

Your Adrien Gold  
Your [adrien@adriengold.com](mailto:adrien@adriengold.com)

63,200 words.

# Dark Pools

by Adrien Gold

Dark Pools  
Copyright © 2025 by Adrien Gold.  
All rights reserved.

This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the author's express written permission, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review, scholarly and non-commercial work.

**Disclaimer:**

*Dark Pools* is a work of fiction; therefore, the novel's stories and characters are fictitious. Any public agencies, institutions, or historical figures mentioned in the stories serve as a backdrop to the characters and their wholly imaginary actions.

ISBN:  
ISBN-13:

To my parents, for your kind hearts, nurturing thoughts,  
encouraging words, and every loving deed.  
With all my love and gratitude.



*“The few who understand the system will either be so interested in its profits or be so dependent upon its favours that there will be no opposition from that class, while on the other hand, the great body of people, mentally incapable of comprehending the tremendous advantage that capital derives from the system, will bear its burdens without complaint, and perhaps without even suspecting that the system is inimical to their interests.”*

*The Rothschild Brothers of London to associates in New York, On June 25, 1863.\**

To the curious reader,

#

The idea for *Dark Pools* originated with a quiet, almost accidental discovery, one I couldn't ignore. At the time, I was finishing my first book, *The Kings Have Won*, and had no intention of diving into extensive research. But I had stumbled upon something that felt both urgent and hidden.

#

I had uncovered the world of “dark pools”: private, shadowy exchanges where corporations, hedge funds, and financial elites place enormous trades in near-total secrecy. At first, it sounded like fiction. But the deeper I looked, the more disturbing the reality became.

#

In these hidden markets, trades occur without names, without public record, and with only minimal oversight, certainly nothing close to the standards of traditional “lit” exchanges (NYSE and Nasdaq). Even more unsettling, trade data is disclosed only when dark pool operators choose

to reveal it. In other words, while ordinary investors play by one set of rules, the ultra-wealthy operate under another: opaque, unregulated, and almost entirely invisible.

#

The quote above lays bare a brutal logic: that financial systems are often designed to be so complex, only a privileged few can understand, let alone challenge them. The Rothschilds' clear disdain for the "*great body of people*," dismissed as incapable of comprehending the system's inner workings, reflects a truth we continue to live with: that opacity is power, and complexity is a weapon.

#

During the 2008 financial crisis, *we, the people*, bore its burdens without complaint. America's poverty rate climbed to 15.1%, even as the nation's largest banks grew richer. J.P. Morgan Chase expanded by 36%, Bank of America by 32%, and Wells Fargo more than doubled in size. By 2010, after pillaging the economy, the top twenty-five Wall Street firms shattered compensation records, paying out a staggering \$135 billion, even as ordinary Americans grew poorer.

#

As I dug deeper into the world of dark pools, a picture began to form: a rigged financial system operating in the shadows, driven by high-frequency trading algorithms and designed to protect the few at the expense of the many. Because traders in dark pools remain anonymous, the door is wide open to shady actors and abusive strategies.

#

These trades are frequently aided by algorithms that exploit millisecond advantages to manipulate prices. It's that very speed and secrecy that keep the system rigged. While average

investors make decisions based on news or instinct, these hidden players move with privileged access and real-time advantages, shielded from scrutiny.

#

Dark pools have evolved from niche backwaters to dominant forces in financial markets. Once used for discreet institutional trades, they now account for nearly 40% of all U.S. stock transactions. Among the largest dark pools are Barclays LX, Credit Suisse Crossfinder, Goldman Sachs' Sigma X, and UBS ATS, each processing billions of dollars in trades outside public exchanges. This growth marks a profound shift: from open markets to opaque systems where price discovery is delayed, fairness distorted, and trust eroded.

#

Could such systems benefit tyrants, drug cartels, or kleptocrats? The answer is, disturbingly, yes. In 2015, former U.S. Attorney General Loretta Lynch warned: "Today, global criminal syndicates operate across borders, exploiting the complexities of international finance, trade, and technology." That very complexity, layered with shell corporations, front companies, complicit brokers, and weak oversight, allows dictators to siphon public wealth, cartels to launder drug money, and corrupt elites to entrench power.

#

As the Rothschild quote suggests, those "*who understand the system will either be so interested in its profits or be so dependent upon its favours that there will be no opposition from that class...*".

#

In this shadow architecture of modern finance, the line between high finance and organized

crime has never been thinner.

#

As someone drawn to the tension between official stories and hidden truths, I felt compelled to write about this, not as an economist, but as a storyteller.

#

*Dark Pools* was born out of that impulse: to explore not just the mechanics of a rigged system. This book is a fast-paced and chilling thriller about the algorithmic war already underway and the hidden forces fighting to control the future of wealth and power.

#

At its core, it is a story grounded in truth.

#

Because while the characters are fictional, the system they navigate is very real. It touches our markets, our politics, and the very stability of nations.

#

We often think the greatest threats to democracy arrive with flags and slogans. But sometimes, the most dangerous forces are quiet, operating behind closed doors, in invisible exchanges, in algorithms too fast for human eyes to follow.

#

I wrote *Dark Pools* because I believe stories can expose what headlines often fail to capture: the societal impact of a system designed to serve the few while hiding from the many.

#

I hope this novel entertains you. But more than that, I hope it leaves you with the same unsettling



clarity I felt when I first entered this world: that the game is not what we thought it was, and it's long past time we asked who, exactly, is winning.

#

It is with humility and purpose that I place these words before you. With respect and gratitude,

#

Adrien Gold

#

\*Note: "Quote often attributed to the Rothschilds, the origins of this quote are disputed.

Regardless, its sentiment remains hauntingly relevant."

## Chapter One

Every syllable carried the weight of an impending storm. The voice reverberated through the subterranean war room buried deep beneath the White House. The grainy image of a man, distorted by layers of encryption, filled the display. “We will bring the global economy to its knees.”

Shoulder-length and wavy black hair framed a pasty, elongated, and asymmetrical face. His features were soft, yet sculpted, a full-face prosthetic mask, crafted from silicone by an untraceable expert, likely Russian. This faceless actor threatened the government with unimaginable consequences and showed little concern or remorse.

NSA, CIA, FBI, and even the most clandestine intelligence networks had come up empty. No identity, no name, no fingerprints, and no history. He wasn't a man so much as a cipher, a construct woven from whispers and control. The Devil. Maybe. But even the Devil had a name.

Power was an illusion. That much, Secretary of the Treasury Jane Holt had learned.

Because the threat is never the unknown we fear, but the known we ignore.

Secretary of the Treasury Jane Holt sat, her hands clenched beneath the heavy oak conference table. The glow from six monitors flickered before her. The screens bathed her in an artificial, bluish hue, highlighting the intensity in her gaze as she scanned the shifting eyes of the man on the screen. The sharp lines of her chiseled cheekbones, square jaw, and deep, penetrating eyes remained fixed on the Administrator.

But she was poised, calculating, ready.

Around her, the room was still. Not out of calm but dread.

A flicker of unease curled in her stomach.

The previous morning, a package had arrived at the Treasury. Inside, on thick ivory card stock, a single letter. An 'A,' embossed on the thick paper. The typeface was elegant and carried the weight of an old-world signature, yet there was something modern about it, as if designed to command attention and defy time itself, stark and deliberate.

Inside the package was a burner phone. The note requested a call. It listed a time and a promise: this was a matter of extreme importance.

Jane Holt had dealt with the letter's author before. She knew he represented a cartel of banking elites and despised his arrogance.

President Walter Lang stood behind the wall of monitors, his arms folded tightly across his broad chest.

The low hum of the war room filled the space, punctuated by the quiet beeps of incoming intelligence reports and the rustle of aides shifting uneasily at their stations.

Overhead recessed lighting cast stark shadows across the President's face, sharpening the

lines of a man who had, for the last two years, borne the weight of the nation.

The President was still, unnervingly so, but his presence commanded the room. Though well into his sixties, Lang exuded a quiet power, his strong frame a lingering testament to his days on the football field. Age had carved wisdom into the angles of his face rather than softening them, lending him a rugged gravitas that no amount of political theater could manufacture.

It wasn't just the burden of the office that weighed on him tonight; it was the certainty that every decision he made at this moment would ripple across the world. Lang wasn't the kind of leader who spoke just to fill the silence. When he did speak, his words carried the full force of conviction, sharpened by a lifetime spent fighting for those without a voice.

Across the room, Jane Holt stood waiting, her expression unreadable, but Lang knew her well enough to catch the flicker of concern in her eyes. They had fought too many battles together for her to hide her unease. Their political and personal friendship was built on trust, on a shared vision, but one that often put them at odds with the powerful elite.

Vice President Amelia Harper stood motionless by the President, her sharp green eyes constantly tracking the information unfolding before her. Her curly gray hair framed a face that, despite the tension in the room, carried an innate warmth. Brilliant yet unpretentious, Harper had a way of making even the grimmest moments feel less dire. But now, she barely breathed, the weight of the situation pressing down.

Around them, senior staff lined the perimeter, silent, watching, waiting.

There, flickering through the grainy distortion of the encrypted video, stood the Administrator. He hesitated for a moment before speaking, his voice distorted by software

designed to obscure his identity.

The war room was silent as his voice cut through the static.

“Over forty percent of all daily stock trades take place in dark pools, our dark pools.” The Administrator began. “The private, unregulated exchanges, where transactions remain invisible and anonymous. We built these markets to serve dictators and tyrants, cybercriminals and narco-terrorists, but also the politicians who rob the trusting people who voted them into office.”

The Administrator moved closer to the lens. His pale, ghostly face filled the screen. “In our dark pools, clients move billions without scrutiny, their trades slipping through the cracks of the transparency you demand; no exchange records, no flashing tickers, just shadow deals, where wealth is secondary to something far greater: control and power. The kind of control tyrants covet, the kind we provide them with in perfect anonymity.” The administrator’s tone was controlled, measured, and almost amused.

“Real power doesn’t change hands in the markets in the Nasdaq or the New York Stock Exchange. No, real power moves in the shadows, within our private exchanges, our treasured and protected dark pools. Trillions of dollars shift without oversight and beyond the reach of your laws and scrutiny. That is where true power lies, Secretary Holt.” The Administrator let the words settle, then continued, his cadence unwavering.

“My clients control these exchanges. They dictate liquidity, manipulate pricing, and move wealth on a scale that no government intervention could contain. These dark pools exist because they serve us, they serve the men I represent, the men who understand the true mechanics of power.”

A pause.

Just long enough to make his next words carry the weight of his threat.

The feed crackled slightly as he continued, a deliberate glitch, as if to remind them how little control Secretary Holt and the American government had over this conversation.

Then, his voice returned, lower, colder.

“Try to regulate our dark pools, dare to obstruct them in any way, and you won’t just be fighting an industry. You’ll be challenging an empire. And history is not kind to those who stand in the way of empires. We will crash the global economy.”

No bluster. No theatrics. Just a simple fact, laid bare in the dimly lit room beneath the White House.

Jane’s nails pressed into her palms, the sharp bite grounding her as she stared at the screens before her.

Each of the six monitors fed her pieces of a puzzle she struggled to solve. The bottom right screen displayed a muted CNN anchor oblivious to the war unfolding behind these closed doors.

The Administrator filled the left four screens, his masked presence distorted by the encrypted feed, a phantom taunting them with every deliberate word. The top right monitor showed the results of an NSA tracking program desperately scanning the digital void, searching, but failing to pinpoint the Administrator’s location.

Behind the screens that faced Secretary Holt, President Lang stood with arms crossed, his expression unreadable.

Vice President Amelia Harper barely moved.

Around them, the support team worked in tense silence, their hushed exchanges

swallowed by the hum of computers and the occasional burst of static from an open channel.

Holt knew about dark pools. According to a 2025 Bloomberg report, the majority of all trading in U.S. stocks was now consistently occurring outside the country's exchanges and happened in dark pools, the unregulated exchanges also called 'alternative trading systems', or ATS.

These dark pools were exclusive exchanges, casinos for the uber-rich. They were designed to rig the game against everyday people.

Holt had faced powerful adversaries before; wealthy bankers, hedge fund titans, even foreign governments willing to turn a blind eye.

But never like this.

Never had the enemy been so brazen, so unashamed of their grip on power. This wasn't manipulation or whispered influence. This was a direct threat. A declaration of war.

The masked figure on the screen wasn't just guarding the fortress of hidden wealth; he was daring them to breach it.

And Jane, for all her expertise, had never felt power so naked in its menace. Her fingers tightened into fists once more. She needed to think. To move. To strike first before it was too late.

Deception and secrecy had so thoroughly brought the government to its knees. The nation's so-called leaders were impotent. They had been stripped of their power by those who truly ruled.

Sadly, this was America's new reality, subservient to a cartel of banking elites, daring the President to defy its demands.

Jane Holt narrowed her gaze.

The man she called ‘A’ was calm, too calm. He wasn’t issuing a threat out of desperation; he was delivering it like a foregone conclusion, as if this meeting was nothing more than a formality.

She refused to dignify him with his full title.

