, gekokujō is undertaken by subordinates who believe those in power have lost their way. The February 26th Incident staged by young officers was not a coup d’état. They never expected to overthrow the government, not in the manner we Westerners envision a coup. Rather, their purpose was to make their government aware it had strayed from kokutal, another one of those slippery terms Westerners can never seem to get right. For the young officers, kokutal meant national character, the essence of what it means to be Japanese. In many ways I, and a surprising number of officers no different than you, believe as those Japanese officers did, we believe our government has lost its way.”

Pausing, Devin watched the troubled officer of rangers as he mulled over what he was telling him, waiting until he was sure the man was ready to move on. “Are you aware of what is going on elsewhere?” he finally asked.

Looking up, Nathan stared at him for a second. “If you mean what your governor is doing, yes, I am.”

“Then you’re aware that the focus of the world’s attention is no longer on what happens here. Despite your dramatic arrival on the scene yesterday, this is now a sideshow,” Devin pointed out. “What matters now is what the convention of states that is organized does and how the administration in Washington responds to it. Nothing we do here is going to make a bit of difference in that fight, not anymore. Whether the President and his minions realize it, it’s too late to stop the shit storm that’s coming their way.”

“The one you unleashed?” Nathan interjected.

Easing back in his seat, Devin smirked. “It wasn’t me or any of my people who set this whole brouhaha in motion.”

Seeing little point in debating who was or was not responsible for setting in motion the chain of events that led to the commitment of his battalion, Nathan returned to the matter at hand. “As a former officer and a marine, you understand the need to follow orders, no matter how distasteful they may be.”

“As a former officer and a marine, I also know there are times when it is necessary *not* to follow orders that are, for any number of reasons, inappropriate, untimely or unlawful.”

Tiring of this back and forth, without taking his eyes off those of the marine colonel seated across from him, Nathan took a sip of coffee as he paused to regroup. “Tell me, colonel, what you would do if you were in my position.”

Without batting an eye, Devin answered. “What’s right.”

*Pennsylvania Avenue, Washington, D.C.*

At the best of times, navigating the crazy quilt patter of streets by car Pierre Charles L'Enfant had laid out was a challenge. Doing so in May, during the high season for tourism when sightseeing buses and coaches bringing high school students in for their senior year class trip joined the fray made the ordeal a nightmare. The only sensible solution for people wishing to arrive at their destination with some semblance of sanity was to join the throng of Federal employees crowding the city’s metro line or, as Chris Dixon was doing, walk to where she was scheduled to meet the D.C. based news team she’d been working with. Her reason for setting out on foot that morning started out as nothing more than a low-tech solution to a near insolvable problem. What it turned into, quite unexpectedly, was a journey of discovery and entre into a new aspect of the story she, and everyone who’d been fixated on the events in Arizona, had been ignoring until then.

It started when she was waiting at a crosswalk for the light to change. As often happened when she was covering a story, a woman belonging to a stepped away from it and called out to her. “My God, you’re Chris Dixon, the journalist on World News.”

Never knowing if this sort of declarative statement was going to be followed by, ‘*I love your reporting*,’ or ‘*You’re a disgrace to your profession and gender*,’ Chris always did her best to ignore people who felt compelled to accost her when she was in public. When that wasn’t possible she’d studied the person’s expression in an effort to gauge their intentions. If it appeared as if they posed no threat, she’d flash them the best smile circumstances permitted before making her way around them as gracefully as possible and quickening her pace. Only when she had no choice, when the situation did not allow her to escape and evade did she engage the adoring fan or annoying detractor in a quick, well-rehearsed exchange, fleeing the scene as quickly as practicable with all the alacrity of a five year old who’d just broken her mother’s favorite vase.

On hearing the cry of one of their number, others who were with the woman swerved around like a herd of gazelles and surrounded Chris. Quickly concluding she was in no immediate danger and having no interviews lined up yet, she decided to indulge what she assumed was a covey of adoring fans, engaging in the sort of impromptu PR her mother-in-law encouraged.

In the exchange that followed, one of the people gathered about her ask if she would be covering the rally later that afternoon. Before answering, Chris took a moment to mentally run down the list of events scheduled that day. Not sure which rally the woman was talking about, she attempted to put the woman off by offering up an excuse that was, in point of fact, true. “I won’t know what stories the network needs me to cover until I’ve had a chance to go over what my producer has scheduled.”

“I’m sure she’ll be there,” another member of the group informed the woman who’d accosted Chris. “Who better to cover a rally in support of what the governor of Arizona is trying to do.”

Having had her first question answered, Chris turned to the middle aged man who’d just spoken. “It was my understanding the rally isn’t scheduled until later today?”

“That’s true,” another woman who was part of the group declared. “It’s just that we want to stake out a good spot.”

“The blogs all say there’s going to be well over a quarter of a million people there,” a third member of the group added.

Eager to be on her way, Chris made a great show of sighing loudly. “With no way of knowing what might crop up between now and then, it’s impossible for me to say for sure where I will need to be later this afternoon.”

“What could be more important than to hear what Senator Hastings and those members of Congress who have come out in support of Governor Burress’ call for a convention of states have to say?” the woman who had spotted her first asked. “A member of the congressional delegation from Arizona is going to review the steps leading up to their governor’s decision to rewrite the Constitution.”

“They’re not going to rewrite it, Emma,” another man in the group pointed out crossly. “They’re just going to fix it so Washington politicians can’t go around doing whatever they damn well please.”

“And it’s not just congressmen and senators from Arizona. Everyone’s going to be there,” another member of the group surrounding Chris informed her as two other men belonging to the group got into an animated back and forth over what the convention of states could and could not do.

The temptation to ask who *everyone* was turned out to be another question Chris didn’t need to ask as she took to looking around, beyond the circle of people surrounding her. Only then did she take note of other small groups little different than the one that had stopped her. All were making their way across Pennsylvania Avenue carrying lawn chairs, rolled up sleeping bags and coolers. It was clear to her they weren’t the typical tourists intent on spending a day blitzing their way through the city, seeing as much as they could before retreating to the cozy comforts of their hotel rooms or fleeing the city at the end of the day. Judging from the number of men and women of every age and race making their way toward the National Mall, the impromptu rally bloggers and social media had been promoting looked as if it might be bigger than anyone back at WNN had originally thought. Nor was it going to be simply a gathering of angry white men like supporters of the administration were claiming. Mixed in with people little different than those belonging to the group who had accosted her were a number of young men and women carrying infants or holding the hands of children old enough to keep up with the adults they were with. All wore the same expression the small group before her were sporting, a look of calm, yet eager anticipation, the kind she’d seen on the faces of people who believed they were about to witness a historical event or were off to listen to a famous person who was scheduled to deliver an important speech.

Realizing that if she did not move fast and get ahead of the gathering throng, she and the crew with her would find themselves crowded out by the people and other media crews who were, in all likelihood, already staking out a patch of ground on the Mall from which they could file their report. After making her excuses as gracefully as she could, Chris bulled her way through the crowded streets. Once she was across, she pulled her cell phone out and hit number for her mother-in-law’s number on its speed dial. “Mom, toss whatever it is you have in mind for today. I’ve got a lead we need to follow.”

Chapter 22

*New York City*

Anyone who had worked as a journalist as long as Jan Fields-Dixon had, covering stories in third world countries where the rule of law came in the form of a full metal jacket 7.62 x 39mm Russian made cartridge knew not everyone was enamored with the press. On more occasions than she cared to remember, she and the camera crew with her had found themselves confronted by men who did not want her to see what they were doing recorded for later viewing by a curious world or a tribunal in the Hague. Most of these run-ins with foreign officialdom ended peaceably enough, even on those occasion when Jan and her crew had everything they were carrying confiscated, including the wad of cash she always carried when reporting from countries where officials were known to be amenable to a bribe.

There was one occasion, however, when she didn’t know if she would live to see the sunset that evening. On that day, without so much as a warning, a pair of soldiers had marched up to Jan, picked her up off her feet, thrown into a windowless van, and driven away. The relief she felt when she discovered she had been taken to the nearest international airport and not into the jungle was short lived when an officials there informed her if she wished to live a long, healthy life, it would be best if she never returned to his country. It was a story she often told that never failed to liven up a dinner party or reception. The one she would have to tell after the events that had just transpired, on the other hand, wouldn’t. Being escorted out of her own building located in the heart of New York City by Federal agents, together with her entire staff was a new and frightening experience, one she could have never imagined in her wildest dreams. But then, nothing that had transpired in the last few days seemed real to her as she made her way down Sixth Avenue, lost in a sea of New Yorkers going about their daily routine as if the events playing in Arizona and the nation’s capital were of no concern to them.

In desperate need to find a secluded spot where she could sit, have a cup of coffee, calm down and decide what to do, Jan ducked into a street corner deli. With the breakfast crowd gone and no need to worry about office workers piling in for lunch anytime soon, after ordering a coffee at the counter, she made for a booth at the very rear of the deli. Philosophically she understood why the President’s minions had shut down her operation. Long a critic of his administration, anyone working for World News Network carried a target on their back whenever they were covering a story that was in anyway connected to the President’s political party or members of his administration. That the people who made up the President’s Praetorian Guard would use the powers the insurrection act gave them to muzzle WNN was a possibility that had crossed her mind, but had been discounted. As she reminded Jack Brant repeatedly over the past few days every time he voiced his concerns, “This is the United States, Jack, not Russia. Even this President wouldn’t try something like that.”