The word Administrator suggested order, structure, and even legitimacy. He was none of those things.

‘A’ suited him better, she believed: short, sharp, and dismissive. It stood for many things in her mind, none of them flattering.

Her voice was steady when she spoke. “I’m well aware of the role dark pools play in your clients’ operations and massive profits. President Lang understands that greed is a necessary evil in our economic system. Wanting more wealth is one thing, but your clients have created a playground for manipulation, where unseen trades shake the very markets Americans trust. Your clients have built a secret, parallel financial system operating in the shadows to siphon the world’s wealth for themselves.”

A flicker of something crossed the Administrator’s face. Amusement? Contempt? He waited before responding.

The man looked strange; his forehead stretched unnaturally above a pale, almost ghostly complexion, which gave him an eerie, spectral presence. He kept his chin low, peering up with a quiet menace, an ever-present threat. His dark eyes gleamed with something unreadable, locked onto the camera like a predator sizing up its prey.

Jane knew exactly who was sitting on his side of the call: the undisputed masters of the



financial world, the hidden shareholders of America's largest dark pools.

The men, Vice President Amelia Harper once called our true rulers, our kings.

This wasn't a negotiation.

This was a warning.

The atmosphere in the room was tense.

President Walter Lang sat in silence, his face an unreadable mask. His ability to judge character was one of his greatest assets, and right now, all he saw beyond the Administrator's manufactured appearance was a twisted, evil man.

Vice President Amelia Harper leaned forward slightly, elbows on the table, her sharp green eyes locked on the screen.

Jane knew Lang, Harper, and the staff were all thinking the same thing.

This was a calculated show of power.

"We are prepared to do whatever it takes to protect our interests," the Administrator continued.

"Whatever it takes."

Jane didn't flinch, but fury sparked beneath the surface. Her calm exterior shifted imperceptibly, just enough to reveal the fire of determination behind her composed façade.

How could the entire American intelligence community fail to identify the Administrator?

The man was a shadow.

"Listen, 'A'. Your clients hold \$43 trillion of America's wealth." Jane said.

"\$43 trillion, isn't that enough? Meanwhile, the rest of the population, we, the 99%, own

a mere 2.5%.” She paused. “Yet, while your masters hoard unimaginable fortunes, we pay the price. We pay our taxes, and we pay for the massive profits you disguise as inflation. So let me ask you, ‘A’. What do you want?”

“We desire to proceed as we do now,” the Administrator replied coldly. “The Securities and Exchange Commission’s proposals to regulate dark pools are unacceptable.”

Jane leaned forward. “This is a threat, not a warning. Correct?”

The Administrator straightened. “If President Lang wishes to see pensions wiped out and the stock market plunge, then so be it.”

Silence.

The truth, Jane Holt understood, was the United States government wasn’t just compromised.

It was outmatched.

## Chapter Two

Prague was shrouded in mist, a city suspended between history and dream. As their plane descended, the Vltava River wound through the fog like a silver ribbon, the ancient spires of Old Town piercing the morning haze. From above, the Charles Bridge emerged like a forgotten relic, its statues floating above a sea of white. In the distance, Prague Castle loomed atop its hill, its towers ablaze in shades of gold as the first light of dawn kissed its walls.

A week ago, an unexpected email had landed in Victoria Porter's inbox. The message was brief:

“Want the scoop of a lifetime?”

Victoria Porter, a fierce opponent of corporate oligarchs with an unflinching resolve, was an independent investigative journalist, a rising star with 1.2 million social media followers, and a reputation for fearlessly exposing hidden truths.

She had responded with a single word:

“Listening.”

The moment she hit send, her phone rang.

“Good morning, Miss Porter. I’m Bridget from Nova Security. You responded to our message, and I’d like to discuss your travel arrangements.”

“Travel arrangements?” Victoria repeated, skeptical.

Bridget’s tone was polite but guarded. “I am sorry, my job is coordinating logistics for a trip to an undisclosed location where you will meet our client. Everything else will be explained in due time.”

Three days later, a black limousine pulled up in front of her Manhattan apartment. A tall and very handsome man waited by the door of the vehicle. His features were sharp, almost sculptural, high cheekbones, a defined jaw, a nose that seemed carved from stone, and crystal clear blue eyes.

As she approached the vehicle, he held the door open for her.

“Miss Porter, I’m Martin Sloane. I’ll be your security detail during this trip.”

“Security detail?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“My client wants to ensure your safety, Miss Porter. There’s no reason for concern.”

They departed from Teterboro Airport, twelve miles northeast of Manhattan, aboard a Gulfstream G600.

Fifteen years ago, she and her parents endured a massive traffic jam and long customs lines at LaGuardia airport to send her to Prague for a semester abroad. She had been nervous back then, eager for adventure.

This time, Victoria was the sole passenger inside the luxurious plane, aside from her

security detail. The custom line had been non-existent. The pilots and crew, while polite, remained distant.

Martin sat at the back of the cabin, absorbed in his phone.

Their Gulfstream G600 touched down at Vodochody Airport, a small, private airstrip north of Prague, far from the busy terminals of Václav Havel International.

The air was damp and cold, and Victoria pulled her coat tighter around her shoulders as she stepped onto the tarmac.

The jet engines cooled to silence.

She turned to Martin. “Should I be worried about my security?”

Martin’s gaze flicked toward a black Mercedes SUV approaching them. “Not just yet.”

*Not yet?* She thought.

The Mercedes stopped and waited at the edge of the tarmac. The driver, an older Czech gentleman in a perfectly pressed suit, exited the vehicle and stood at attention.

Martin Sloan, her mysterious security detail, gestured toward the car. “Miss Porter.”

They traveled through Malá Strana, the “Lesser Town,” where Baroque palaces towered over them like silent guardians. The car navigated the labyrinth of winding streets, gliding past timeworn façades.

Victoria’s long, wavy blonde hair framed her face in soft, natural waves, while her deep brown eyes glimmered with quiet intensity, speaking volumes in their stillness. Impatient, she tapped her fingers against her phone. No reception.

In the front passenger seat, Martin sat in silence. His gaze never rested, checking mirrors, scanning streets, assessing threats she couldn’t see. A man of few words who only spoke when

spoken to, his silence commanding more attention than conversation ever could.

Victoria had not missed the fact that Sloane was very handsome.

They drove through Prague's maze of cobblestone streets, where pastel-hued buildings stood shoulder to shoulder, their ornate Baroque and Gothic details bathed in the soft grey light. The city's charm unfolded in bursts of color, buildings painted in ochre, rose, and pale blue, their façades adorned with intricate cornices and statues that hinted at centuries of history.

Eventually, they pulled up in front of a nondescript building in a quiet neighborhood, its plain exterior a stark contrast to the vibrant cityscape they had just passed.

The street was deserted, the sidewalks slick from a recent rain.

Victoria glanced at Martin anxiously. "How about now?"

He studied the area, scanning the rooftops and alleyways. "You're fine, Miss Porter. For now."

They entered the building through a side entrance, walking up a dimly lit stairwell. The scent of old wood clung to the air.

She followed Sloane to the top floor. A towering oak door loomed before them, ornate, imposing, and reinforced.

Sloane pressed a few numbers on the keypad, and they stepped into a spacious, elegantly designed living room. It was palatial, lined with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, their gilded spines gleaming under the warm glow of an antique chandelier. The fireplace crackled softly, throwing flickering shadows against the dark wood paneling.

There, by the window, stood a man she recognized instantly:

Max Whitney.

He turned slowly, his silhouette cut sharp against the dim light bleeding through the curtains. Max Whitney was solid, immovable, a human wall. Yet he was brilliant. In the shadows of the tech world, he was a legend; revered, elusive, and dangerous in his brilliance. He had quietly masterminded the software architecture behind high-frequency trading and laid the digital groundwork for the shadowy networks of financial exchanges known as dark pools, first for Nelnet, then beyond. His influence was vast. Invisible threads ran from his fingertips into the bloodstream of the global financial system.

Whitney's last TV appearance had shaken the financial world at its core. His last tweet warned: *Deception and secrecy have crushed our elected officials, forcing them to bow to those who, from the shadows, wield power with ruthless precision, while the unaware population remains enslaved.*

And then, without a warning, Max Whitney had vanished.

No known addresses. No traceable financial transactions. No calls, emails, or whispered messages from beyond. He left behind nothing but unanswered questions and a void where his presence had once been. His name faded from databases, his history scrubbed clean as if he had never existed. The few who had once called him a friend searched in vain; their inquiries met with dead ends and silence.

Yet, here he was.

Standing before her, solid, real, somehow more ghost than man.

Victoria's pulse quickened. "Quite a surprise to meet you, Mr. Whitney."

Max smiled faintly. "Well, I wish it were under better circumstances. I never intended to disappear. But these are dangerous times."

She studied him. The last time she had seen him on television, he had been polished, powerful, untouchable. Now, he looked weary. His once neatly combed silver hair was slightly disheveled, a newly grown beard thick and unkempt, and his eyes shadowed with exhaustion.

“That explains the security detail,” Victoria said, glancing toward Martin.

Whitney nodded, sinking into a leather armchair. “I hope your trip was comfortable.”

“It was. Though I’m still trying to process why I’m here.”

Whitney leaned forward, hands clasped. “Tell me, Miss Porter. Have you ever heard the name ‘Consilium Noctis’?”

She frowned. “No. Would that translate into the ‘Council of the Night’?”

A shadow crossed his face. “Yes. And if you truly want this story, the scoop of a lifetime I offered, you may have to disappear for a while.”

Before she could respond, Martin entered the room, his face tense.

“We have to move, sir.”

Max sat up. “How much time?”

“Let’s plan for five.”

Whitney turned to Victoria. “You have five minutes to decide. Stay, and you get the scoop of a lifetime. Leave, and we’ll get you back to New York.”

Five minutes later, they were on the move.

Across the street, two black SUVs idled, engines humming. Inside, a group of men in dark suits sat watching.

The moment Whitney and Victoria emerged, one of them murmured into a radio.

As they stepped onto the sidewalk, a flood of students poured out of an adjacent building.



Triggs, the lead operative, swore under his breath.

“Too many civilians,” one of his men muttered.

“Follow them at a distance,” Triggs ordered.

Whitney, his cap pulled low, steered Victoria toward a public park ahead.

In the SUV, a phone buzzed.

“Triggs, report.” Asked the Administrator.

“We have them. Just waiting for the right moment.”

“We need them now, Triggs. I am counting on you.”

“Understood. Let me call you back.”

The mission was simple: grab the targets, get them into the van, disappear. The team prepared to strike and waited a moment longer.

But then, everything unraveled.

As they closed in, Porter and Whitney erupted in frantic screams, their voices sharp with urgency and fear, echoing off the walls. Strangely, they spoke Czech.

In an orchestrated move, a police car rounded the corner, sirens flashing.

The strike team froze..

Triggs frowned. Something wasn't right.

Then, he saw it.

The man they had been tailing wasn't Max Whitney. Nor was the woman Victoria Porter.

They had been following body doubles.

Inside the SUV, Triggs clenched his fists as his phone buzzed again. He answered.

The Administrator spoke. “Report.”

Triggs exhaled. “We lost them.”

### Chapter Three

Morning sunlight poured through the towering windows of Jane Holt's Georgetown townhouse, creating sharp patterns of light across the white marble of her pristine kitchen. The scent of freshly brewed coffee filled the room, mingling with the faint odor of beeswax polish on antique wood floors.

She sat at the counter and admired the black bookshelves built to accommodate her handpicked collection of centuries-old books.

Classic photographs, all originals from lesser-known artists to masters such as Brassai, Doisneau, Sudek, and even a small Cartier-Bresson, were framed in dark mahogany, capturing moments long vanished, histories long told. In her sanctuary of privilege and refinement, where every bronze and marble statuette, blown Murano glass vase, and her exquisite collection of antique cameras held their place, she felt utterly alive.

Agent Sam Wilson was already waiting by the car when she stepped outside, his stance

relaxed but eyes scanning the quiet Georgetown street. He greeted her with a nod, opening the door of the black Lincoln that would ferry her through the heart of the nation's capital.

As they pulled away, Holt glanced back at her townhouse, the grand Federal-style façade standing dignified among the autumn foliage. The drive toward the White House took them past the Capitol, where tourists snapped photos against the morning sky. A line of art lovers had already formed outside the National Gallery, eager to discover its exquisite collection.

The city moved like clockwork, predictable, structured, unchanged.

It was 7 a.m. and the White House was quiet.

Jane Holt had been summoned for an early meeting and now walked briskly down the stark, fluorescent-lit hallway, her heels clicking sharply against the polished cement floor. She had never been in this part of the White House before, two floors underground, past a labyrinth of corridors that housed the most highly classified operations in the country.

To her right, a tight formation of Secret Service agents stood at attention, their expressions grim, unreadable. They had been ordered to clear the room, she assumed, and while they complied, their subtle shifts of weight and fidgeting with earpieces betrayed their discomfort.

As she neared Room 6A, she reached for the door, only for a mountain of a man to step into her path.

He was a towering figure, at least six feet three inches, with a broad-shouldered frame that exuded raw power. His uniform was unfamiliar, perhaps navy, but she couldn't be sure. Army? Green Berets? She had no idea, and that uncertainty made him all the more intimidating.

His face was concealed behind a high-tech mask, sleek and featureless.

“Ms. Holt.” His voice was as formidable as his presence, deep, steady, commanding.

She narrowed her eyes but kept her expression neutral. “Who are you?”

He didn’t answer. Instead, he said, “No security detail inside, ma’am.”

Jane glanced at Agent Sam Wilson, the one person she trusted completely, her shadow for the past two years.

She hesitated. Then, with a slight nod, she turned to Wilson. “You stay here, Sam. Thank you.”

He gave her a brief, reluctant nod.

She stepped inside.

President Walter Lang was fastening the buttons of his dress shirt when she entered. His jacket was draped over a nearby chair, and a fresh bandage covered his forearm.

Jane halted mid-step. Her sharp, analytical mind registered everything instantly: the bandage, the sterile smell, the presence of medical staff.

Then she heard a sharp gasp behind her.

She turned.

Vice President Amelia Harper lay stretched out on a medical table, her short, grey, and curly hair spilling onto the pillow, eyes wide with shock. A doctor in a white coat stood beside her, holding a handheld scanning device that emitted a low hum as he moved it over her hip, abdomen, and chest.

Finally, the machine beeped.

The doctor exchanged a glance with the nurse, then looked down at Harper.

“This may hurt.”

Vice President Harper clutched her neck, her breath coming in quick, uneven bursts.

Jane turned to Lang. “What the hell is going on?”

Lang held out his hand toward the table. “You’re next.”

Jane’s pulse quickened, but before she could demand an explanation, her phone buzzed.

She glanced at the screen and immediately recognized the number. Without a word, she showed it to Lang.

He gave a slight nod. Permission to answer.

She lifted the phone to her ear. “Yes?”

A voice on the other end spoke quickly, the words clipped and urgent.

Her eyes darkened. “I see. Very concerning indeed. Keep me posted.” She ended the call and turned back to the President. “What’s going on?”

Lang gestured toward the doctor and nurse, who were now preparing the scanner for her.

“Please, Jane. Sit.”

She hesitated.

Then, with the instinct of someone who had spent her life in the highest echelons of power, surrounded by secrets, she sat.

The doctor ran the scanner over her shoulders, back, arms, and ribs.

Finally, a sharp beep.

He stopped, adjusting the display.

“There it is,” he murmured.

Before she could ask what they found, the nurse stepped forward, gentle but efficient, pressing a cool antiseptic swab to the back of her left shoulder.

A quick incision. A sharp sting.

Then, something tiny, metallic, barely the size of a grain of rice, was extracted from beneath her skin.

The nurse dropped it into a sealed plastic container.

Jane Holt leaned forward to read the label. Her name. She inhaled sharply.

Someone had implanted a tracker inside her.

She looked up.

Six people underwent the same procedure: President Lang, Vice President Harper, Jane Holt, and three senior officials.

Once done, they moved to a heavily secured room, its walls lined with signal-blocking technology, and completely sealed for audio.

Slowly, a group of elite soldiers, clad in the same uniform Jane had seen earlier, filed into the room with measured precision.

Lang stood before them, his expression steeled.

“Gentlemen, I need you to swear allegiance, not just to me, but to the Constitution of the United States.”

The soldiers exchanged glances, silent, uncertain. This was an unorthodox request, especially from a President who knew they had already sworn their allegiance. Still, one by one, they nodded and took the oath.

Lang turned to the massive masked man who had blocked Jane’s path earlier.

“You,” he said. “I’m calling you ‘One.’ You will be my primary contact, oversee all operations, and report directly to me.”

The man, they would, from now on, refer to as “One”, remained silent for a moment. Then, a slow, deliberate nod. “Understood, sir.”

Lang’s voice was low, but firm. “We will not do anything illegal or unconstitutional. I need security I can trust. For myself, the Vice President, and a small, handpicked group of public servants. Do you understand?”

“Quite clear, sir.” One answered.

Lang turned to Jane. “Holt, could you give me a detailed overview of what the hell these dark pools are?”

She confirmed, and they decided to meet later in the Oval Office.

The group returned to the main room. The doctor and nurse were gone.

At a nearby table, three Secret Service agents and three high-ranking security officers sat, their faces etched with displeasure. They were not accustomed to being sidelined.

Lang took the lone chair across from them. “Here’s how this will go.”

He listed six names: his own, the Vice President’s, Jane Holt’s, and the three others in his group.

Then he gave an order that sent a shockwave through the room.

“Your job is to travel with our stand-ins. Do exactly what you would normally do. Business as usual.”

A door opened.

Body doubles entered.

Jane’s breath caught in her throat.

The resemblance was uncanny. Henry, the President’s double, moved exactly like Lang,



mirroring even the smallest details, the way he sat, the way he unbuttoned his suit, every gesture eerily identical.

And then, her stand-in walked into the room.

Jane stared, an eerie discomfort creeping over her.

It was like looking into a distorted mirror.

Twenty minutes later, the White House erupted with activity. Motorcades surrounded by motorcycles with flashing lights exited the compound, all theatrics for the watching world.

Quietly, President Lang, Vice President Harper, Secretary Holt, and their assistants slipped into an unmarked and heavily armored vehicle, its windows blacked out. They drove out of the White House and soon left Washington behind.

The city receded.

For the first time in years, the President of the United States had vanished from the prying eyes of the Secret Service.

Then Jane's new burner phone rang.

She answered.

A familiar voice came through, calm yet edged with urgency. "This is the Administrator."

Time stopped. *This man has eyes everywhere.* She thought.

"We are deeply concerned about the situation unfolding at the White House."

"What is happening at the White House?" Secretary Holt demanded as innocently as possible, though she was shocked, he knew something was going on.

"Secretary Holt, the consequences of your actions could push America, and the world, into an economic catastrophe. Is that what you and President Lang truly desire?"

## Chapter Four

The stairwell was tight, the air stale with the scent of old plaster and lingering cigarette smoke. Victoria descended, her heels sharp against the worn stone steps. The fluorescent lights above flickered intermittently, casting eerie shadows.

Then, movement.

A couple emerged from an apartment on the floor below. Victoria's breath hitched, her pulse stuttering.

Same height. Same build. Same hair color.

Same clothes.

A cold pulse of unease coursed through her. Every nerve in her body screamed at the impossibility of it.

The doppelgängers moved briskly, their heads slightly downturned, descending in synchronized steps. They reached the lobby before them, veering left without hesitation,

vanishing out of the dimly lit corridor.

Victoria's fingers curled into a fist. This wasn't a coincidence. Someone had gone through the trouble of replicating them, precisely, Max or Sloane, perhaps.

Max's hand found the small of her back, steady, grounding. His grip was firm but not forceful. "This way," he murmured, steering her right. His voice was low and controlled, but she could feel the tension beneath it.

Beyond the double glass doors, she spotted two black vans parked back-to-back in the alley, their tinted windows reflecting the glow of the hallway. A large patio umbrella stretched wide across the rear of the vans, casting a shield against prying eyes from above.

Deliberate. Controlled.

Victoria's stomach clenched. She had come to Prague chasing the scoop of a lifetime, not to become the lead in a high-stakes espionage thriller.

She barely had time to process the thought before the doppelgängers exited onto the street.

To her right, a door ahead swung open.

A man stood on the threshold.

Tall, broad-shouldered, sharp-featured, his dark skin contrasted against the dim glow of the hallway, and his presence filled the space with an undeniable authority. His posture was poised, his gaze sweeping over them with quick efficiency.

"Move," he ordered, voice smooth but firm.

Victoria barely hesitated. Max was already propelling her forward, past the threshold, and into the room beyond.

Behind them, she heard the vans' doors slam shut. Engines revved, tires screeched against the pavement. Within seconds, the vehicles were gone, taking whatever remained of this charade with them.

The man shut the door, sealing them inside the utility room. His eyes locked onto hers.

“James Monroe. Nova Security.”

Victoria studied him. There was something undeniably magnetic about the way he carried himself, unshakable, quietly commanding. He wasn't a man who needed to prove himself.

Martin's hand found her shoulder. “We're safe. Don't worry.”

Safe?

Victoria clenched her jaw. The weight of the situation pressed against her ribs, an invisible grip tightening with every breath.

Max had already stepped to the far side of the room, speaking in hushed tones with Monroe. Their exchange was brief, clipped, the kind of conversation where too much was left unsaid.

Monroe turned back to them, lifting three black cases onto a table.

“For you, Max.” He handed over the first. Then, turning to Victoria, “And this is yours.”

The last went to Martin.

Victoria flipped the lid open. Inside, neatly packed disguises. On top of the props was a photo.

“This is what it's supposed to look like.” Said Monroe.

Victoria looked at the photo, early sixties, a thick woolen scarf, a muted shade of beige, was wrapped tightly over her hair, knotted just beneath her chin, a style both practical and old-

fashioned, graying brown hair, thick-framed glasses, a heavy, knee-slate-gray coat, slightly oversized, low-heeled leather shoes, gloves, a well-used handbag.

Playing dress-up sounded fun. Thought Victoria. She unpacked the case.

Max retrieved a gray wig, wire-framed glasses, a long wool coat, and brown leather gloves. The ensemble stripped him of every trace of the presence he usually carried. He became unremarkable. Forgettable.

Victoria frowned as Martin handed her a yellow plastic belt. “What is this?”

“Wrap it around your waist. Zip it. Press the button.”

She obeyed. The device hissed, inflating in seconds, expanding her stomach outward.

The change was immediate. The svelte lines of her frame disappeared, replaced by the bulk of a woman decades older.

“Charming,” She said. “Our first date, Mr. Sloane.”

He smiled.

Within minutes, she was a heavy woman in her late sixties, her posture adjusted to match.

Max was now a shadow in a drab plaid overcoat, cheap shoes, and a full-face mask.

Martin adjusted the brim of his red cap. His red jumpsuit faded and stained, giving him the look of a maintenance worker who had spent years scrubbing the city’s filth.

Monroe gave them a final once-over before nodding. “You’re set. The farm is your next stop.”

*Wherever that was.* Victoria thought.

No time for questions. No room for hesitation. They had to move.

Max and Victoria stepped out first, their pace unhurried, their steps careful. They melted

into the city's rhythm: slow, steady, just another aging couple navigating the damp streets of Prague.

The air carried the scent of wet stone and cigarette smoke curling from open windows.

Victoria's arm looped through Max's, her grip firm. The bulk of the disguise pressed against her ribs, the wool of her coat scratchy against her skin. The illusion of frailty gnawed at her pride. She hated feeling small. Hated playing weak. But she kept moving.

A car crept up beside them.

Victoria's pulse hammered. Instinct clenched her muscles, her fingers tightening on Max's arm. Run? Fight?

But Max didn't flinch.

Breathe. Stay in character. Victoria kept telling herself.

The car slowed.

Stopped.

Martin.

They slid inside without a word.

The vehicle was an older-model Škoda; sky blue with an off-white roof. It was dusty with scuffed seats, and the lingering scent of smoke clung to the fabric, mixing with the faint tang of gasoline.

Martin pulled away smoothly, but Victoria's eyes flicked to the rearview mirror.

A black SUV skidded to a halt outside the building.

Her stomach clenched.

Doors flew open. Men spilled out, hard, fast, deliberate.

Mercenaries in black fatigue, unhappy to have been fooled.

Martin didn't wait to see what happened next. His grip on the wheel tightened. He punched the accelerator.

The city blurred past as they tore into the labyrinth of Prague's sprawling suburbs, leaving chaos in their wake.

## Chapter Five

Light streamed through the tall windows of the Oval Office. Outside, Washington moved in slow, monotonous rhythms. Inside the office, President Walter Lang leaned back in his chair, elbows on the armrests, the lines around his eyes sharpened by fatigue and something colder, resolve.

Jane Holt sat to his left, her posture composed but alert. The Secretary of the Treasury had the quiet steadiness of someone not easily rattled.

Opposite them stood Gabriel Alden, Director of the Securities and Exchange Commission, flipping open a soft leather folder. Alden was meticulous, every move calculated.

“What exactly is being traded in dark pools, and why are they such a goddamn problem?” The President said. “And make it as simple as possible, please.”

Alden cleared his throat. “Mr. President, dark Pools are similar to public exchanges like the New York Stock Exchange or Nasdaq. They are places where anyone can trade just as they would on other exchanges, such as the NYSE.”



“So what is the problem?” asked Lang.

“The first problem is price discovery. Dark pools are not transparent, meaning a trade happening today in a dark pool is not announced until the operator decides to announce the trade. Thanks to this covert strategy, these powerful and anonymous investors can perform large sales of a certain stock without affecting its price on the public exchange most people use. Let’s say a large mutual fund company wants to sell thousands of shares of Microsoft, it can do it covertly to reduce the possibility of lowering the price and warning rivals. No price transparency. No real-time reporting. And no visibility for the average investor.”

“Dark pools could create a conflict of interest where the operator of the dark pool could manipulate prices against the customers who use them. With the use of HFT, the sky is the limit.”