Unable to decide what hurt the most, being proven wrong on that count or witnessing an act that shattered her faith in laws she thought prevented the Federal government she thought would protect her from behaving like a third world nation, it took Jan longer than it should have to set aside her anger. It wasn’t until after she’d worked her way through her first cup of coffee and was on the way to the counter for a refill that she was able to turn to finding a work around this setback, one that would show the President and his legions of peons they weren’t going to push Jan Fields-Dixon around. She was well into that second cup of coffee when she finally decided there was no way of avoiding something she expected she would regret, sooner rather than later. Gathering up her things, she tossed a generous tip on the table, came to her feet and gave her hair a quick toss before making her way back out onto the crowded city streets where she hailed a cab and directed the driver to take her to the building where the New York studios of World News Networks chief rival were located.

*Fort Necessity, Arizona*

At first Cardosa thought one of the hackers working out of Devin’s cyber warfare section was somehow keeping him from connecting with the station in Tucson using the same uplink he’d been relying on since arriving at the militia compound. Only after he’d run through a top to bottom diagnostics of his entire system that came up with bupkis did he finally breakdown and call a friend at the station using the man’s private number to find out if there was something wrong on their end. Had he not been so determined to solve whatever the problem was on his own and gone to Jennings to inform her he was having a problem, he would have found out there wasn’t a problem at either end, at least not one he or his friend back Tucson could fix.

“We’re off the air,” Jennings informed him when he met her midway between their satellite truck and the compound’s operations center. Downcast and at a loss as to what to do, she groused. “Apparently someone in Washington decided the reports we’ve been filing from here are a threat to national security or some such bullshit.”

Like many westerners, Cardosa had never been a fan of the Federal government and the way it threw its weight about. That they would seek to silence any and all news stories that cast it in a bad light came as no surprise. “Well, I guess that leaves us little choice but to resort to plan B,” he declared in an upbeat tone of voice Jennings found to be inappropriate given their plight.

Looking up at him, she regarded the lean Arizonan quizzically as he gave the problem facing them a moment’s thought. “What, may I ask, is plan B?” she asked cautiously.

Proud of himself for having had the forethought to prepare for just such an event, Cardosa grinned. “If what you say is true and the Imperial storm troopers have overrun our network, we’ll just tap into another and see if they’re willing to pick up your reports.”

“You can do that?” Jennings asked incredulously.

Cardosa set aside the surprise he felt that an intern who’d graduated from Columbia with a degree in journalism was clueless when it came to the technical aspects of her chosen career. “Sure. All I need are the frequencies of another news outlet willing to receive and broadcast your stories, which I just happen to have, and we’re back in business.”

“You already know of one that would be willing to do that?”

“Yeah, but they don’t have near as big an audience as World News does. It’s a provider that specializes in Christian programing,” he replied with noticeably less enthusiasm. Then, after pausing to mull something over, he perked up again. “But that’s really no biggie. I expect other news networks that haven’t been shut down will rebroadcasts our stories if they’re good.”

Encouraged by what she was hearing, Jennings took heart. “Oh, trust me, they’ll be good.” Then, after dropping her gaze a second to mull something over, she broke out in a broad smile as she looked back up at Cardosa. “I have just the story in mind that is sure to grab the attention of every news outlet and leave them begging for more.”

Without waiting for Cardosa to explain the how or who, Jennings spun about and ran back into the ops center to find Maria Rivera and ask if she would be able to arrange transportation to where the ranger battalion had spent the morning establishing a perimeter outside the one held by the Arizona Home Guard and inside the one manned by the Arizona National Guard and state police.

*The National Mall, Washington, D.C.*

Making it through the traffic choked streets leading to the National Mall, Patricia Nowak bulled her way through the press of people to where her officers and park police had retreated after a failed attempt to take down a stage that was being set up just east of the Washington Memorial between 14th and 15th Street. Finding them turned out to be but the first challenge Patricia Nowak had to deal with.

The scenes that greeted her along the way and at the Mall were proving to be just as bad as the reports she’d been receiving all day had indicated. She was about to ask one of her lieutenants she spotted in a gaggle of sweaty and exhausted uniformed officers why they had abandoned their efforts to keep an ad hoc group of workers from setting up a stage and speakers when her attention was drawn to the sound of a metal barricade being thrown on top a pile of other such barricades caught her attention. As she watched, members of the crowd, accompanied by several children of various ages, wiped their sweaty hands on their jeans before turning around and heading off to take down another barrier. They had no sooner walked away from the pile of discarded barriers and disappeared in the crowd than another group of men, women and children came up to it to add the one they were carrying.

“It’s been like this all morning,” the police lieutenant who was also watching members of the growing crowd bringing sections of barricade to the pile muttered in frustration. “We no sooner set them up, and they take them down.”

Without needing to ask, Nowak knew trying to find out who was organizing the tearing down of police barricades was a waste of time. Having made the rounds of all the law enforcement agencies in the greater Washington metropolitan area before leaving her office without finding anyone who had a clear idea of who, exactly, the people pouring into the city were, Nowak’s officers had no one person they could go to and demand they stop. It was also becoming clear asking her officers to wade into the growing crowd and out them up again would be an exercise in futility. With every man and woman she could call in was already on duty, either at the Mall or scattered around the city trying to unsnarl the monumental traffic jams created by an unprecedented influx of people. The last thing she wanted to do was waste what manpower she had on an effort that was futile.

“Any idea how many people are here already,” the harried lieutenant asked.

“As of an hour ago I was told by the head of Parks there are half a million. From what I saw on my way here and by the looks of it, he’s lowballing it. And they’re still coming,” Nowak added glumly. “Maryland and Virginia state police are reporting all the interstates and just about every secondary route leading into the city are experiencing heavier than normal inbound traffic.”

“Well,” the lieutenant chuckled cynically, “if anyone wants to know just how effective social media can be in mobilizing the masses, all they need to do is come down here and see for themselves. Welcome to the Twenty-First Century reenactment of the 1381 Peasants’ Revolt.”

Looking away from the crowd and over at her lieutenant, Nowak frowned. “Where did you pick up that little gem?”

“The TV. Chris Dixon, who usually reports on World News, is in there somewhere, interviewing people and giving a running commentary of what’s going on here for CNN. She likened what is happening here to an uprising in England that pitted the people against their king.”

“I’ll bet her mother’s not pleased she’s working for the competition.”

The lieutenant chuckled. “If what I heard from one of CNN’s regular reporters I came across not too long ago is true, it was her mother who arranged it so her reporters could stay on the air.”

This caused Nowak to shake her head. “You know, the cynics just might be right. If CNN and WNN can set aside their differences and work together, maybe we are witnessing the end of days.”

“I don’t know if it's the end of days as described in the Revelations, but I’d bet you a dollar to a donut the President’s tenure as the Commander in Chief are numbered.”

“Please,” Nowak groaned. “One crisis at a time. Now, what can the officers you have here do to keep a lid on this?”

The temptation to say not a god damned things was set aside. Patricia Nowak was a no non-sense chief who, even when things were going to hell, demanded her subordinates come up with solutions, not excuses. “Wading back into the crowd and trying to keep them from putting up that stage like the park police want is a waste of time. We just don’t have the manpower. Until we get a serious influx of reinforcements, the best we can do is keep the emergency routes around the Mall open and assist whoever needs immediate medical attention.”

Unable to come up with a better idea herself, Nowak nodded. “Okay, do what you can here. I’m going to finish making the rounds, passing the word we’re falling back to a wait and see posture until someone decides to send in the Marines.”

“Begging your pardon, chief, but it was a marine who started this. What makes you think the lads at 8th and I or Quantico are going to rush over here and help us? Remember, semper fi is more than a catchy motto to them.”

Having no wish to get into a discussion that was as pointless as the lieutenant’s efforts to take down the stage that was nearing completion, Nowak fixed him with a steady gaze. “Do what you can with what you have for as long as you can. If things get out of hand, use your discretion.”

“Which means?” the lieutenant asked coking a brow.

“Don’t do anything stupid.”

*The White House, Washington, D.C.*

With the volume of the TV that sat across the room from her desk muted, Ann Lucas keeping one eye on it and her other one on the phone, waiting for it to ring. At the moment a journalist from CNN and one who normally reported for WNN were standing side by side, jointly reporting live from the Mall on preparations on what was being dubbed the Take Back America rally.

How Eric Joiner was going to slap a smiley face on a crisis that had managed to grow as fast and spread as quickly as this one had at the daily press briefing was a question she had been pondering for the last half hour. The usual blame game wasn’t going to work this time. Far too many people knew the decisions that had set the stage for what was quickly becoming a constitutional crisis had originated just down the hall from where she was sitting. Offering up a token scalp to the howling masses pressing up against the fence surrounding the Executive Mansion wasn’t going to placate them either, not this time. With their staunchest allies and supports in the press now arrayed against them, Tiny Tim as going to need to pull something spectacular out of his hat within the next few hours if they were going to turn the growing tide that was threatening to come crashing down on the President and everyone who had had a hand in unleashing the pent up rage of the American public.

When the phone finally did ring, the name showing up on the call ID window wasn’t who she’d been expecting. The temptation not to answer it ran counter to Lucas’ curiosity, for she wanted to know what had compelled Bruce Edgars to set aside the animosity he felt for Jan Fields and allow her reporters to appear on his network. Taking up the receiver, Lucas didn’t bother with a greeting. “If you’re looking for a statement or trying to set up an interview with the President, you’ve reached the wrong office.”