“Explain HFT.”

“Sorry. HFT stands for High Frequency Trading. High-frequency trading is a form of algorithmic, automated trading in finance distinguished by its extremely rapid execution speeds. In 2014, the New York Attorney General filed a lawsuit against Barclays over the unethical operation of its proprietary trading platform, Barclays LX. The case, which centered on the bank’s failure to adequately disclose the presence of high-frequency traders to its clients, was ultimately settled for \$105 million. Although Barclays asserted that it monitored its dark pool for high-frequency trading activity, it was later revealed that such oversight was not actually in place. By not monitoring its dark pool, it allowed high-speed traders to insert themselves into the system and run predatory trading strategies.”

Lang nodded slowly. “So what’s being traded?”

“While equities are the predominant securities traded, some dark pools have expanded

their services to include other financial instruments, such as credit default swaps, or CDS,” Secretary Holt said. “Remember 2008? When everyone learned what credit default swaps were. Still, the trading of derivatives like CDS in dark pools is less common than equities.” Secretary Holt said.

“That is correct, primarily equities, Alden continued, “but also bonds, options, derivatives, and ETFs. Dark pools are used to move millions of dollars without anyone seeing the trade, until after it’s done, if at all.”

Lang narrowed his gaze. “Why the secrecy?”

“Honestly? Market manipulation,” Alden said. “Let’s say a fund wants to sell two million shares of a tech stock. If they do that on the open market, prices would crash before they finish the order. Through HFT, High-Frequency Trading, competitors front-run them. Investors panic. But in a dark pool, they can move quietly, without stirring the water.”

Lang tapped his fingers against the armrest. “And what stops someone from abusing that system?”

Alden hesitated, just long enough for Lang to catch it.

“Very little,” he admitted. “That’s the problem. These platforms aren’t well-regulated, if at all. Some are run by the very firms trading on them. Conflicts of interest are baked into the architecture.”

Jane interjected, her voice calm but edged. “There are disclosures, but they’re thin. And without daylight, manipulation becomes easy to do and hard to detect.”

The President nodded, absorbing the information. “Do we have concrete figures on the trading volumes within these dark pools?”

Alden answered, “According to data compiled by Bloomberg, off-exchange trading, which includes dark pools, accounted for approximately 51.8% of total U.S. stock trading volume in January 2025.”

“That translates to roughly \$92.5 billion traded daily, \$1.85 trillion monthly, and \$22.2 trillion annually.”

The President’s eyebrows rose in concern. “That’s a significant portion of our market. How does the reporting mechanism in these dark pools affect regular investors?”

Holt leaned forward slightly, her tone measured. “Dark pools operate with limited pre-trade transparency, meaning the details of orders aren’t visible to the public before execution. While trades are eventually reported, there’s often a lag. Even brief delays can disadvantage regular investors, especially those relying on real-time information to make split-second decisions.”

She paused, letting the words settle before continuing. “This lack of transparency creates information asymmetry. Institutional investors, those already holding an advantage, are given a further edge. They know more, sooner. The average investor doesn’t stand a chance.”

“Furthermore,” Alden added, “this opacity, this lack of transparency, disrupts price discovery. With so many trades hidden from public view, the market loses a crucial element of equilibrium. Prices no longer reflect real-time supply and demand. Over time, that erodes trust, particularly among retail investors. It creates a market that feels rigged.”

President Lang leaned back in his chair, his fingers steepled against his lips, eyes narrowed in thought. “Who runs these dark pools? Are they primarily managed by major financial institutions?”

Alden answered smoothly. “Yes, sir. Many are. JP Morgan operates JPMX. Goldman Sachs runs SIGMA X. Morgan Stanley owns MS Pool. Then there’s Barclays Capital’s LX Liquidity Cross and Citi’s Citi Match. Independent players like Liquidnet and Instinet run their own as well. Each claims compliance, but their internal operations are sealed off from the kind of scrutiny we apply to public exchanges.”

The SEC Chair straightened in his seat. He had been anticipating this moment.

“Mr. President, to level the playing field, I’d suggest the following: First, we enforce full pre-trade transparency, requiring dark pools to disclose orders before execution, just like public exchanges.”

Lang nodded slowly, considering it. “That would strip away trade secrecy.”

“Exactly,” Alden continued. “Second, real-time trade reporting. No more 24-hour delays. Every transaction should be reported immediately, giving the entire market the same access to information. Third, prohibit internalization of orders, meaning dark pool operators can no longer match trades internally without routing them to public markets first.”

Alden paused briefly. “This is where it gets ugly. Since many banks operate dark pools specifically to keep client trades in-house. It saves them money, avoids exchange fees, and lets them maximize profits. A ban on internalization would drive more volume to public exchanges, but it would be a direct hit to their model.”

Lang leaned back. “And what would that do to the operators? The owners? The shareholders of these dark pools?”

He turned his gaze to Secretary Holt, who had been listening in silence, her expression composed but taut.

Holt exhaled. “The effect would not be great, sir. The big players, JPMorgan, Morgan Stanley, Goldman Sachs, would fight it tooth and nail.” She folded her hands. “Pre-trade transparency would be seen as an existential threat. Their business depends on secrecy. They’d argue that revealing orders before execution would destroy their ability to protect clients from market volatility and HFT algorithms software lurking on the web. But the truth is, secrecy is their weapon.”

She glanced at Alden. “And real-time trade reporting? That’s another hill they’ll die on. They rely on those brief delays to get ahead of the market. Without them, they’ll claim they’re forced into riskier trades with higher exposure.”

Lang tapped his fingers against the desk. “And if we ban internal matching altogether?”

“They’ll argue it’s inefficient,” Holt said. “That it increases costs and hurts liquidity. But at its core, it’s about control. Internalization lets them keep everything in-house, no oversight, no competition, no transparency.”

Lang turned to Alden again. “If we propose these changes, what’s the likelihood we get them through Congress?”

Alden hesitated, then answered with quiet certainty. “It depends on how much pressure Wall Street applies. They’ll say these reforms will ‘harm market liquidity, make trading more expensive, and destabilize the system. It’s a scare tactic, but a powerful one.”

Lang nodded grimly. “And I assume they’ll send in the cavalry.”

Holt smiled without humor. “Sir, we are dealing with the Administrator and the men he represents, and they have already declared war. The banks will flood Washington with lobbyists. Think tanks will produce white papers overnight. Cable news panels will be stocked with

analysts warning of catastrophic consequences. They'll claim it will drive trading overseas, hurt retirement accounts, and cripple American competitiveness."

Lang's brow furrowed. "And their clients aren't regular investors."

"No, sir," Holt said. "We're talking hedge funds, pension funds, high-net-worth individuals, and Institutions on the legal side. And, tyrants pillaging their respective countries, terrorist groups, and drug cartels on the illegal side. The men who use Dark Pools remain anonymous. To us, their trades are a mystery." She paused. "Ever wondered where Putin's fortune went after all the sanctions that were imposed on him? "

She paused. "And on top of that, we still have the Administrator's threat, a far darker, more dangerous problem."

"I wonder who that idiot represents?" Lang stared into the distance. The sun had dipped lower, spilling amber light across the South Lawn. For a moment, he didn't speak.

"So we're looking at a full-blown war," he said quietly.

"Yes, Mr. President," Alden said. "But if we don't act, nothing changes. The shadow games continue. And everyone else keeps trading blind while the powerful get richer."

The President was silent, his expression unreadable as the light shifted across his desk. The weight of power, its reach, its price, settled into the room like dust.

Finally, he spoke.

"We move carefully," he said. "But we move forward with regulations."

The filtered sun caught the edges of the Resolute Desk and slowly moved across his hands. The room, draped in history and responsibility, seemed to hold its breath, an island of contemplation in a storm of consequence.

Lang turned toward the window again, watching a cloud drift across the sky, dimming the light for a beat. His voice, when it came, was low. Almost confessional.

“They told me to stay out of this,” he said. “Told me not to apply any regulations. That poking around their Dark Pools would open a door I couldn’t close.”

Jane didn’t speak, but her hand found the arm of her chair, resting it there lightly.

Alden remained silent. He didn’t need to speak.

Lang turned back to face them. In his eyes, something had shifted. Resolve was beginning to harden.

“Then let’s get a crowbar.”

## Chapter Six

The Administrator tore off the mask he'd worn during his meeting with Secretary Holt. His face, usually a smooth canvas of control, flushed red with fury. In the sterile glow of his secure operations center, he stood alone, shoulders rigid, breath shallow. He wasn't accustomed to setbacks. His commands were followed. His will, executed. Simple as that.

But this, this was failure.

The Administrator was tall, thin, and handsome, his angular features illuminated in the cold glow of the monitors, giving his pasty complexion a ghostlike shimmer. There was an ease to him, the kind born not just of privilege but of someone who had never once questioned whether the world would bend to his will. His eyes, dark and searching, carried the intensity of someone always just a breath away from something dangerous, and yet, capable of disarming softness if it served him. His movements were slow, precise, economical, every gesture calculated, a chess master making his final play.



The men who worked for him never quite knew what version of the Administrator they would meet: the charming architect of chaos, or the cold, methodical strategist who could destroy a life with a look.

He wore power like a well-cut coat, expensive, subtle, unmistakable. And though his voice remained level, his silence now was louder than any command. Something beneath his perfect exterior had cracked. The failure had wounded him not visibly, but *viscerally*, a man unaccustomed to loss, now tasting it for the first time. The situation was getting out of control; he needed to reassert control without delay.

#

Four floors beneath the streets of Prague, inside a concrete-walled command center that once housed Cold War secrets and now pulsed with the hum of encrypted communications and heat-mapped surveillance feeds, Triggs sat with the headset pressed to one ear, expression blank. Cold blue monitors glowed across the walls, bathing the room in sterile light. His voice was clipped as he opened the call.

“We lost Whitney. And Porter.”

There was a pause. Long enough for the Administrator’s silence to become dangerous.

Triggs continued, his tone clinical. “He was in the building at 13:14 local time. We initiated sweep protocols thirty-five minutes later. Surveillance nodes in the district had been tampered with, cut clean. Thermal traces showed two black vans leaving the premises. One went east, the other west. Soon, both diverted north, converging at Vodochody Airport.”

The Administrator’s fingers tightened around the phone. His other hand moved to a small glass panel inset on the wall, calling up a topographical display of the Czech capital.

He traced the van routes on the screen with the edge of a pen, silent. “What about aerial?” he said, voice tight, metallic.

“Satellite feed confirms arrival at Hangar 9 and 11. Forty-five-minute intervals. Doors opened. Vans entered. Planes departed. No identifiers, no manifests. No trace.”

The Administrator’s jaw ticked. His voice was ice. “Ensure we’re not being deceived in Prague, Triggs. I’ve reviewed the full surveillance reconstruction three times. We were outmaneuvered.”

The Administrator’s pupils shrank slightly. He leaned closer to the console, his voice shifting down a register. “Have you spoken to Higbee in Washington?”

Triggs hesitated. “Yes. He says everything appears normal there.”

A lie. Or something close to it.

The Administrator heard it instantly, not in the words, but in their weightless delivery.

Triggs was loyal, yes. Tactical. Precise. But not immune to the strain of failure.

The Administrator pressed the phone to his ear, as though proximity could pull the truth from Triggs’s tongue. “What did he say exactly?”

“The President entered the white house compound through the main entrance. No visual confirmation of his exit from the limousine. He returned to the Oval. All other personnel you listed returned to their respective departments. No abnormalities in the tracker’s data. Activity appears... routine.”

The Administrator didn’t answer.

In the silence, the faint hum of a concealed air vent above him sounded deafening.

“I’ll reach out to Higbee myself,” The Administrator said.

“Understood.” But even Triggs couldn’t scrape the doubt from his voice.

The Administrator turned from the console, facing a glass wall that overlooked the darkened sub-basement levels of his high-tech center.

Somewhere far above, the city carried on beneath the gloom of a dark grey sky.

He’d been blindsided, not just in Prague, but deep within the American government, where his influence should have guaranteed foresight. His eyes lingered on the screen displaying satellite readouts of Eastern Europe, but his thoughts were on something far more immediate: the consequences.

The Councilium Noctis had no tolerance for failure. Their wealth was unfathomable. Their reach, global. But their mercy?

Nonexistent.

The Administrator didn’t know who the men of the Councilium Noctis were, and that was the point. Faces changed. Names shifted. A whisper in Zurich, a signal rerouted through Lagos, a banker vanished off the coast of Sardinia. He’d met three, perhaps four, but never in the same room, never with the full picture. That knowledge was above him, tucked behind layers of silence no one had ever breached. And still, the question gnawed at him: who were the others? Presidents? Tech magnates? Royals? He could dig, but the men of the Councilium Noctis would know. They always knew. And if he so much as traced a line too close to the truth, he’d vanish before the hour turned. Not killed. *Erased.*

The last operative to disappoint them had been found in pieces off the coast of Tunisia.

And now he, who had the backdoor access to half the planet’s surveillance infrastructure, had lost Whitney. Again.

His breath slowed. Anxiety wrestled with logic, but logic prevailed.

The Administrator crossed the room and placed a hand on the steel desk, steadying himself.

He could still turn this.

He must.

Whitney was clever.

The Administrator suspected Whitney had government backing; perhaps Jane Holt's fingerprints were on this. Perhaps others. But Whitney wasn't invincible.

The Administrator called Triggs once more. His voice was calmer, masking the thunder beneath it.

"Triggs, keep eyes on the hangars. Search every departing flight for anomalies. Check the FAA, EASA, and ICAO registries. If any paper trail exists, I want it."

"Yes, sir."

"And Triggs, next time, you call me before our target escapes."

"Yes, sir," Triggs repeated, this time quieter. The line went dead.

The Administrator stood alone, a single figure beneath the black recessed lights of his command center. Around him, the screens flickered, streams of metadata, network pings, and whispers from the darknet.

Somewhere out there, Whitney was moving.

The hunt wasn't over.

Not yet.

## Chapter Seven

Disguised in nondescript caps and oversized clothing, President Lang, flanked by his team of Green Berets, led the group into two unmarked black vans, departing the White House under a veil of secrecy. For ten tense minutes, the convoy weaved through Washington D.C.'s maze, vigilant for any signs of pursuit. Once assured they were safe, "One", the team leader signaled, and they proceeded on a twenty-minute journey to Alexandria.

The vans rolled to a stop in front of an ordinary, long-abandoned commercial building, its brick façade faded and chipped, windows dusty and veiled in grime. A dusty "For Lease" sign hung askew above the door, swaying slightly in the breeze. The structure looked like the kind of place people passed by without a second glance.

"What's the meaning of all this?" Vice President Harper demanded, her voice tight with frustration.

"Secrecy," President Lang replied, without looking at the V.P.

After a brief struggle with the rusted locks, hinges groaning in protest, they pushed open the heavy steel door. Inside, the air was stale with the scent of mildew, insulation dust, and time. The foyer opened into a cavernous main room with high ceilings and exposed beams, littered with forgotten furniture and scattered debris. Fluorescent lights flickered half-heartedly above, casting the space in an uneven, clinical glow.

They climbed a concrete stairwell to the second floor, where more dust-covered chairs and warped tables were left as though a meeting had been abruptly abandoned years ago. Faded graffiti marked the far wall, and yellowed blinds rattled against cracked windows.

The soldiers fanned out with disciplined precision, sweeping the building room by room. Boots echoed over concrete as they checked every doorway and shadowed corridor, rifles steady, eyes sharp.

Reappearing at the stairwell, One reported, “All clear.”

The soldiers gathered six chairs around a rickety table, placing a mag light at its center before exiting and positioning themselves in a protective semi-circle, twenty feet from the makeshift conference room.

“So, what do we do now?” Lang inquired, breaking the uneasy silence. “I said, let’s get a crowbar. But really, how do we proceed?”

“This is unacceptable if you ask me,” Secretary Holt interjected, her tone brimming with indignation, so the crowbar sounds good to me.” Tall and lean, with the poised, athletic bearing of a lifelong runner, Secretary Holt was a commanding figure, even in stillness. Her short, boyish haircut framed sharp, angular features, and her slate-grey blazer cut tight around her body seemed chosen as much for function as for defiance, a uniform of sorts. Though her expression

remained composed, her blue eyes blazed with unmistakable intensity, the kind that made people stop mid-sentence.

“Do we all agree?” Lang wondered. “Take a crowbar to these insidious dark pools?”

Chris, a man in his early thirties with striking red hair cut short, was Secretary Holt’s chief of staff. His bright blue eyes scanned the room with sharp alertness, giving the impression that very little escaped his notice. Though young, he carried himself with cool authority, his voice clear and deliberate as he stepped forward. “If I may, the Administrator and his backers currently hold the upper hand.”

“We’re all in agreement: the path ahead demands difficult choices,” said Lang. “Alright, let’s brainstorm our next steps. Do we proceed with our plan to regulate dark pools, or do we capitulate and concoct a plausible excuse to withdraw our regulatory proposals?”

Holt began. “The forces we’re up against know they’ve got us cornered,” her voice low but steady. “We’ve had no success identifying the Administrator, no location, no trace. And whoever’s pulling his strings remains buried even deeper.”

“But we know who owns the largest dark pools and who stands to lose the most from our proposed regulations. We could start there,” suggested Julia, the Vice President’s usually reserved chief of staff.

“Is there a way to outmaneuver the Administrator, to twist this setback into leverage? In war, the victor isn’t always the strongest, just the one who strikes where and when it counts.”

Said Holt.

“Opting for that course of action entails a substantial and perilous confrontation, perpetually shadowed by the looming specter of a colossal financial crisis. Knowing all too well,

they control every area of our government. Look at us. To have a private meeting, I had to replace my security team with an unknown group of dedicated soldiers, remove trackers from everyone, and employ decoys to impersonate us while traveling with the trackers we took out.” Lang cautioned. “We’re contemplating a highly intricate operation that would likely leak, triggering the economic catastrophe they threaten upon America and the world. Trust is not the steadfast ally it appears to be. There are too many ears, too many interests.”

Holt interjected, “I have serious doubts about the data we receive from our intelligence agencies. Why can’t they identify this so-called Administrator?”

The conversation continued for another thirty minutes, the weight and reality of their predicament pressing heavily upon them.

They stood at the precipice, a menacing force poised to shove America, and the world, into an uncertain future, one they feared would usher in immense suffering for the masses. They pondered whether they could somehow repel that force and avert catastrophe.

President Lang dismissed everyone except for his Vice President. Their exchange was brief and decisive: “We will appear to fight while signaling our willingness to abandon the regulations.”

As she departed, Lang summoned her chief of staff.

The timid Julia, now alone with the President, felt a surge of anxiety.

“I want you to keep this confidential, but we will concede. Do not share this with anyone, including the Vice President.” In a low voice, the shy Julia responded, “Okay.”

“That’s not good enough. Loud and clear. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, sir.” She said forcefully.



Next, Chris, Secretary Holt's chief of staff, entered. Lang thanked him for his participation and shared the same secret, emphasizing, "I mean, anyone, including Secretary Holt. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

Holt was the last to meet with the President. She had been a formidable Secretary of the Treasury and his most trustworthy partner. They had known each other since their college days, more than three decades ago.

Five minutes later, the two emerged from the small office.

The room seemed smaller now.

One aide shifted uncomfortably, and another cleared his throat, too loudly. They had come expecting a briefing. What they got was a glimpse behind the curtain. And though the President's voice was calm, measured, his words hung in the air, hard to ignore, harder to forget.

The group stared at the President, who briefly paused before addressing them.

"Thank you for enduring this charade. You are my closest advisors, and I trust today's events will remain our secret. Let's reconvene soon."

His voice resonated with a steely resolve that cut through the tension-laden air. "Until we meet again, let secrecy be our shield." His gaze swept across the room, locking eyes with each member of the group, silently conveying the gravity of their mission. The weight of unspoken words hung heavily, a palpable reminder of the peril that loomed should their clandestine endeavors be unveiled.

In that charged moment, the very walls seemed to close in, as if to guard the secrets shared within. The flickering light cast elongated shadows, mirroring the uncertainty that lay

ahead. Yet, amidst the encroaching darkness, a collective understanding solidified: their unity and unwavering commitment to silence were the only defenses against the impending storm.

Lang spoke once more. “I am faced with an incredible dilemma, for I must choose: to submit or to fight.”

## Chapter Eight

The phones had been ringing incessantly as they traveled south. Max seemed in a trance, answering call after call in a low, urgent tone. It took just over two hours to reach their destination, a sprawling, meticulously renovated farmhouse nestled deep in the Czech countryside. Surrounded by dense woods and shielded from view by a long, winding drive, the estate was designed for seclusion.

Max stepped out of the car and disappeared into the house without a word.

Victoria Porter turned to Martin Sloane, her bodyguard. He smiled, the corners of his eyes creasing. “Let’s get you settled, Miss.”

The house was striking: a two-story structure of pale stone and reclaimed wood, its modern updates carefully hidden behind rustic charm. Soft golden light spilled from its large windows, hinting at warmth within. A stone chimney released a steady plume of smoke into the evening sky, the scent of burning wood clinging to the crisp air. Inside, a roaring fire crackled in

the main hearth, casting flickering shadows across a grand open living space with high-beamed ceilings. A massive farm table dominated the dining area, flanked by sturdy, mismatched chairs. The kitchen gleamed with modern appliances but retained the heart of the home feeling, a space built for gathering and planning.

Sloane led her up a wide wooden staircase to the second floor, where he opened a door to a spacious bedroom. The room felt like a sanctuary, a large canopy bed, dressed in crisp white linens and a dark blue velvet throw, sat centered between two tall windows draped in soft, gauzy curtains. A pair of antique bedside tables flanked the bed, each with a small reading lamp casting a warm glow. Opposite the bed, a pair of upholstered armchairs and a low table offered a place to sit. The bathroom was sleek and modern, with a freestanding tub beneath a skylight, marble-topped counters, and brass fixtures that gleamed.

“Now,” Sloane began, stepping to the far wall, “in case we need to leave in a hurry, there’s a hidden stairwell here.” He pressed discreetly against the wood-paneled wall, revealing a seamless door that opened onto a narrow, spiraling staircase. “It leads to the cellar and out through the old root stone house, past the orchard.”

Victoria nodded, absorbing the information.

Sloane gave her a reassuring smile and left her to settle in.

She stood in the middle of the room for a moment, uncertain. How long would they be here? How much should she unpack? In the end, she chose to unpack very little. Just the essentials. Her burner phone sat on the nightstand, but she would not dare to use it. Even with the curtains drawn and the lights dimmed, paranoia clung to her like a second skin.

A knock on the door woke her from a daydream.

She opened it cautiously, and for a moment, didn't recognize the man standing before her.

Max.

His thick beard was gone, trimmed to a sharp, three-day stubble. He looked different, leaner, stronger, more alert. He wore dark jeans, a fitted leather jacket, and a charcoal shirt that hugged his frame. He exuded a quiet confidence, grounded and unshakable.

He smirked. "Hey, Princess," he said, his voice low and familiar. "Dinner?"

Victoria exhaled, tension slipping away just slightly. "Give me a few," she said, her voice quiet, composed. She turned and stepped back into her room, closing the door softly behind her.

When she emerged minutes later, the transformation was striking.

The navy-blue fitted blazer sat sharply on her shoulders, adding confident structure to her soft, graceful silhouette. Black, high-waisted trousers swept to the floor in wide, elegant lines, giving her the appearance of height and poise. On her feet were sleek black pointed-toe flats, stylish, yes, but practical, always. Her wavy blond hair was styled with a subtle wave that framed her pale face, her blue eyes catching the low hallway light with that signature twinkle, warm and mischievous. There was something in her gaze, deep, unwavering, enigmatic, that drew the eye without effort.

A trace of Prada Paradoxe lingered in the air as she passed, the fragrance subtle but unforgettable. The delicate bracelet at her wrist glinted once as she slipped her coat on, its silver shimmer understated. Everything about her seemed effortless and devastatingly put together.

Martin waited behind the wheel of the BMW, his hands resting lightly on the steering wheel. He stole a glance as she approached, something flickering behind his composed

expression. He said nothing. But something within him had shifted.

The night stretched around them, dark and endless, the sky a vast canvas full of stars. They drove through winding roads, headlights carving golden lines through the wooded countryside.

Victoria glanced out the window, eyes narrowing slightly. “Where are we?”

Max leaned back in his seat, one arm casually draped across the door. “A little town called Třisov. About ten kilometers north of Český Krumlov, and about two hours south of Prague.” He turned, his eyes catching hers in the rearview mirror. “Hungry?”

“I’m starving,” she admitted, a small smile tugging at the corner of her lips.

They pulled into a quiet restaurant nestled on a hillside, the kind of place that locals held close and tourists never found. Stone walls, arched windows, and ivy climbing over faded signage gave it an old-world charm. Only a few tables were occupied, and from the terrace, the view of Český Krumlov in the distance was postcard-perfect, a storybook village frozen in time.

The air outside was warm. Inside, it smelled of roasted meats and butter, of caramelized onions and rosemary, of comfort and peace..

Martin sat two tables away, eating alone. His posture was relaxed, but his eyes followed every move, silent, constant.

For the first time in days, Victoria felt at peace. The heavy veil of flight and fear lifted slightly, replaced by the gentle lull of good wine, exquisite food, and Max’s quiet presence beside her.

But would it last?

She swirled her wine, watching the candlelight flicker through the crimson liquid. “So,”

she said, her tone casual but loaded. “What is this scoop of a lifetime?”

Max leaned in, his voice dropping to a hush. “Tell me... do you know about dark pools?”

Her brows furrowed. “Dark pools?”

Max scanned the restaurant before returning to her. Then he exhaled. And began. He looked sharp, composed, and impenetrable. He spoke low, leaning slightly closer over the candlelit table, his tone controlled and deliberate.