Rather than being offended, Edgars chuckled. “Nerves a little frayed around the edges?”

“I’m in no mood for you this morning, Bruce,” Lucas snapped.

“I didn’t think you would be.”

“Before you tell me why you’re calling and I tell you you’re wasting your time asking, would you care to tell me what compelled you to link arms with Jan Fields?”

“Did you ever hear of a Lutheran theologian by the name of Friedrich Niemöller?” Edgar asked.

“Can’t say that I have.”

“I’m sure you’ve heard a quote of his, one he used often to explain what turned him from being a supporter of Adolph Hitler into one of that degenerate mongrel’s fiercest critic. *First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out because I was not a Socialist,* Niemöller said. *Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out because I was not a Trade Unionist.* *Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew.* *Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me.”*

“Jack, we’re not Nazis.”

“No you’re not. But that poisonous dwarf who whispers in the President’s ear sure has been acting like one lately, which is why I’ve decided to say something, even if it means working with Jan Fields, before Rowland sends someone to my office to drag me away to the showers.”

Hearing a quote that had been bantered about over the past few days again did not bother Lucas. What did was hearing it from someone like Edgars, a man who had used every resource at his command to get the President elected. If he was turning on them, what hope did the President have of talking his way out of this mess as he had always managed to do in the past, she wondered.

“Ann, are you still there?” Edgars asked when she didn’t respond immediately to his last comment.

“Yeah, sure. I’ve nowhere else to go at the minute. Why?”

“The reason I’m calling you is I couldn’t get through to either Tim or Eric. There’s a piece we’re going to run in about five minutes I think the President should watch.”

“What’s it on?”

Again Edgars chuckled. “Let’s just say he’d best be sitting down while he’s watching it.”

“Is there anything else you wish to share with me, Judas?”

“Judas? For doing my job I’m a Judas?” Edgars asked half in jest.

“What else would you call a person who betrays a friend when they’re in desperate straits?”

“When you swim with sharks, you have to expect to get bitten by one every now and then. It’s the nature of the beast.”

Tiring of this exchange, Lucas snorted derisively. “Are there any other pearls of wisdom you wish to share?”

“No, not that I can think of at the moment,” Edgars replied airily.

“Good.” With that, she hung up, wondering as she slumped down in her chair if she should go through Rowland or tell the President herself. In no mood to play a thousand questions with Tiny Tim, questions she had no answer for, she decided she’d by pass the President’s chief of staff. There’d be hell to pay, for sure. But in light of the shit storm that was headed their way, it wouldn’t be long before someone else did something that set Rowland off and caused him to turn on them, leaving her to slink away and hide.

“Well, Lucas, might as well get on with it,” she muttered to herself before coming to her feet and heading out of her office.

Chapter 23

*Field Headquarters, 2nd Battalion, 75th Rangers, Arizona*

It quickly became clear to Sarah Jennings that the time Rivera had set for them to be ready to leave the compound and the arrival of a helicopter had been no accident. John Cardosa and Sam Emerson had just finished checking out their equipment and establishing a link with the people at the Christian Broadcasting Network when a National Guard UH-60 Blackhawk emblazoned with large red crosses set in a field of white came into view. After setting down in the center of the compound, an event Emerson was able to capture, Maria Rivera stepped in front of Emerson’s camera and explained to Jennings why it was there. “Those rangers who were unable to rejoin their unit due to the injuries they sustained during yesterday’s drop are being dusted off to a hospital in Tucson where they will be treated before being sent back to their home station at Fort Lewis in Washington state.”

Following an opportunity to speak with some of the injured rangers as they were being taken from the compound’s dispensary to the waiting Blackhawk, Jennings and Emerson were driven down to the base of the hill in a National Guard Humvee. There they were met by Master Sergeant Jefferson, who identified himself as the operations sergeant for 2nd of the 75th Rangers. “The Major isn’t available at the moment,” he informed Jennings as Emerson was checking the strength of the video signal her camera was sending back to the satellite truck. “He’s at a coordination meeting with the commander of the National Guard at the moment,” he explained. “They’re going over rules of engagement.”

Jennings was taken aback by the news the officer in command of the ranger battalion she thought had been sent to deal with the militia and restore order in the state was meeting with the Arizona National Guard, an organization that was working closely with Devin’s militia as evidenced by its evacuation of injured rangers. She was about to ask Jefferson what those rules of engagement entailed when she noticed several soldiers sporting shoulder patches that identified them as members of the Arizona National Guard chatting with rangers.

Following her gaze, and correctly reading the expression on her face, Jefferson hastened to explain. “In order to keep the situation from getting out of hand, the Major and Colonel Torres, the senior Guard officer in the area, have exchanged liaison teams. If you’d like, I’ll introduce you to Captain Wilkie, a native of Pima County who’s serving as the Arizona National Guard’s liaison officer to the battalion when we get back from a tour of the battalion’s positions.”

Dumbly, Jennings nodded as she mechanically followed Jefferson as he led her away on a tour of the positions the rangers had taken up at the base of the mountain Fort Necessity was located on. Along the way he introduced her to company commanders and other key officers and company NCOs. From time to time she and Emerson stopped to chat with those rangers who were willing to be filmed speaking to her. What impressed the young inter during these impromptu interviews was, with the exception of the uniforms the rangers were wearing and a noticeable difference in age, the rangers she spoke to came across as being little different than those who belonged to Allen Devin’s militia.

As open and honest as the men she meet were, the one question she repeatedly asked them that all shied away from answering directly was what they would do if ordered to attack the militia compound. Most simply shrugged off the question by saying they hoped it wouldn’t come to that. None were willing to state categorically that they’d fire on the militiamen they were supposedly besieging or the National Guardsmen who were, in turn, besieging them. “Those guys up there are Americans, not some crazed Haji who’s looking to become a martyr by blowing me and my buddies up,” one particularly outspoken specialist four who was part of a mortar crew pointed out. “The people we should be facing off against aren’t up there,” he declared jerking his finger over his shoulder off in the direction of the militia compound. When Jennings asked him who he thought they should be sent against, the ranger stared into the camera and, with a dead pan expression, stated they knew who they were before going back to joining the rest of his crew who were busily improving their positions.

As Emerson tracked the mortarman with her camera back to where his team’s weapon was set up, she noticed the mortar’s tube was facing out, away from the mountain and not toward the militia compound. Without telling Jennings what she was doing or why, she tightened the focus of her camera on the mortar, then panned off in the direction it was aimed. Someone familiar with the military who saw the video she was shooting would understand what the shot was telling them about the true intentions of the ranger battalion’s commanding officer.

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By the time Jefferson and Jennings, with Emerson in tow, had completed a complete circuit of the mountain, Nathan had returned from his meeting with Colonel Torres. After accepting a cup of coffee from one a member of his staff and asking Jennings if she cared for one, he led her and Emerson to a spot a short distance away from the tent they had borrowed from the National Guard that served as headquarters for his battalion and settled down cross-legged on the ground. When Emerson indicated she was ready, Jennings asked Nathan to lay out, in layman’s term, what the mission of his battalion was and how he intended to go about carrying out his orders.

“I expect you’ve read the statement the President’s press secretary put out concerning the reasons behind the President’s decision to deploy my battalion to Arizona,” Nathan stated evenly.

“I have,” Jennings relied calmly. “Having had an opportunity to visit with some of your men and see firsthand how you have deployed them, what I would like to do is know what you intend to do.”

“Do you Ms. Jennings?” Nathan asked as if confused by her question.

“Yes, of course,” she snipped. “What I want to know, and I imagine the American people do as well, is do you intend to follow the orders given to you personally by your Commander-in-chief?”

Unable to help himself, Nathan smirked. It never failed to amuse him how a journalist who seldom ventured very far outside the media bubble they lived in always seemed to know what the American people wanted. After setting that thought aside, he took to answering Jennings’ question as carefully as he could. “For the record, the orders conveyed to this battalion were issued to my commanding officer. They were passed down to him directly from the Secretary of Defense which, in the military, is not the way things are normally done. While the President may be at the top of my chain of command, there are a number of layers that an order issued by him has to pass through before it reaches this battalion.”

“I expect that may be true,” Jennings admitted. “But it is my understanding that an order, issued by a superior, still has to be obeyed. Or am I mistaken.”

“A lawful order issued by a superior must be obeyed,” Nathan shot back.

“Are you saying you do not believe the orders sending you here are not lawful?”

“Not at all. In fact, as you have seen for yourself, we are following those orders. As soon as I deemed it was feasible and prudent to do so, I established a perimeter around the militia compound known as Fort Necessity.”

The careful manner with which Nathan was parsing his words went over Jennings’ head, just as he hoped they would. Someone who understood military operations, particularly airborne operations, would, Nathan expected, realize his description of what he was doing was at odds with the what he should have done had he been serious about taking down Allen Devin and the Arizona Home Guard. An assault from the sky, referred to as vertical envelopment by the military, followed by an immediate assault on the objective was the epitome of shock and awe tactics. To delay aggressively pressing home an attack as Nathan had done forfeited all advantages an airborne assault afforded the attacker. By describing his actions as he was, Nathan was telegraphing his true intentions.

Blissfully unaware of the unstated reason Nathan was bothering to be interviewed by her, Jennings gamely pressed on. “And?” she asked in an effort to coax Nathan into telling her what he intended to do once the ranger battalion had secured its perimeter around the mountain.