“Dark pools,” he began, “are private markets or exchanges where large investors, hedge funds, institutions, or corporations trade stocks in secret to avoid moving the market and risk lowering the prices of the commodities clients trade.”

Victoria tilted her head, listening closely, the curve of her lip betraying both curiosity and skepticism.

“Secret trades?” she asked. “Like insider trading?”

“Not exactly. These are legal, at least technically,” Max replied. “Dark pools operate like the New York Stock Exchange or Nasdaq. But unlike the public stock exchanges, clients’ trades aren’t seen by the public and the public exchanges until long after they’re executed. There’s no visibility.”

Her brow furrowed as she processed.

He continued, eyes flicking toward Martin across the room before returning to her.

“They exist for one reason: to let big players buy or sell massive quantities of stock without tipping off the market. If an institution wants to move millions of shares, doing it publicly would spike or tank the price of the shares before the trade is even completed. Dark pools let these trades remain invisible.”

She nodded slowly, swirling her wine. “So, dark pools are private trading platforms for the elite. No names. No exposure. No impact on the public markets, at least not until it’s too late for the commoner to react.”

“Exactly,” Max said. “Clients can maintain complete anonymity, shield their trades from the public, and influence markets from the shadows.”

Victoria raised an eyebrow. “Is this widely known?”

“In the industry? Very. But outside it?” He gave a tight smile. “Not at all. Most people have never even heard of the name, dark pools. And those who have? They’ve no idea what it means.”

She rested her elbow on the table, her hand toying with the base of her glass. “I’m listening, Max, but I don’t see how this is the scoop of a lifetime. So far, it’s shadowy finance. Business as usual.”

Max took a slow sip of wine, then set his glass down with care. His voice dropped further.

“Victoria, by the third quarter of 2024, trading within dark pools was gaining momentum at a dizzying pace. These private, off-exchange trades made up nearly 44% of all U.S. market activity.”

Her eyes widened, but she said nothing.

“That’s trillions of dollars in annual trading volume. Over 40% percent of that is nearly \$48 trillion traded in secret. No transparency. No real-time oversight. No accountability.”

He paused, letting it settle.

“These pools, these hidden exchanges, can move markets at will. They can wait for the



most convenient time to disclose their trades, and can shift momentum before the average investor even knows what happened.”

“I’m lost. And is this for real?” Victoria whispered.

Max leaned in closer, his voice a low rasp. “Imagine a private casino where only the wealthiest players are allowed in. This could be a customer from an oil-rich country, the owner of a successful hedge fund, or the head of a drug cartel. Remember, anonymity. In this private casino, there are no cameras, no records, no clocks, and whoever enters it wears a mask. The house doesn’t just win, it writes the rules. That’s what dark pools are. A parallel system. One, the rest of us aren’t allowed to see, even though it will affect our retirement funds or meager savings.”

Silence fell between them. The restaurant had faded into a blur: soft music, flickering candles, quiet plates.

Victoria’s mind raced. She thought of her own Roth IRA, the painstaking years of cautious investing it took to grow it, the hours of reading headlines searching for clues on how to invest, and the trust she had placed in the system. A few hundred thousand dollars. All hard-earned. All exposed.

And here, in the shadows, trillions moved without warning. Without scrutiny. Without justice.

Her stomach turned.

The public had no chance to compete with this kind of advantage, no way to win against a game rigged in silence. The consequences weren’t just theoretical. They were personal.

Max watched her closely, his eyes searching for a clue that would convey her emotion..

She lifted her glass, took a slow sip, and exhaled. “This... this changes everything.”

“It should,” Max said. “If people understood what’s happening in the dark, they’d be outraged. Maybe even reform. But right now? The public is asleep.”

Victoria stared out the window at the glow of Český Krumlov in the distance, the lights of the medieval town glittering like a promise. Her mind, however, had already left the table.

She began imagining her upcoming blog posts, exposés designed to pull back the curtain. To inform, to agitate, to awaken. The first post would be titled: Dark pools: invisible, unregulated, and designed to rob us blind.

This wasn’t just a scoop.

It was a war worth fighting.

Max had yet to share the threat the Councilium Noctis posed.

They were in Český Krumlov now, the air warm and clean, the scent of damp stone and blooming trees drifting on a gentle breeze. The castle loomed before them, golden and regal in the fading light, as if it had been plucked from a medieval fairy tale and set against the blush of the evening sky.

Max leaned back in his chair, his frame relaxed, but his mind alert. The food had been nothing short of sublime, the wine, a bold South Moravian red, fruity, rich, and far too easy to drink. He let himself enjoy it, just for a moment. After everything, this peace, the laughter around him, and the silence within, felt like a kind of triumph. He was fully aware, of course, that men were hunting him. But sometimes, the hunted deserved one good meal.

“The elite manipulate market prices in ways the average investor could never begin to imagine,” Max said quietly. “It’s not just an advantage, it’s control. Complete control. The

system isn't broken, Victoria. It was *built* this way. Designed for secrecy. Engineered for those who operate in shadows. Every move they make, calculated, invisible, and precise. But now..."

His voice dipped lower. "Now, that same system is being used for something far darker. Something no one saw coming. And the fallout has already begun."

His words hovered in the air like smoke. The sounds of the restaurant, the clink of silverware, the murmur of voices, the shuffle of servers, faded. Outside, the old town shimmered like a mirage, its beauty untouchable.

Sloane, discreet and unassuming as ever, remained just within sight, quietly stationed near the rear terrace, watching. Not intruding. Just present, as always. Unshakeable. Loyal.

They returned to the safe house.

Martin retreated to his room without a word, his movements careful, deliberate.

Victoria and Max found themselves sitting by the fire, its amber glow throwing long shadows across the worn stone walls. The heat crackled and popped as if trying to hold off the dark.

For the first time in days, they were still. No chases, no disguises, no half-breaths. Just firelight and space.

Victoria leaned closer, her voice soft. "Is the scoop you promised about the dark pools?"

Max took a moment before answering. "Yes and no."

He looked at her, face grave. "The dark pools are only the doorway. The real story is what's behind them."

He shifted forward, the lines of his face sharpened by the flickering light. "A few years ago, a group of powerful investors, the largest shareholders in these dark pools, decided it wasn't

enough to benefit from the system. They wanted to *own* it. So they formed a group called the Councilium Noctis or *Council of the Night*.”

Victoria blinked. “That sounds like something out of a conspiracy novel.”

Max nodded grimly. “That’s how they hide. Under names no one would take seriously. But make no mistake, they’re real. They operate globally. Quietly. Their members aren’t elected; they’re the untouchable. They are the ones who make the rules because they own the board on which we play.”

He hesitated before continuing. “Once the Council was formed, it quickly evolved. Foreign leaders like Putin, Kim Jong Un, and Maduro began to leverage these exchanges. These dark pools gave them ways to bypass sanctions and move money invisibly. Drug cartels followed. Arms dealers. Energy oligarchs. It became a playground for every monster who wanted to stay rich and invisible.”

Victoria’s eyes had gone cold.

Max leaned back, tired. “Soon, the men of the Council decided to disappear behind a front, someone who would carry out their will without hesitation or risk of exposure. They found him. We know him as the Administrator. He’s the only face, the only voice, and the only one who knows the entire network. He’s methodical. Untraceable. Unafraid. His latest act was to threaten the U.S. Government; That’s when our impotent leaders finally understood that the reckoning was upon us all.”

The room was quiet. The fire cracked again. Max stared into it as if it could offer absolution.

Victoria said nothing. Her mind reeled. She thought of the invisible trades, of

governments compromised, of criminals thriving inside systems designed to protect the powerful. She thought of every citizen, every investor, every retiree who had placed their faith in fairness, only to be betrayed by criminals in thousand-dollar suits.

She forced herself to breathe. Then, softly, “Do we know who the Administrator is?”

Max shook his head. “Not yet. But we’re getting close. And once we do... it’ll change everything.”

They sat like that for a while, talking of smaller things, old regrets, lost chances, paths not taken. The fire warmed them. Max felt like an older brother, steady and knowing, offering a momentary sense of safety. No weapons. No lies. Just words.

Then, movement.

Victoria’s senses snapped back as Martin appeared at the top of the stairs. He descended fast, tension sharp across his face.

“We’ve got to go,” he said tightly.

Max stood immediately.

Martin turned to Victoria, his voice low but firm. “This is probably your last chance to walk away.”

Before she could answer, Martin’s phone buzzed. He checked the screen.

“It’s Monroe,” he said grimly. “We’ve got trouble.”

And just like that, the silence was broken.

The fire still burned, but the warmth was gone.

The hunt had resumed.

## Chapter Nine

The Administrator picked up the controller and pressed its largest dark grey button. Instantly, the heavy curtains slid open with a soft swish, revealing the sprawling cityscape beyond. The Empire State Building rose majestically to the south, while the sleek silhouette of the Chrysler Building dominated the view to the east, overlooking the East River. The room was vast, with twelve-foot ceilings and bay windows standing eight feet tall, offering an unparalleled view of Manhattan. The city stretched out endlessly before him, its grid of streets glowing faintly in the dusk.

He poured himself a glass of bourbon and took a slow sip, savoring the burn as the amber liquid slid down his throat. The rich scent of oak and caramel lingered in the air, but it did little to ease the knot of tension that tightened in his stomach. One of his three phones rang, its shrill tone cutting through the quiet luxury of the room.

"Triggs, what's up?" he answered, bracing for more bad news.

"Sir," Triggs' voice crackled from the other end, "we can't find any trace of Whitney,

Porter, or their security detail.”

“I see,” the Administrator replied, his expression unreadable. His mind raced for the next steps. “Do you know if Porter received a COVID shot before she departed for Prague?”

“I’m on the international front, Sir, not aware of that,” Triggs said, a bit surprised by the question. “Let me check with Higbee. I’ll call you back.”

The Administrator glanced out the window, watching as the sky gradually filled with vibrant hues of pink, orange, and deep blue. The sun dipped lower, casting a soft glow over the city, painting the streets with long shadows. The Chrysler Building and the Empire State Building began to light up, their towers shining like beacons against the growing darkness. It was a sight he had seen a thousand times, yet it never failed to stir something deep within him, both awe and bitterness in equal measure.

His phone rang again. “Yes?” he answered, already anticipating what he might hear.

“Higbee here, Sir,” said the voice on the other end. “Victoria Porter did get a COVID test before she left. A tracker was inserted. We’ve just contacted Dr. London, and she’ll reach out with the coordinates as soon as she can. I’ve texted Triggs, but it might take a little while. We’ll keep you posted.”

The Administrator paused, a bitter taste rising in his mouth. They had a tracker on Porter and hadn’t activated it? He cursed under his breath.

How stupid were these guys? He wondered.

They could have triggered the tracker as soon as she landed in Prague.

“How about the White House, Higbee?” the Administrator asked, shifting his attention to the larger issue.

“All clear on this end, Sir. Everyone’s being tracked. I’ll double-check, but we’re good,” Higbee replied. “Could I call you right back?”

“Of course,” the Administrator muttered, disconnecting the call. He moved toward the couch and sank into it, his gaze lingering on the dimming city skyline. Manhattan was beautiful, always had been, with its endless lights, its ceaseless hum of energy. Yet, tonight, he felt an ache in his chest, an emptiness that the city’s brilliance couldn’t fill. The weight of his responsibilities and the endless machinations were beginning to feel heavier.

He picked up his phone, dialed 4, and waited.

“Sir, how can I help you?” His driver answered.

“James,” he said, his tone steady, “please order food from Portofino and have it delivered.”

"Got it, Sir." Said James.

He hung up and then answered another phone.

“We found Dr. London, Sir.” Said Higbee. “She’ll send the coordinates of the tracker within the next half hour. After that, it’ll take about thirty minutes to track them down.”

“Good,” the Administrator replied.

He looked out at the city once more. It was growing dark now. The streets below, bathed in sunlight only minutes ago, were now shrouded in twilight, the city’s lights flickering to life. It had always amazed him how the city seemed to breathe, pulsing with a life all its own, even in the most desolate of moments.

“However, a bit of bad news, Sir,” came the voice on the phone, snapping the Administrator back to attention.



“I’m listening.”

“It appears the Secret Service was dismissed by Lang this afternoon.”

“And?” The Administrator’s patience was beginning to wear thin.

"Looks like the president and his team were replaced by a bunch of stand-ins," the voice continued. "No one’s sure where Lang went, but none of the Secret Service agents were with him. Just a small group of Navy SEALs, or Green Berets, we’re not sure yet.”

The Administrator’s blood ran cold. He had a bad feeling about this. “Where did the President go?”

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out. None of the agents has any information, and there’s no sign of the President anywhere.”

"Thank you, Higbee. Keep me posted."

He dropped the phone, exhaled hard, and swore under his breath. His eyes wandered back to the city, but his thoughts were elsewhere, far away, lost in memories.

He stood up and walked to the window, looking out over the city. The weight of the world rested on his shoulders, and it felt like a noose, slowly tightening around his neck. His fingers drummed against the glass.

*How much longer can I do this?* He wondered.