“And what, Ms. Jennings?”

“It is my understanding your orders direct you to restore Federal authority over those elements the President has declared to be engaged in insurrection against the government.”

“That they do,” Nathan replied flatly as he slowly nodded his head.

“Do you intend to carry those orders out?” Jennings asked sharply.

Nathan grinned as he fixed her with a steady, unflinching stare. “Look around you, Ms. Jennings. Does it look like I’m in any position to reassert the authority of the Federal government over the entire state of Arizona? As good as the men in this battalion are, I doubt if we would last a day as the governor of this state threw everything he had at his disposal at us. Since my name isn’t Leonidas and those people up there on the hill aren’t Persians, unless the tactical situation radically changes in my favor, or it becomes necessary, I have no intention of launching an attack on the Arizona Home Guard.”

“So, what you’re telling me is that you have no intention of following your orders.”

“As the tactical commander on the ground, it is my responsibility to use my discretion when carrying out all lawful orders passed down to me through my duly appointed chain of command.”

Unfamiliar with the military, the nuanced manner with which Nathan was answering her questions went over Jennings’ head. What she did understand, as did everyone who later saw this television, was Nathan Dixon had no intention of moving against Allen Devin and his militia no matter how favorable the odds were in his favor. Back in Washington, D.C., this was as far into the interview Timothy Rowland got, for he flung a statuette he kept on his desk across his office at the screen of the television he’d been watching. Smashing it would prove to be the only success he was to enjoy that day.

The

Seventh

DAY

Chapter 24

*Washington, D.C.*

With the need to meet up with the CNN producer she and her crew were now collaborating with for a working breakfast to go over that day’s schedule, Chris Dixon tumbled out of bed a full hour earlier than usual. The last thing she wanted to do was provide members of a rival network ammunition with which to bad mouth employees of WNN within the tightknit social cocoon they tended to gather in. Showered and dressed, she was just about to leave her hotel room a full half hour ahead of the schedule the CNN producer had laid out when there was a knock at the door. Thinking she had misunderstood the arrangements they had agreed on the night before, Chris assumed he had sent one of his assistants to her room to fetch her. She was already hastening to apologize to whoever it was on the other side of the door when she hastily flung it open but stopped in mid-sentence when she found herself face-to-face with Emit DeWitt.

“Emit! What a surprise,” she declared after taking a quick step back.

Before saying a word, DeWitt glanced fugitively to his left, then to his right as if looking to see if someone was following him. Satisfied no one had, he turned back to Chris. “Is it alright if I come in? I can’t afford to be seen talking to you. You understand.”

*Yes*, Chris told herself as she stepped aside, opened the door wider and ushered an old friend of Nathan’s into her hotel room, she understood perfectly.

With his head bowed and his hands jammed into the pockets of his uniform’s trousers, DeWitt took to pacing back and forth as if mulling something over in his mind. Having seen Nathan behave in the same way, Chris knew it was best to let him workout whatever it was that was troubling him. Taking a seat on the edge of the bed, she clasped her hands in her lap, and said nothing as she watched him parade past her once, twice, three times.

He was in the middle of another circuit when he stopped in front of Chris and turned to face her. “What the hell does Nate think he’s doing?”

Having gone over any number of things that would have brought him to her door, Chris was thrown by a question she hadn’t considered. Drawing back, she gave her head a quick shake. “Excuse me?”

“Nate, your husband. What does he mean by going on national television and saying he has no intention of following the President’s orders?”

After taking a moment to recover from DeWitt’s accusatory manner and frame a suitable response, she drew herself up and pinned DeWitt with an angry glare. “He’s doing his job, that’s what he’s doing.”

“His job is to follow his orders, something he has all but declared he has no intention of doing,” DeWitt shot back.

“And what, may I ask, would you have him do? Order the men who managed to make the jump to fix bayonets, charge up the hill in front of them and skewer the men and women who are up there?”

Thrown by the sharpness of Chris’ response as much by the imagery it evoked, it was DeWitt’s turn to flinch. “No, of course not,” DeWitt snorted.

“Then what?” Chris demanded. “What isn’t he doing you think he should be doing given the situation he’s faced with?”

It was now DeWitt’s turn to back off, both physically and mentally as he returned Chris’ stare in silence for several long seconds before turning around and stalking across the room where he slumped down into a chair like an unstrung puppet. “I don’t know, Chris,” he muttered despondently. “I really don’t know.”

After a long pause, he dropped his gaze down at his lap. When he spoke, his voice took on a haunting solemnness. “I spend my nights sitting around with the football right here,” he stately flatly as he used his hands to indicate where he often balanced the leather covered metal case containing the nuclear codes the President would need to use to unlock the nation’s nuclear arsenal on his knees. “I suspect you, better than most people, appreciate the kind of havoc being a part of something like that can engender in a person with a fertile imagination.”

*Yes*, Chris told herself, *I do*, for she’d often overheard snippets of discussions Nathan’s father shared with his son concerning contingencies he was working on when he had been the Army’s Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations. It wasn’t so much what Scott Dixon said. Rather, it was his tone of voice that betrayed the grim nature of the topic at hand and what he would need to do if push came to shove.

“And as if that’s not bad enough,” DeWitt continued, “last night a bunch of politicians who couldn’t find their own ass with both hands hauled me into a meeting where they asked me to explain to them what Nate is doing out there.” Looking over at Chris with pleading eyes, he shook his head. “Chris, I honestly didn’t know what to tell them then, or what I’m going to say if they ask me again.”

“What do you mean?” Chris asked quietly.

For the longest time DeWitt said nothing as she returned his stare. To admit to her and the people who had sent Nathan and his battalion on what he considered to be a misguided fool’s errant was doing all he could warred with his sense of duty. Nathan been issued an order, an order DeWitt had been shown that was written in a manner that would have earned the officer who’d drafted it high grades at Fort Leavenworth. Nathan’s position that it had not come down to the battalion through the normal chain of command was, in DeWitt’s opinion, fallacious. Nathan had to know the Joint Chiefs had made it clear they had no wish to become involved in a political dispute they considered was best resolved by means other than armed intervention, thus removing themselves from his chain of command. Even his argument that he had neither the manpower nor the wherewithal with which to carry out his assigned mission, which was actually quite limited in scope, was one DeWitt found fault with. 2nd of the 75th was a ranger battalion. Devin’s militia was a thrown together collection of veterans who had no hope of matching the battalion in a standup fight. Even if the Arizona National Guard did intervene, which DeWitt thought to be highly improbable, he expected the ranger battalion would still prevail.

Not knowing what to say, or if she should even say anything, Chris just sat on the edge of the bed, watching DeWitt weight the pros and cons of his argument a manner she imagined Nathan had before he’d settled on the course of action he was following. The silence of the room was shattered by the sound of her cell phone dancing across the nightstand as an incoming call caused it to vibrate. Coming to her feet, Chris went over to the nightstand, took the phone up, and clicked the talk button. It was the CNN producer calling to inform her he was in the hotel’s restaurant waiting for her. Covering it receiver with her free hand, she looked over at DeWitt. “I’ve got to run, Emit,” she informed her husband’s friend apologetically.

DeWitt slowly drew in a deep breath, then, after holding a second, let it out as he spoke. “Yeah, I should be going too,” he stated in a tone of voice that betrayed the exhaustion and mental anguish he could not keep from showing through. After coming to his feet, he looked over at Chris and gave her a weak smile. “I expect it wouldn’t do for me to be seen consorting with the enemy.”

Though she imagined he had intended his comment to be funny, a chill ran down her spine as she realized a vast chasm had been torn open that not only put members of the armed forces and the media on opposing sides of this conflict, it brought into sharp focus an awkwardness and strain her career put on her marriage, never more so than now.

“You be careful, Chris,” DeWitt called out as he headed for the door. After opening it, he took a moment to check to see that the corridor outside was empty.

“You too, Emit,” Chris whispered as the door was closing behind him. “You too.”

*Office of the Chief of Police, Washington, D.C.*

As the day progressed, the number of people heeding Allen Devin’s clarion call to go to Washington and take back their government continued to grow with no sign of slowing, much less stopping. With the crowd now spilling over onto Constitution and Independence avenues, the efforts of Patricia Nowak’s officers in the area of the Mall had been reduced to doing little more than restricting traffic on the avenues bordering the Mall to emergency vehicles only using the single lane on each they were able to keep clear and responding to direr emergencies. The only bright spot in the otherwise dismal picture a new day presented Nowak was there had been precious few medical emergencies that required immediate attention during the night and a crowd that was remaining remarkably peaceful.

And what a crowd it was. With the Mall now filled to capacity with clusters of makeshift encampments that ran from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial right up to those of the Capitol Building, new comers had begun to occupy other outlying parks and open spaces. Even the downtown Metro stations were being overrun by squatters who wished to be part of what one news commentator had dubbed the revolt of the silent majority.

Why people were pouring into the city, or what they hoped to achieve by doing so was of no interest to Nowak. Her concerns were maintaining law and order and, if possible, keep the city functioning. The former goal was accomplished with surprising ease, as each encampment organized its own ruling council complete with a watch to maintain order. These grassroots governing bodies went out of their way to cooperate and work with those belonging to all other encampments it was adjacent to as well as the Metropolitan, Park and Capitol police. “Maybe the members of Congress should come out here and take notes on how things in a democracy are done,” one of Nowak’s lieutenants told her while she was making her morning rounds. The realization that that was, at its core, the true goal behind this movement occurred to her when she’d finished her tour that morning, leaving her to wonder just how they intended to do so and what would happen if that lesson was ignored.

The other goal Nowak was focused on, keeping the city open and functioning was proving to be an entirely different matter, one she concluded would soon be beyond her means to achieve. Even with the full cooperation of U.S. Park Police and the Capitol Police, by noon it was clear she was on the verge of losing that fight. As much as she hated the thought of doing so, she concluded she had no choice but to call on the President to send in Federal troops. “I’ve had calls from the heads of state police in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia and North Carolina who are all telling me the same thing, there are more buses headed our way,” she informed Timothy Rowland when she finally brought herself to make the request directly to the White House rather than wasting what precious little time she had left by going through Homeland Security. “Most of my officers have been at it for twenty-four hours without a break. Their supervisors are telling me if we don’t get some relief soon, there’s going to be problems.”

“What kind of problems?” Rowland asked.

Unable to believe a man who was reputed to be as intelligent as Rowland was asking a question that was, to her, the silliest damned thing she’d heard in days, Nowak drew her head back and took to staring at the phone’s receiver she was holding in utter disbelief. When she finally did reply to the question put to her, her response was tinged with an unmistakable snarkiness. “The kind of problems armed police officers who are exhausted and at their wits end encounter when confronted by a mob, problems I image the President can’t afford right now.”

“I don’t like your tone,” Rowland growled.

It took every last ounce of effort she had left to keep from telling the President’s chief of staff she really didn’t give a shit whether he liked her tone or not. Instead, she got down to the crux of the matter, making the point of her call as clear as she possibly could. “Please inform the President that unless he does something in the next few hours, I am going to lose control of this city. When that happens, every Federal agency and department north of the Potomac and west of the Anacostia will find itself surrounded by leaderless mobs of disgruntled citizens who won’t be happy until they have someone’s scalp. Do I make myself clear, *Mister* Rowland?”

Without waiting for a response, Nowak hung up.

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There had been no need for the chief of Washington’s Metropolitan Police force to tell Rowland keeping the government running was now an open question. Even Departments and agencies that were not being affected by the mass of people who were pouring into the city were experiencing disruptions caused by anti-government protest that kept essential personnel from reaching their offices. In states led by governors who had openly sided with Governor Aaron Burress, various means were being employed to hinder, if not bring to a complete halt to the smooth functioning of Federal agencies and offices within their borders. The most notable and most widely reported on was taking place in Utah where State Police had set up repetitive sobriety stops and vehicle inspection check points along all routes leading into the NSA Data Center located at Camp Williams near Bluffdale, Utah. Even employees at that facility who had nothing to worry about were calling in sick rather than put up with the bumper to bumper traffic they had to wade through going into and out of Camp Williams. Nor was the White House immune as the growing number of middle and lower grade staffers were staying at home rather than contend with growing throngs pouring into the city.

With the need to do something that would arrest what Ann Lucas had taken to calling a precipitous slide into anarchy, Rowland steeled himself to do something he had been hoping to avoid. But before going into the President and recommending he order Federal troops stationed in and around the District to clear it of anti-government protestors, he instructed the Secretary of Defense consult with the commanders of those troops to see if that was even a viable option.

*Office of the Secretary of Defense, Arlington, Virginia*

Anticipating the needs of a superior even before that superior is aware of those needs is often the difference between a good officer and great one. Colonel Evan Simon, the commanding officer of the 3rd Infantry Regiment located at Fort Myers was, by any measure, a great officer. The call that summonsed him to the Pentagon came as no surprise. The only thing he did find curious was how long it had taken someone to finally get around to calling on the Old Guard to fulfill what was, in truth, its primary mission, the defense of the nation’s capitol.

With a history that stretched back to 1784 and service in every war and conflict America had been engaged in the exception of the Revolution and the First World War, the 3rd Infantry was the oldest active duty regiment in the Army. Its two battalions stationed at Fort Myers had two missions. Its first, and most visible, was providing troops for ceremonial duties such as burial details at Arlington National Cemetery and guarding the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The second required it to be ready to support civil authorities throughout the National Capital Region when their own resources were unable to cope with an emergency, natural or otherwise.

When it became clear to Simon it was only a matter of time before he’d be called on to send his troops into the District, he had made a personal recon of the Mall and outlying parks, speaking to policemen and their supervisors as he went. On his return to Fort Myers, he telephoned his superior, Major General Thomas Holt, the commanding general of the United States Army Military District of Washington. After sharing his assessment of the situation and his thoughts on what his units would and would not be able to accomplish when, not if, they were called upon to assist local law enforcement agencies in maintaining order within the District with Holt, Simon took the unusual step of asking Holt if he would back him regardless of the decision he made.

Holt was no fool. Like Simon, he had been following the events of the past few days as they unfolded, anticipating and preparing himself for what he would be asked to do just as Simon had done. Having already discussed the use of Federal troops to clear the District with the Chief of Staff of the Army and come to a consensus, Holt informed Simon to use his discretion. “You are the commander on the ground. You know your troops, the lay of the land and the situation you’ll sending them in to deal with. General Morris and I are confident you will make the right call when the time comes.”

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In the wake of a phone call to the commanding general of the Military District of Washington during which Paul Hayes got the distinct impression the general was not in favor of sending troops under his command into the city, Hayes decided to call Colonel Simon to his office to receive his orders directly from him. As a former prosecutor, Hayes understood the power a courtroom could inspire, cowering people thought to be unflappable and making them more malleable than they would otherwise be in a setting that was less intimidating. Whether the commanding officer of the only sizable force in the greater Washington, D.C. area could be persuaded to commit them was a good question, one he was about to have an answer to as he prepared to receive the Colonel.

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As Simon passed through the outer offices leading to the Secretary of Defense’s, he could not help but notice the way uniformed members of the Secretary’s staff stared at him. In addition to the pity and sympathy he saw reflected in most of their eyes, he could not help but noticed a few made no effort to hide the contempt they felt for him. By way of contrast, despite the confident, self-assured façade the Secretary greeted him with, Simon could tell he was a man who had been beaten down one too many times.

Paul Hayes didn’t bother directing Simon to take a seat. In the same manner he’d seen many a judge use in order to lord over a wayward attorney, he leaned forward, planted his forearms on the desk before him, and clasped his hands together. “I expect you know why I asked you here, Colonel,” the Secretary of Defense stated in a firm voice.

“I have a fairly good idea, sir.”

“Neither the governor of Virginia or Maryland are willing to commit any of their National Guard units for use in the District,” Hayes explained. “The commanding general of the 82nd is against committing any units that are part of the division’s ready brigade to deal with what he considers to be nothing more than a civil disturbance. Both he and the commanding general of the 10th Mountain have informed me it would take them seventy-two to ninety-six hours to muster a brigade size element and deploy it to the District, followed by another twenty-four to forty-eight hours of intensive riot control training before they’d be willing to commit them once they are here. And the commanding general of the 2nd Marine Division at Camp Lejeune, a man who had served with Allen Devin in Iraq, isn’t even returning my calls.”

On hearing this assessment, Simon nodded. “That sounds about right, sir. Neither the 82nd or the 10th Mountain are equipped or trained for the mission I expect you have in mind.”

“But yours is.”

Simon nodded. “While it is true my battalions are trained to deal with civil disturbances, what’s going on across the river is not a civil disturbance.”

“It most definitely is, colonel.”

“Sir, it's a rebellion, plain and simple.”

“What you choose to call it isn’t important, colonel,” Hayes shot back in a manner that warned Simon the Secretary was on the verge of losing his patience. “What I need to know is how long it will take you to muster your units and move them into the city.”

“If I were to be given the order to do so, once I issued my orders to the battalion commanders, it would take between four to eight hours.”

“Consider the order given, details to follow.”

Having expected to be given those orders, and having discussed the matter with his superior, his battalion commanders and key members of his staff before he’d left Fort Myers, Simon was able to respond without hesitation. “It is my considered opinion, sir, sending my two battalions into the city would be a serious mistake.”

“I’m not asking you for your opinion, colonel. I am ordering you to restore order in the nation’s capital.”

Without taking his eyes off of Hayes, Simon slowly shook his head. “Neither I nor any of my commanders are prepared to do what MacArthur did in 1931. Putting down the Bonus Army at the point of a bayonet was more than a mistake, it was a betrayal on the part of the government to the veterans of the First World War. Sending armed American soldiers against American citizens who are exercising their right of assembly and free speech would be worse.”

Just as Simon had expected to be given an order he had no intention of obeying, the Secretary of Defense was prepared to have the commander of a unit some called the President’s Own refuse to obey it. With an audible sigh and a backhanded wave of his hand, he dismissed Simon without another word.

Chapter 25

*Fort Necessity, Arizona*

With the focus of the crisis now turned elsewhere and the need to come up with something different than the human interest stories she’d been doing within the confines of the militia compound, Sarah Jennings did not hesitate when Maria Rivera asked if she would be interested in meeting with and interviewing Colonel Torres, Arizona National Guard at his forward command post. Never once did the eager young intern think to question why she was being afforded this unexpected opportunity. Even if she had, the answer she would have been fed would have been far different than the one Rivera had given Devin. “We can’t lock them up every time you need to keep them from getting underfoot. With the mainstream media finally coming casting us in a more positive light, the last thing we want is for them to claim we’re no better than the Federal Government when it comes to freedom of the press. Besides,” she added as a hint of a smile softened her expression, “after all they’ve done for us, I think Colonel Torres and his lads deserve a little face time with the folks back home.”