He thought of his parents. Both gone now, taken from him in a strange car accident, when both front tires had blown out on a twisting road in Maine, in the middle of nowhere. A pleasant evening at a quiet restaurant, a bottle of wine, some conversation, and then... nothing. Their deaths had been ruled an accident, but he suspected otherwise.

Then there was his brother. Killed in a war zone by a sniper’s bullet, though no sniper

was ever reported in the area. The truth was buried, like so many things in his life.

He was alone now, entirely. His parents were gone. His brother was gone. All he had left was this job, the unyielding, relentless job.

*Would they kill me if I walked away?* The thought lingered, like a shadow in the back of his mind. The answer was simple: probably.

He was a tool, a cog in their grand machine. And tools, when no longer useful, were discarded.

His phone buzzed again, but for a moment, he didn't answer. Instead, he stared out the window, letting the city's lights blur in front of his eyes. He had spent the last few years manipulating others, controlling the strings from behind the curtain. And now, it felt like those strings were slipping from his hands.

There would be no escape. There never was.

His phone rang again. He picked it up. "Yes?"

"Sir, we're still working on tracking them down. We are working with Dr. London's coordinates as we speak."

The Administrator nodded, though he didn't feel any relief. "Good. I'll hold."

The last of the sunlight disappeared. The city below was alive with light. But inside the Administrator's mind, darkness was creeping in.

The voice on the other end returned, calm and assured, but the words carried weight.

"We got them."

#

In the dimly lit room, Monroe's voice cut through the tension. "You're being tracked," he said urgently. "You may have just a few minutes."

Whitney's eyes widened as he turned to Martin. "What do we do?"

Victoria felt a surge of anxiety, sensing the gravity of the situation.

"How much time, Monroe?" Martin asked, his voice steady but intense.

"It's not looking good, ten minutes, maybe fifteen. They're onto you."

Whitney bolted upstairs to grab the black computer case, his lifeline to the rest of the world.

Victoria watched, her heart hammering in her chest.

Monroe's voice crackled through the speaker again. "Miss Porter, did you receive any vaccinations before your trip to Prague?"

"Yes, I had a COVID shot," she replied, confusion evident in her tone.

"Was it administered by your usual doctor?"

"No, it was a new doctor, I think. Why?"

"Had you ever seen this doctor before?"

"No, I guess she was new."

"Martin, check for a tracker immediately and dispose of it. I'm off now, but get the hell out of there," Monroe commanded.

Whitney returned, urgency in his steps. "Let's go!"

"One minute," Martin said as he pulled out a large, intimidating knife, its blade glinting ominously.

Victoria began to tremble, her fear palpable.

“Don’t worry,” Martin said reassuringly. “Which arm did you get your shot in?”

“This one,” she said, pointing to her left arm.

Martin gently massaged her upper left arm, his fingers probing carefully. He paused, feeling something unusual beneath the skin.

Whitney opened a box of medical supplies, retrieving alcohol wipes and a small clamp.

Martin rubbed a numbing balm on Victoria’s arm, causing the area to lose sensation.

With precision, he made a tiny incision, the knife slicing cleanly.

Martin carefully inserted the point of his knife, pinched her skin, and extracted a minuscule metallic ball.

He dropped it into an empty glass with a soft clink.

“Go,” Whitney urged.

Martin stood, his movements swift and deliberate.

Whitney applied a bandage over Victoria’s wound, securing it tightly. “I have your bag. Let’s move.”

They hurried out of the house toward the barn, the night air thick with tension.

Entering the barn, they navigated through the dark space to a small, concealed room.

Whitney lifted a trapdoor, revealing a narrow staircase leading to a sub-basement.

“This way,” he whispered.

They descended into the darkness, the sound of their footsteps muffled.

In the sub-basement, they found a small window. It offered a limited view of the outside.

Suddenly, the crunch of gravel signaled the arrival of vehicles. Headlights swept across

the yard as cars pulled into the driveway. Voices echoed in the night, followed by the sharp sound of gunshots.

Victoria's breath caught in her throat.

"Stay quiet," Whitney whispered, his tone firm. "Martin will take care of us."

Outside, three men approached the house, their guns drawn. One of the men pressed a button on his headset. "Sir, we're here."

The Administrator listened, apprehension evident.

The silence was broken by an explosion. It rocked the area, shaking the ground beneath them.

"Triggs," a voice crackled over the radio.

"They blew up one of our trucks," Triggs said.

The Administrator tensed, his plans unraveling.

In the basement, Victoria clung to Whitney's arm, her body trembling.

"We're okay, Princess," Whitney murmured. "Martin is out there. We're in good hands."

Triggs had been thrown to the ground by the blast, fury burning in his eyes. A beep sounded by his side. "The tracker is moving," he noted, watching the signal on the small screen he held. "They're in the forest and moving rapidly."

"Triggs," one of his men said as he approached, "there's no one inside, one of our vehicles is destroyed, and sirens are approaching. We should move"

"Send two men after Whitney. Follow the tracker." Triggs ordered.

The men grabbed their tactical gear and disappeared into the woods.

Triggs jumped into the SUV when a flurry of bullets hit the trunk. A machine gun was

firing at them. He sped away as fire trucks approached the house, their sirens wailing.

Outside, Martin moved stealthily. He had planned for this and knew the terrain.

In the basement, Whitney listened intently, the distant sounds of chaos reaching them.

“We need to move,” he whispered.

Victoria nodded, determination replacing her fear.

Whitney listened intently, waiting for the right moment to move. The distant wail of sirens grew louder, signaling that time was running out.

“Ready?” Whitney whispered to Victoria.

“Let’s go,” he said.

But the sound of a machine gun was heard in the distance.

“Martin!” She cried out.

#

In the heart of Lower Manhattan stood a six-story brick building, its unassuming exterior marked only by a small blue acrylic plaque with the name “Nova” printed on it. Below the signage was a discreet buzzer. The true nature of Nova remained concealed until one ascended to the second floor, where an identical but larger sign revealed that Nova was, in fact, a private security firm.

Phil Esposito, a short, stout man in his early fifties, stood before the door, momentarily perplexed.

His military posture: straight back, squared shoulders, was still intact, but age and politics had softened him in places. Black hair, cropped close. A neatly trimmed goatee framed a face weathered by sun, wind, and classified regrets. His olive skin bore the tone of long deployments in hot places, and his broad frame, though still powerful, now carried the quiet burden of too

many years behind a desk.

He shifted his weight slightly, cold weather always brought it out. The limp. Barely noticeable unless you'd been trained to watch for weakness. A souvenir from Iraq, stitched together by army surgeons and left to ache whenever the temperature dropped or the workday stretched too long.

Phil saw no camera, no microphone, no obvious means of surveillance, but he knew better than to assume he wasn't being watched.

The entrance to Nova's office was a heavy-duty metal door, void of handles, hinges, or keypads, save for a solitary black plastic and round button, which Esposito assumed was the doorbell. He reached out and pressed the buzzer. After a brief wait, a message appeared on the door. A red LED dot display came to life. A small arrow flashed, pointing to a rectangular shape the size of a cell phone. Above it, a small digital message flickered to life on the door's metal surface, instructing Phil to place his ID within a red rectangular shape.

The red outline pulsed twice before becoming solid.

Phil sighed and placed his government-issued ID in the designated spot.

The rectangle blinked once more, then faded.

A new message appeared.

“Come in.”

With a soft click, the door unlocked. Phil pushed it open and stepped into a narrow, dimly lit hallway. Before him stood another door, upon which a new message appeared: “Close the door behind you.”

He did so, hearing the door lock automatically. A breeze of cold air passed through the

entry. A minute or so later, the second door opened.

Strangely, he felt a slight dizziness.

A tall woman with a slight British accent welcomed him. “Please come in, Mr. Esposito,” she said, pointing at a small waiting room where two cozy chairs stood.

“Mr. Monroe should be with you momentarily,” she said.

Phil Esposito was relieved to take a seat, trying to shake off the lingering lightheadedness. He suspected the air filtration system was responsible, perhaps dispersing some kind of gas. He’d heard whispers of such technology before, a subtle way to subdue a potentially dangerous visitor.

Before he could dwell on the thought, a deep voice cut through the room.

“Mr. Esposito. A pleasure to meet you.” James Monroe was an imposing figure; at least six feet two, broad-shouldered, with an easy yet commanding presence. His dark complexion, warm smile, and faint Caribbean accent hinted at roots in Jamaica or another West Indian island.

He extended a firm hand, his grip both confident and controlled.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Esposito?” he asked as they entered a plain office.

“Call me Phil,” Esposito replied, once again glad to be sitting down.

“Alright, Phil. What brings you to Nova Security?”

“I am here on behalf of Jane Holt, the Secretary of the Treasury.”

Monroe’s expression remained unreadable. “I see.”

They exchanged pleasantries for a few minutes until Phil reached into his pocket and took out an iPhone-looking device.

“Fingerprints, please,” he requested.



Monroe hesitated.

Sensing the hesitation, Phil said, “There is no way Secretary Holt could attend this meeting without bringing too much attention to Nova.” He looked at the device. “We are the government, Mr. Monroe. We have your fingerprints and all your data on file. Remember, you were Special Forces.”

Before Monroe could respond, a knock sounded at the door.

His assistant entered, handing him a note. Monroe read it:

“AVFR\_JH2BE\_\_XP\_hat\_APY13; a visitor from Jane Holt to be expected at approximately 1:00 PM.”

Monroe looked at his watch; it was 1:05. He extended his index finger and placed it on the device.

Phil handed Monroe the phone.

The screen flickered to life, and a sharp, professional woman’s face appeared. It was Secretary Holt.

“Mr. Monroe, Max Whitney suggested I reach out to you.”

Monroe gave a slow nod. “I’m listening.”

Holt wasted no time explaining her needs.

Monroe listened but picked up his phone and typed a quick command.

“Secretary Holt, I reached out to my associate Rahul. He’s my hacker extraordinaire,” Monroe said without fanfare.

Holt’s expression remained impassive, but her gaze sharpened. She envisioned a pale, twitchy youth with bloodshot eyes and a large cup of coffee in hand. Instead, when the encrypted

video connection flickered to life, the image that materialized was not what she expected.

A middle-aged Indian man filled the screen. His neatly tied white turban gleamed under warm light. A thick beard framed his face.

“Rahul, this is Secretary Holt,” Monroe said, nodding toward the monitor.

“Madam Secretary,” Rahul replied with easy warmth. “An honor.”

Jane Holt nodded tersely. Her patience was already worn thin.

“We need to identify a man,” she said. “An extremely dangerous and elusive individual. Can you help?”

Rahul’s head tilted slightly, as if evaluating not the task, but her. His eyes, sharp and calm, reminded her of a surgeon’s, precise, unhurried, detached.

“Secretary Holt,” he said slowly, “how difficult do you believe this task to be?”

“None of our government agencies have been able to uncover his identity.”

Rahul’s smile deepened, but it was not one of amusement; it was something closer to suspicion.

“Forgive me,” he said gently, “but when you say unable, do you mean unwilling?”

For the first time in her career, Jane Holt felt the blood drain from her face. The suggestion landed like a depth charge.

What if the agencies she relied on, those whose job it was to follow her lead, were no longer merely incompetent or outmaneuvered, but compromised? What if the Administrator and the men he represented were not just ghosts in the system, but engineers of it? Embedded so deeply within the American intelligence apparatus that they could *redirect* priorities, *override* protocol... or worse, make entire files vanish with a whisper?

Holt gripped the armrests of her chair, anchoring herself.

The room was quiet. The question hung between them, like smoke from a fire no one had yet admitted had started.

Seeing confusion on her face, Rahul continued. “Secretary Holt, we should be able to find who you are looking for.”

She gathered herself. “Good.” She turned back to Monroe. “I’ll leave the operational details to you and Phil. Nova has full government backing at the highest levels. Get on this immediately.”

For the next several hours, Phil, Monroe, and Rahul ironed out the operation’s specifics.

Rahul was firm. He demanded full autonomy over the team he would lead, zero government interference, unlimited funding for recruitment and operations, a secluded and undisclosed operational base of his choosing, and direct contractual protections from the White House for himself and his team.

Phil resisted at first but quickly realized the conditions weren’t negotiable. He did, however, manage to secure twice-daily status updates.

Once the verbal agreement was set, Monroe moved into action.

He stepped out to his assistant’s desk. “Bridget, this project is top priority. Draft a full cost analysis, prepare contracts, and set up a new overseas bank account for this project immediately. You know the drill.”

“Yes, Mr. Monroe.”

“And get Rahul whatever he needs.”

Phil stood, ready to leave, but hesitated. He turned back to Monroe.

“Have you ever heard of The Consilium Noctis, or the Council of the Night?”

Monroe’s brow furrowed. “No.”

Phil exhaled, his voice lower now, almost a warning. “The man you’re after isn’t just dangerous; he represents the Council of the Night. If you go after him, you won’t just be facing one adversary. You’ll be making enemies of an invisible and far more powerful force than you can imagine. And the moment you start this hunt, the entire American intelligence apparatus may turn against you.” He met Monroe’s gaze. “Be careful. These men aren’t just dangerous. They’re lethal.”