Only when Jennings and her crew were well on her way did Devin’s operations officer indicate it was clear for a National Guard Blackhawk bearing Governor Burress to set down within the confines of the militia compound. Wearing jeans and a tan polo shirt emblazoned with the unit crest of his former regiment, Burress made straight to where Devin was standing. Neither man paid any attention as the fresh faced aide Burress had brought along was taken in hand and led to the compound’s mess hall while Devin escorted the governor to his office, filling him in on the terms he, Colonel Torres and Nathan Dixon had agreed on the previous day. “We’re all more or less in a wait and see mode. The National Guard, together with the state police and highway patrol continue to man roadblocks and run patrols along all know access route into and out of the exclusion area they’ve established, keeping the curious at arms distance. The rangers, as you no doubt saw as you were coming in to land, have established a loose perimeter at the base of the mountain. And up here, my people continue to hold our positions.”

“How much longer do you think your people will put up with this quasi-siege?” Burress asked as he acknowledged those members of the Arizona Home Guard who waved at him by returning their greeting with a friendly smile and nod of acknowledgement as he and Devin were passing through the compound’s operations center.

“If need be, indefinitely,” Devin replied as he ushered Burress into his office and closed the door behind him. “The people I picked to be here are no strangers to being away from home for long stretches of time or living rough. Each and every man and woman is dedicated to our cause.”

“I imagine they won’t need to stay much longer,” Burress informed Devin as he accepted a cup of coffee from the Marine colonel. “Those states that are willing to participate in the convention of states are sending representative to the Truman Library in Independence, Missouri to discuss the mechanics of the process. Once they’ve agreed on a framework, I expect you can stand down. As I see it, your efforts here have served their purpose. We’ll take it from here.”

Devin knew without needing to ask Burress who the ‘we’ he was talking about were. Politicians, men Devin saw as being little different than the ones who the American people had sent to Washington, men and women who conveniently forgot their campaign promises the second they stepped in front the glaring lights of the Washington press corps. “Tell me, Governor, do you for one minute think the President and his minions are simply going to sit in the White House, twiddling their thumbs while you and the other governors re-write the Constitution?”

“Yes,” Burress stated with a confidence that caused Devin to flinch. “As brazen as this President has been when it comes to disregarding the law of the land and his oath of office, I find it hard to believe he would interfere with us. We, the governors, after all, will be exercising our right to hold a convention of states to amend the Constitution as spelled out by Article Five.”

Rather than bothering to point out the faults and potential pitfalls he saw in Burress’ assessment, or get into an argument over the finer points of the Constitution with a career politician, by way of response Devin grinned. “You know Chris, that’s what I like about you. Not only are you an eternal optimist, no matter how many times someone has shit all over you, you’re always willing to give them another chance.”

Like Devin, Burress had no desire to waste his time arguing with a man who did not understand the fine art of governance. Letting Devin’s remarks go unanswered, he instead turned his attention to the reason he’d flown down from Phoenix to meet with him in private. “Some of the governors think it’s time you called off the protest in Washington you and your people have done a masterful job of whipped up. Not only are they concerned things may get out of hand, if we’re to have any chance of success we’re going to need the cooperation of the Congress. There have been rumors the President is preparing to use Federal troops to clear the National Mall. If he does, anything can happen, none of which would bode well for our efforts.”

Devin blithely dismissed Burress’ concerns with a wave of his hand as he spoke. “Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that happening. I have it on good authority that isn’t going to happen.”

Burress had no need to ask the former Marine colonel how he could be so certain. In much the same way Devin had curried favor with members of the Arizona National Guard by reaching out to members who had served a tour in Southwest Asia, state police and highway patrol who were veterans, and even several members of his own staff who’d done a stint in uniform, Burress had no doubt he had managed to recruit serving officers and NCOs throughout the armed forces currently serving in key positions, creating a network of like-minded people who were more than simply sympathetic to his cause.

“You’ve made your point, Al. As a result of the stand you and your people have made here, you’ve set in motion the mechanism by which change, real and substantive change can take place,” Burress intoned as he leaned forward. “It’s time to ask the protestors in Washington to go home and let us take things from here.”

“Us?” Devin asked quietly. “You mean politicians no different than the ones we’ve been sending to Washington year after year, only to see them betray us by catering to the needs of special interests, appointing judges to Federal courts who ignore the will of the people and a Congress that funds an oppressive bureaucracy that stifles free enterprise and intrudes in every aspect of our lives without a second thought?”

With the greatest of effort, Burress managed to keep his anger in check. “It’s going to be different this time. You have my word on that.”

Like the Governor, Devin was able to keep the animosity he felt for politicians in check, though it was a near run thing. As far as he was concerned the word of a politician, even one who’d once served with the colors as Burress had, amounted to bupkis. Instead, he eased back in his seat and raised the cup of coffee he was holding up as if in a toast as he smiled. “Oh, rest assured, Chris, things *are* going to be different this time.”

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As he was watching the Blackhawk taking the Governor back to Phoenix disappear in the distance, Devin concluded the man had been right about one thing. There was little need to continue the standoff between the Arizona Home Guard and the rangers. With the focus of events now off what they were doing, he decided the time had come to shift his base of operations to where he could better monitor and influence events. Doing so would not be easy, for he was far less sanguine about the vengefulness of the President than Burress was. No doubt, he told himself, he’d have a target on his back the size of the state of Arizona wherever he went. “Well,” he muttered to himself as he took to looking around the compound, watching as his people went about their duties, “it won’t be the first time someone was out to cancel your ticket, Devin.”

Despite he had repeatedly made it clear there being no need to render military honors to him by way of saluting, most members of the Arizona Home Guard did so whenever they passed within close proximity of him or he paid a visit to their position. Without fail he always returned their salute with a smartness that was second nature to him. Finding a way of maintaining his freedom of action once he’d left Fort Necessity would have to wait, he concluded. First he would need to fashion a way of bringing the siege of Fort Necessity to an end that not only kept the President from hailing it as a victory but, and more importantly, do so in a manner that honored the courage of the men and women who had stood with him. He owed each and every one of them a debt of gratitude, for they had risked all by standing up for what they believed in. It would not do to simply thank them and send them on their way. He wanted them to leave their hilltop strongpoint with a sense of accomplishment and pride. If Allen Devin was anything, he was first and foremost a Marine. For him, Semper Fi was more than a motto.

With that thought in mind, he set out to find the former lieutenant colonel of rangers who served as his deputy before contacting Major Dixon to see if he would be so kind as to meet with him in an hour. The time had come to play his last and, by far, the single most important hand in the high stakes game he had every intention of winning.

Chapter 26

*The White House, Washington, D.C.*

The incident everyone had feared, and many expected, occurred as most incidents like it did when people who feel they are under siege are confronted by a large, impassioned mob. The players who took part in the tragedy of errors were not from among the usual suspects. Alice Fleming, a midlevel staffer who worked for the White House Director of Communications was a single mother of two. She did not set out from the White House for the purpose of provoking an incident. Likewise Ken Wyatt, a member of the Executive Protective Service was interested in noting more than doing his job as best he could when he assumed his post at the entrance used by White House employees.

A call from the sitter who was taking care of Fleming’s two children informing her that her youngest was running a fever left her little choice but to ask Eric Joiner if she could leave. Under normal circumstances Joiner would have thought nothing of sending her on her way. At the moment, however, circumstances were anything but normal. Due to the influx of people answering Devin’s call to go to Washington and take back their government, traffic into, out of and around the city was coming to a near standstill. With the ability of people who worked in the District to get to or away from their place of employment becoming increasingly problematical, Timothy Rowland made it clear no one was to leave the White House grounds without his expressed permission. Officially, the reason for this emergency measure was to spare people who were members of the President’s staff the hassle of fighting their way through traffic that spent more time at a dead stop than it did moving forward. The real purpose behind his latest dictate was actually far less altruistic. “The last thing I want is for some twit like that Dixon woman going on TV and likening the departure of members of the President’s staff to rats abandoning a sinking ship,” he confessed to Ann Lucas in private when she tried to change his mind by pointing out his policy would cause an untold amount of hardship for staffers who had families.

“Be reasonable, Tim. Some of us actually have lives, you know. The surest way of assuring people will jump ship at the first opportunity that comes their way is to behave like a tyrant, not to mention giving legs to what Devin and his followers are saying about this administration.”

Reluctantly, Rowland rewrote his memo, toning down the wording of his first draft. Still, that didn’t keep lower level staffers from calling it Tiny Tim’s Stand Your Ground memo when no one belonging to the President’s inner circle was within earshot. The revised memo included a number of exceptions. At the top of that very short list was a provision that allowed employees to leave if there was a family emergency. To ensure no one took undue advantage of this proviso, Rowland had gone to great pains to spell out just what was included in that category, least someone use the excuse that they needed to take their sick dog to the vet in order to escape a crisis that was on the verge of bringing the District to its knees.

As all too often happens when a person under pressure dashes off a memo without first staffing it through someone with a clear head and time to consider what a casual reader might read into it, Rowland’s memo appeared to give the heads of the various departments within the White House discretion he had not intended to include. In the case of Alice Fleming, when she went to Eric Joiner and asked if she could run home and check on her daughter, Joiner believed the provision that permitted members of the staff to leave to tend to family emergencies gave him the authority to let her go without him needing to check with Rowland. He therefore sent Fleming on her way, warning her to be careful. “I’ve no need to tell you things are getting tense out there. So drive careful and whatever you do, don’t stop until you get home. There’s no telling what will happen if any of those crazies out there find out you’re a White House employee.”

Already worried about her daughter, Joiner’s warning added to Fleming’s anxiety, and for good reason. With news crews staking out all entrances to the White House in the hope of catching a fleeting glimpse of who was being summonsed to confer with the President, the crowds besieging the White House were decidedly more animated and vocal than those on the National Mall. There the people were only interested in listening to the nonstop parade of speakers who were, themselves, seeking an opportunity to have what they said broadcast live to those who could not be there. Many who were part of the crowd surrounding the White House, on the other hand, had a very different agenda.

With news crews from every major network staking it out, every vehicle that entered the White House Grounds or exited it, no matter how innocuous, galvanized them and the crowd into action in the off chance that one of its occupants was someone of note. For the most part people just chanted whatever slogan they favored or waved signs they were carrying as the vehicle approached, more for the benefit of the camera than to communicate their sentiment to the vehicle’s occupant. A few of the more aggressive members of the crowd sought to slow or stop vehicles either by slapping a sign they were carrying against the windshield in front of the driver or stepping out in from of it.

At the last checkpoint before leaving White House grounds, Wyatt stopped Fleming to warn her to warn her she needed to take it slow. “Keep moving if at all possible. Once you’re clear of this crowd, go straight home. Whatever you do, don’t stop.”

With her eyes firmly fixed on the solid mass of people just up ahead, a death grip on the steering wheel, and her heart in her throat, Fleming nodded before applying a touch of pressure on the accelerator and moving forward. Ever so slowly she inched her way toward the crowd that reluctantly began to part, opening a narrow but passable lane. She was just about to turn onto the street when an angry protestor slapped his placard against the driver’s side window. Startled, and believing she was being attacked, Fleming turned her attention away from where she was going just as an unexpected surge from somewhere within the crowd caused several people lining the narrow lane in front of her car to tumble over and into its path.

A sudden thump, accompanied by a sharp jiggling of the steering wheel that felt as if front wheels of her car had just hit a speed bump was followed by a shrilled chorus of shrieks and screams. Whipping her head back around to the front, Fleming realized the lane before her had closed up. In its place was a sea of angry faces and people who had taken to pounding on the hood of her car. Terror stricken and confused, Fleming slammed on the breaks as the people surrounding her car continued to shout contradictory orders at her, some pleading with her to back up, others demanding she get out.

Having witnessed what was happening, and fearing Fleming was in mortal danger, Ken Wyatt left his post. His efforts to reach Fleming was blocked by a number of angry protestors who pressed in on him, shouting demands that he go back and call for paramedics. Believing the paramedics were needed for Fleming, his sworn duty to protect White House employees left him no choice but to force his way forward and save her before the angry crowd pried her from her car and tore her to pieces.

When brute force failed to clear the way, Wyatt drew his pistol. Those who were face-to-face with him and saw the weapon being brandished about immediately attempted to back away. Those who could not, who stood between Wyatt and Fleming’s car refused to yield. People further back in the crowd who had no idea what was going on and were either attempting to assist the protestor who had been run over or simply wanted to see what was happening, pressed forward.

This utter and uncontrollable chaos took a sudden and tragic turn when a series of three shots fired in the air, setting in motion a stampede that turned a tragic series of events into a calamity.

*Studios of CNN affiliate, New York City*

With no office to call her own, Jan Fields had taken up residency in the CNN control room where she coordinated the activities of her reporters with George Ross, the head of that network’s New York news bureau. At the moment the two of them were listening to Chris Dixon’s live update on the incident at the White House that left three dead and an untold number of men, women and children.

When it was finished and the producer cut to the CNN anchor, Jan glanced over at her counterpart who continued to stare at the screen as if deep in thought. “You do appreciate the days of the current President’s administration are numbered.”

“I wouldn’t be so quick to count the man out, not just yet,” Ross intoned without taking his eyes off the monitor in front of him.

“The how and the why of today’s tragic events or the events that led up to it no longer mattered,” Jan countered. “Just as the Chinese emperors of old who were judged to be no longer fit to rule, the people of the United States have decided the President had lost his mandate with Heaven. He has to go if Congress hopes to keep the states from seizing upon the opportunity Devin and incidents like this have handed them to wrestle control from it.”

In the past, Ross would not have hesitated to defend the actions of a man he had once put his faith in. That he didn’t told Jan all she needed to know. Rolling the armless chair she was seated in back away from the console, she came to her feet, never once taking her eyes off the monitor before her. Today had been long and trying. Tomorrow, she imagined, would be just as long. “Unless you have something we need to go over, George, I’m calling it a day.”

Ross sighed before glancing over his shoulder and regarding Jan with a weak smile. “I’d ask you to join me for a drink, a big one, but with my reputation already in the shitter as a result of our collaboration, the last thing I need is to be seen in public with you. Imagine the rumors that would give rise to.”

Reaching out, Jan gave Ross an amiable pat on the back. “At my age, rumors like that are welcomed. They serve to dispel all the other less than flattering ones my staff indulge in.”

After sharing a good laugh over this, Jan bade Ross goodnight and made her way out of the building where she joined the crowd of harried office workers and pedestrians who always seemed to fill the city’s streets.

How the crisis playing out in Washington would end, what the delegates to the convention of states meeting in Independence, Missouri would do and whether the American people would go along with seeing a system of government that had transformed a handful of colonies into a nuclear superpower changed were questions that would have to wait until tomorrow. What Jan needed if she were to be able to affectively cover the stories that resulted from the resolution of those issues was opportunity to clear her head, grab something to eat and catch a few hours of uninterrupted sleep in her own bed.

But first, she would take a page out of Ross’ playbook and have a drink. That one wasn’t going to be enough to banish the nervous anxiety and uncertainty that had been driving her on these past few days didn’t bother her in the least. At least when it came time to lay her head to rest that night, she mused, she’d be able to enjoy a good night’s sleep, something she expected few in the nation’s capital would be able to do.

The

Eight

DAY

Chapter 28

*Fort Necessity, Arizona*

Awkward and unsure of herself didn’t even begin to describe how Sarah Jennings felt that morning as she waited to report on the ceremony that would see Allen Devin turn control of the compound the Arizona Home Guard had held for a week over to the rangers. Never having been witness to such an event, she was not sure how to behave or what she was going to say. The only thing she was sure of was the word surrender was never to be used. “We are no capitulating,” Maria Rivera had pointedly informed her as he was walking her through how the handover was going to take place. “The Arizona Home Guard will continue to safeguard the rights and property of the citizens of this state as we always have. This can best be achieved by turning this facility over to the acting commanding officer of the 2nd Battalion, 75th Rangers, thus freeing up members of the Guard to return to their families and resume their normal occupations when they’re not otherwise assisting the U.S. Border Patrol by tracking and reporting aliens illegally entering the United States. The rangers, in turn, will be able to use Fort Necessity as a staging area where they will be able to recover from their sojourn in the desert and prepare for their next mission, whatever that may be.”

In a rush to tend to her personal preparations for the handover, Jennings didn’t think to ask Allen Devin to specular on where he thought the ranger battalion might be sent next during a brief one-on-one interview that morning. Not that he would have given her a straight answer. At the moment his full attention was focused on bringing this chapter in the history of a country he so loved brought to a fit and proper conclusion before moving onto the next.

Never having had the need to go parading about, the Arizona Home Guard didn’t waste time with close order drill. It therefore took some doing to organize the men and women who had been selected to represent the whole into some semblance of a formation and walk them through the ceremony. The one thing Devin had no need to do was to remind them of the need to show up wearing their best uniform with clean weapons and freshly shaven faces, for all were just as eager as he was to show the world they were proud veterans who had not forgotten who they were and what they stood for.

Still, despite their best efforts, Jennings could not help but take note of the odd mix of uniforms the assembled militiamen were wearing. Every pattern of camouflage the various uniformed branches of the armed forces had worn over the past three decades were on display. Some wore the green, black and brown woodland pattern the Army first issued in the 1980s. Others turned out wearing the same universal pattern Army Combat uniform they had kept after multiple tours in either Iraq or Afghanistan. Scattered about with them were militiamen wearing the distinctive MARPAT, which Jennings had been told stood for Marine Pattern camouflage. Conspicuously standing out among this riotous cacophony were several members of the Arizona Home Guard clad in the distinctive blue camouflage uniform the Navy had issued for years.

By contrast the company selected to represent the ranger battalion was uniformly turned out. As they marched into the compound Jennings could not help but be impressed. With the exception of the rhythmic tromping of boots on the hard, level ground and the muted cadence count of a senior NCO, their tightly packed formation came on in utter silence. To a man all wore an expression that reflected a grim, unflinching determination no different than that of their commanding officer. Upon reaching its pre-designated position opposite the formation of militiamen, the ranger company executed a series of evolutions with a crisp smartness that reminded Jennings more of a machine than a group of men. Caught up in the moment, she had to remind herself that the company of rangers was a machine, a killing machine that had not been called upon to use the weapons they carried sung over their shoulders.

Having worked with Sam Emerson every day for the past week, the young intern had no need to concern herself with where the camera was, allowing her to focus her full attention on a running commentary she was delivering in a low, almost reverent whisper. She stopped speaking when the rangers came to a stop, made a quarter turn, and faced the assembled militiamen across the open compound. After a brief pause, during which only the sound heard was that of the wind sweeping across the mountaintop, Colonel Devin stepped out in front of his men and ordered them to present arms. After his command had been carried out and all movement in the ranks of the militia had ceased, Major Dixon followed suit. When both groups were ready, a bugler Jennings had not noticed before played a tune that caused a pair of militiamen to hoist the American flag up the pole located dead center between the two formations.

Only then did it dawn upon Jennings that the two groups, though their turnout and reasons for coming to this desolate corner of their country was as different as night and day, they had both been fighting for the same thing. Both were paying their respects to the same flag that represented a country they all had been ready to fight for and, if need be, die. How odd, she thought to herself, that in their own way, both had been fighting for the same thing. Perhaps that was why, after they had brought their respective commands back to a position of attention, both Colonel Allen Devin, USMC retired and Major Nathan Dixon, United States Army were able to march out to the center of the compound, saluting each other, and shake hands under the flag they both served without hesitation or the slightest hint of animus.

*In Front of the White House, Washington, D.C.*

Watching the ceremony in Arizona on a small monitor in the news truck she’d be relying on as she covered events at the White House, the pride Chris Dixon felt for her husband was tinged with relief at seeing him alive and well. Once more he had sallied forth into harm’s way and had, through a combination of luck and well-honed professional acumen, managed to not only weather the tempest he’d been thrown into, but did so in a manner that brought great credit to himself and his unit. They were sentiments she expected her mother-in-law shared and, if there was such a thing as Heaven, Nathan’s father as he looked down with pride upon his son and others like him who answered the call to duty fewer and fewer men and women were willing to.

The only regret that intruded on this otherwise happy occasion was the knowledge that this would not be the last time he’d be called on to put all on the line for a country that all too often ignored men like him until they were needed.

The sound of an approaching helicopter’s blades beating the mid-morning air put an end to her reflections as the CNN producer she was working with informed her they were about to go live. “I’m not sure what’s up, so we’ll just have to wing it,” he informed her.

With a cocky confidence that would have made her mother-in-law smile and earned her a nod of approval from her husband, Chis relied with little more than a nod. “I’m ready anytime you are.”

*The White House, Washington D.C.*

Having gathered most of the members of the staff who would be accompanying the President to Andrews Air Force base on Marine One, then to Camp Davis until a better location could be found from which they could work from, Ann Lucas set out to find out what was keeping Timothy Rowland. She found him in his office, slumped down in his chair staring blankly at the television across the room from him. Hesitating in the partially open doorway, she studied a man she admired and loathed in equal measure.

Like many who came to the Executive Mansion to serve a sitting President, Luca was treated to a host of stories and legends that spoke of little know or remembers incidents involving past occupants. The sight of Rowland sitting there, despondent and unstrung, reminded her of a story she’d heard of how Richard Nixon had behaved during the height of the Watergate Affair. When it became clear to that notorious political brawler the end was near, it was said he would retreat to a room and sit alone before a fire. To see a man who personified the term power behind the throne so downcast was more than upsetting to Lucas. It was the surest sign yet that all the President had hoped to achieve was about to be undone by the very people who had elected him. The America they had labored to transform was about to be replaced with one that was, in her mind, a step back and away from the progressive, enlightened vision they had once embraced.

Slowly she took in a deep breath, pushed the door fully open, and entered the room. “Tim, we need to be going,” she announced firmly.

As if wakening from a dream, Rowland blinked and gave his head a quick shake before looking over to where Lucas was standing. After staring at her with a blank expression, he sighed. “You know, it just dawned upon me we’ve been recruiting the wrong people for the military.”

Taken aback by this non sequitur, it was Lucas’ turn to give her head a shake. “Excuse me.”

Spinning his leather executive office chair around, Rowland lurched forward as he took to explaining. “Watching that, I suddenly realized where we went wrong,” he proclaimed as he waved a hand toward the TV that was broadcasting live the ceremony that was marking the formal end to the siege of the militia compound. “The people we’ve allowed the military to recruit and promote into positions of leadership aren’t like us. They don’t share our values, our dreams, our goals. That’s why we failed this time around.”

Not sure if she was understanding the point he was trying to make, Lucas tilted her head to one side and frowned.

“Don’t you see,” a suddenly animated Rowland continued, “the founding fathers who wrote the Constitution and the men who had fought the British were one and the same. With the exception of slavery, they all pretty much believed in the same things. Even worse, precious few were lawyers, people who understand the importance of writing a contract that leaves nothing to doubt. The Constitution, the contract between those men and the American people left too much unsaid. That’s why we’ve had so much trouble with the damned thing all these years.”

Having no idea why Rowland had picked this moment to launch into a discussion of Constitution, Lucas attempted to remind him they needed to leave and leave soon. With the chief of the Metropolitan Police force withdrawing her officers from the streets in the immediate vicinity of the National Mall and Capitol and Park police retreating to key buildings where they would make their last stand against the mass of people who were teetering on the edge of turning into a vengeful mob, the head of the Secret Service had informed her he could no longer guarantee the safety of the President. Hence, the need to evacuate the White House.

“Tim, we can discuss this later, once we’re way. Right now you need to get the President on Marine One.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure, in a minute,” Rowland blurted as he continued to put her off. “The point I was making, about the military, is next time we need to do what the Iranians did after they got rid of the Shah. The Shah lost control of his country when his army withdrew their support of him. The imams who took his place understood that, which was why they created a separate force more powerful than the regular army that was loyal to the imams and no one else.”

Leaning further forward in his seat, Rowland clasped the arms of his chair and fixed Lucas in a steady, unflinching stare as he prepared to make the point he had been leading up to. “If we’re to have any hope of succeeding against the troglodytes who are too stupid to understand what we’re trying to accomplish, next time we need to do the same.”

Not knowing whether to be more concerned about the state of Rowland’s mental health or the vision he was laying out for the country, she hesitated. Perhaps it would be best if the Secret Service and White House police simply threw open the gates and allow the mob gathered on the other side to storm the place and tear the whole lot of them to pieces as the French had done to Louis XVII in 1789. It would be bloody, but in the end, as Jefferson had pointed out in his oft quoted passage, healthy for the Tree of Liberty. Only her concern for the other members of the White House staff and the loyalty she felt for the man she had played a role in putting there spurred her on.

“Tim!” she snapped tersely, “we need to go and we need to go *now*.”

Startled by her curt manner, Rowland blinked. After returning her stare for a long, tense moment as if trying to decide if he needed to be angry with her or agree, he nodded. “Yes, of course. If you would, see to it the other members of the staff who will be going with us on the first helicopter are ready while I inform the President we’re just about ready to leave.”

Deciding it would be pointless to tell him they had been ready for the last ten minutes, Lucas simply nodded but did not leave until she saw Rowland rise up from his chair and head off to the Oval Office. Only then did she hurry on back to where everyone was waiting for her to lead them out to where Marine One had landed.

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In a side office where they often sat, waiting for a summons neither man wanted to hear, with Emit DeWitt watched as Major Gregory Easton, USMC tossed a coin. Both watched as it flipped round and round in the air until it hit the floor between them. “Head,” Easton declared. “I win.”

Looking up from the coin, DeWitt fixed Easton with a hard, unflinching stare. “Best two out of three.”

“Sorry, G.I. It is what it is,” Easton informed DeWitt as he bent over and took up a black, nondescript leather case. “I have the honors.”

Knowing full well it would be pointless to argue with the self-assured Marine, DeWitt reached out with his hand. “Via con Dios, amigo.”

Easton took DeWitt’s hand and gave it a firm shake. “I expect I will.” With that, the two men parted.

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As she had often done before, Lucas stood at the foot of the stairs of the helicopter, mentally checking off the key members of the President’s staff as they filed onto it and took their seats. Neither she nor anyone else bothered to inspect the messenger bags or computer cases they carried containing vital data and information the President could not possibly do without. Among them was Major Easton, clutching the black, nondescript case the nuclear football was normally carried in. Only when she saw the President and Rowland emerge from the White House and head their way did she make her way up the stairs and to her seat, relieved that they would soon be away from growing turmoil and chaos that had brought the nation’s capital to a total standstill.

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With her back pressed up against the iron fence surrounding the White House, over the cheers of the crowd that surrounded her, Chris Dixon reported on the departure of Marine One as her cameraman tracked it. “We have yet to receive any confirmation from anyone in White House, but it is safe to say the President is preparing to leave Washington. Where he will go, and what he and his key advisors will do once they reach there to regain control of a situation they have clearly lost is a question everyone here is asking themselves. All we can do now is wait to see what happens next.”

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On reaching a vantage point from which he would be able to track Marine One, Emit DeWitt stopped. Surround by others who were also watching the VH-3D Sea King helicopter carrying the President and his closest advisors, he tightened his grip on the nondescript backpack he was carrying as he turned his gaze skyward and waited.

With the suddenness that stunned all save him, Marine One was consumed by an all-consuming and catoptric explosion. The sound of gasps and cries mingled with those of the detonation that washed over them after several long and terrible seconds. Not knowing what else to do, but feeling the need to somehow honor the sacrifice Easton had made for a cause he and many of his fellow Marines believed in, DeWitt responded in a manner that was, for him, appropriate and fitting. Coming to attention, he took one hand off the backpack he was carrying and rendered a crisp hand salute. He held it but for a moment, before heading off to the Pentagon with the nuclear codes he and Easton had removed from the case they were normally carried in and replaced it with something very different.