## Chapter Ten

It took over an hour for the firefighters to extinguish the blaze from the car explosion. The local police surveyed the house, finding it empty and devoid of clues, and concluded there was little more they could do. The charred remnants of the car offered no insights either. Finally, the police chief ordered his team to leave. He would send a crime scene expert the next morning, though he doubted they would uncover anything significant.

Meanwhile, Max and Victoria had been unable to leave the basement as the Czech firemen had suddenly appeared in the courtyard. All that time, they remained hidden, waiting patiently for a sign that it was safe to emerge. They tensed up at the sound of footsteps just outside. Suddenly, the door blew open.

It was Martin.

“Let’s go,” he said.

Victoria was relieved to see him alive. She wanted to embrace him, but restrained

herself. Instead, she grabbed her bag and followed him and Whitney outside.

The night had been long. They walked silently along a narrow path paralleling the road. Exhaustion weighed heavily on them. After about a mile, they arrived at a neighboring house where a car was concealed under a black tarp.

Martin pulled the tarp, unlocked the car, and the three stepped in as the engine of the black BMW 7 Series roared to life.

Max was frantic, his movement sharp. He opened his travel case and retrieved a phone labeled 'Number Three.'

"Monroe will fill me in," he said, and fell silent as he listened. "I see," he murmured, pausing. The conversation continued for a few minutes. "Okay, we're going all out against these evils. Thanks, Monroe. Yes, I know we need to go dark. I'll call you soon." Whitney listened for a moment longer. "Great, thank you," he finally said and hung up.

Martin appeared calm, his gaze fixed on the road, vigilant, searching for any signs of pursuit.

"Pull over, Martin, please," Whitney requested.

Martin complied.

Whitney slid into the back seat and unlatched his mobile command case.

Inside the Pelican 1600 case, precision met paranoia. A rugged black laptop sat embedded in custom-cut foam, flanked by two encrypted solid-state drives, their brushed metal gleaming under the case's lid light. A fold-out power module and satellite uplink unit were tucked into the top compartment. A dark laptop was set in the bottom one, where wires were coiled neatly beside a collapsible mousepad. Every item had its place, military-grade, road-ready, silent, and secure.

He placed a headset over his ears and withdrew from his surroundings.

Victoria now sat in the passenger seat beside Martin.

Turning to him, she asked, “What the hell happened back there?”

Martin handed her a device resembling a GPS unit. “Look at this,” On the screen, a red dot flashed.

“The red dot is the tracker I removed from your arm. I placed it on a drone that’s now flying high and slow. It has about 45 minutes of battery life left before it crashes. Press the second button on the right, below the screen.”

She did so and observed the ghostly images of two men moving slowly through the forest.

“Victoria, this is serious. I can get you back to New York safely. You’ll be fine.”

She turned to him. Beneath his tough exterior, Sloane was a man of compassion, capable of a tenderness few ever witnessed. There was a timelessness about him; maturity tempered by the rawness of youth, she thought.

A longing stirred within her to reach out and touch him, to rest her head on his broad shoulder. She wanted to hold him, to wrap her arms around his body, every muscle toned and defined, a testament to his dedication to staying in shape. She remained silent, in a daydream.

Sloane continued. “We need to decide where you stand before things get too dangerous. These men are hunting us, and the longer you stay with us, the deeper you’re involved. You asked if you should fear for your safety. Now is the time to be truly afraid.”

## Chapter Eleven

Walter Lang sat motionless in the dimly lit war room, his fingers interlocked, resting on the table. The glow from the bank of monitors cast shifting shadows across Secretary Holt's face as she moved from left to right nervously.

Secretary Holt adjusted the cuffs of her blazer, her posture deliberately poised. The air was thick with anticipation, laced with the quiet hum of the server racks surrounding them.

The Administrator was late. That, in itself, was unusual.

Then, the screen flickered. A moment later, the Administrator appeared, his face gaunt and pale against the sterile glow of his office. Something about him was different today, and though he always had a sickly, almost pitiful air, Holt detected an underlying tension. The way his fingers curled against his desk, maybe, or the way his gaze flickered slightly before settling on her. The Administrator, whom she only referred to as A, wasn't just agitated. There was tension in his body, in the way he moved, furtive, preoccupied, and evasive. Was he afraid?



“It was our understanding that President Lang would accommodate our request,” the Administrator said, dispensing with any form of greeting. His voice was sharp, expectant. “By now, I assumed there would have been movement on stopping these unacceptable regulations.”

Holt met his gaze, her expression neutral. “We’re working on it, A. This is Washington. Everything takes time.”

The Administrator exhaled sharply. “You are the Secretary of the Treasury, Miss Holt. There is no reason it should take any time at all. Fix the problem.”

She glanced briefly at one of the server indicators on the console. A flashing yellow light on a secured line pulsed twice, an anomaly. It was a subtle but deliberate signal, a warning; the line was being monitored.

Holt turned her attention back to the Administrator, her tone measured. “There are two options,” she said. “I can walk into the Securities and Exchange Committee right now and order them to drop all regulations on dark pools. Within an hour, every major news outlet will investigate why I made such a reckless decision. I don’t need to tell you what happens when the press asks the wrong questions. The press will dig, and they will find something. And when they do, I assure you, it won’t be me they crucify.” She took a breath. Or...” She let the word linger. “We can handle this with discretion and diplomatic finesse. President Lang and I believe this is the wisest approach.”

The Administrator’s nostrils flared. “We are uncomfortable with the moves you have been making,” he said coldly.

Holt remained impassive. “Such as?”

He didn’t hesitate. “President Lang has dismissed his Secret Service detail and replaced it

with mercenaries.”

Holt barely allowed a pause before responding, her voice smooth. “There is no truth to that.” She answered.

The yellow signal indicator blinked twice again, then turned solid green. After a few seconds, it began to pulse at two-second intervals. Holt made a mental note of the change. She wasn’t sure what it meant yet, but there was activity on her server.

The Administrator leaned forward, attentive, his face a mask of controlled displeasure.

“Our message will be simple, A,” said Secretary Holt. “This is not the time to introduce unnecessary burdens on the banking industry. The financial sector has been, and remains, the pillar of the American economy.” She continued. A rehearsed line, no doubt. But one she had delivered strongly and convincingly.

Holt almost laughed at the audacity of her own words. Pillar? She had spent too much time studying the banking industry to believe that. The global financial machine wasn’t just about backroom deals; it was a relentless force, issuing veiled threats while quietly amassing even more power and wealth.

Instead, she met the Administrator’s gaze with a cold, knowing stare.

The Administrator’s tone darkened. “I see. And how about your assistant? Why was she suddenly dismissed? And why is the Vice President traveling the world aimlessly?”

Holt didn’t break eye contact. “I am the Secretary of the Treasury, not the President. I do not control the Vice President’s schedule. As for my assistant, her loyalties shifted. She could no longer be trusted.”

A flicker of something crossed the Administrator’s face. He didn’t comment, but Holt

could tell he had already known the answer.

The assistant had been compromised, blackmailed into sharing Holt's every move with the Administrator.

There was a beat of silence. Then, the Administrator's voice turned sharper, colder. "Our patience is running short, Secretary Holt."

The words came slowly, deliberately. Then he repeated, "Very short."

Before she could respond, a banner flashed across one of the secondary monitors.

BREAKING NEWS: MARKETS DOWN 5%, LARGEST SINGLE-DAY LOSS IN 20 years

Holt's stomach tensed. The retirees. The pensions. The current and fragile economy could not afford another manufactured crisis. She could already see the fallout.

*They're tightening the noose. She thought. War has begun.*

She kept her expression unreadable, but her mind was already running calculations. If this continued, panic would set in. Soon, investors would pull back, institutions would move to secure assets, and the ripple effect on the economy would be catastrophic. Political pressure was mounting.

Holt knew the same institutions crying out for less regulation would also be the first in line to demand government bailouts.

Then, unexpectedly, the Administrator's voice changed. The clipped authority gave way to something else. Something uneasy.

"Are you tracking me?" There was something in his tone, an edge of uncertainty, of fear.

Holt blinked. "Excuse me?" she paused, enjoying the Administrator's reaction. "A, we

have been trying to track you down for months, but your minions have been doing a swell job impeding our search.”

Holt narrowed her eyes. But before she could push for more information, she saw it.

The Administrator wasn't looking at her anymore. He stared past the camera, his eyes darting rapidly across the room.

He was panicking.

“Don't worry,” Holt said cautiously. “We're not tracking you.”

The Administrator cut her off.

“Someone is.”

He turned sharply, as if hearing something behind him. Then his gaze snapped back to the camera.

“Someone is,” he repeated, his voice louder, more urgent.

Then the screen went dark.

## Chapter Twelve

The mask flew across the room, landing with a dull thud against the wall.

The Administrator stood frozen, heart pounding, his breath shallow. Someone was tracking him.

A red light flashed in the bottom right corner of the screen, an intrusion alert. His throat tightened. For a fleeting moment, relief washed over him as the warning light vanished. Maybe it was a false alarm. Maybe the system had overreacted.

This was a bad sign. A very bad sign.

However, he could no longer focus on his conversation with Secretary Holt and the lack of movement to stop the regulations.

It could have been a glitch. He told himself.

But a minute later, two red lights blinked in unison. His stomach lurched.

No glitch.

This was real; a deliberate, targeted breach. Someone, someone skilled was probing the deepest layers of his firewall, searching for a way in. Six years of total anonymity had kept him safe. Now, in a matter of seconds, that security was unraveling.

Was Holt tracking him? She pretended to be surprised, but she had shown herself to be a deceitful foe. The words escaped his lips before he fully processed them. The question felt distant, distorted, like he was hearing himself through water.

Secretary Holt's voice crackled through the speaker, but the Administrator was no longer listening.

A third red light appeared.

No more hesitation.

He crossed the room in three quick strides and yanked the fiber optic cable from the wall. The monitors flickered, then went black. Silence filled the underground communications room, four floors beneath the city's street level.

He clenched his jaw. His hands trembled.

Had he been compromised? He wondered. What should his next move be?

Informing his employers was out of the question. That would mean immediate dismissal, assuming they didn't decide to eliminate him right then and there. He knew too much. People like him didn't just leave this job; they disappeared.

Sweat beaded on his forehead, rolling down his temples. His black shirt, an essential piece of the Administrator's carefully crafted persona, clung to his damp skin. He drew in a slow, deliberate breath, forcing his mind to steady.

*The emergency server manual.* He thought

His eyes darted toward the lone black shelf.

Something was wrong, deeply wrong. His fingers floated over the keys, frozen, as lines of unfamiliar code flickered across the screen. A chill spread through his chest, slow and paralyzing; someone was inside, and for the first time in years, he didn't know what to do.

The Administrator was far from an amateur hacker, far from it, but this breach required expertise beyond his own.

After rerouting his connection through a backup server, he activated a secondary VPN. The system purred to life, smooth, stable. He initiated a deep scan, watching the data scroll across the screen.

Thirty minutes passed.

Nothing.

Then, his phone buzzed.

Line 6. This phone was reserved for external vendors.

He hesitated. Then picked up.

“Yes?”

“This is Operator 119 from TWS, Total Web Security. We're checking in on a flagged server issue.”

His pulse quickened.

“Don't worry about it,” he said, keeping his voice steady. “Spilled coffee. Fried the system. Completely down.”

A brief silence. Then, “You're sure, sir?” said the operator.

“Positive. Appreciate the follow-up.”

“Understood. Have a good evening.”

The Administrator hung up, exhaling slowly.

This was bigger than he thought. They were already watching.

He grabbed another phone and dialed 4.

“James, pick me up in twenty minutes. We’re leaving.”

“Yes, sir.” His driver answered.

The Administrator spent the next ten minutes in silence, moving with mechanical precision. One by one, he shut down the core of his operation; eight fiber optic servers disconnected, their status lights blinking out like dying stars. Five computers were wiped clean, internal drives overwritten beyond recovery, before he unplugged them. Monitors faded to black, leaving only the faint hum from the ventilation system and the soft tap of his gloved fingers moving across control panels.

Then came the final step.

He activated the neutralizer. A low-frequency hum pulsed through the floor, subtle at first, then resonant, like a storm gathering beneath concrete. Electromagnetic waves swept the room in silent force, devouring every residual signal, scrambling hardware, and destroying data at the molecular level. Within seconds, nothing remained. No deep scan would find heat, and no forensic trace of information would remain. The space registered as a void, just cold, lifeless concrete buried four stories underground.

#

*Was it time to disappear?*

#



The ride back to his penthouse was smooth and uneventful; ten minutes of silence that felt stretched thin with unease. James, his driver, said nothing; he never did unless spoken to. In the back seat of the vehicle, the Administrator stared at the passing lights, pensive and fraying at the edges.

How the hell was he going to recover from this breach?

His penthouse felt quiet, empty, and foreign.

A hot shower. Fresh clothes. A quiet dinner alone, with a glass of Château Margaux. The familiar routine helped steady his nerves, but the weight of the situation still pressed against his chest.

The Administrator needed help.

Even though his high-tech center had been compromised and entirely erased, it had been backed up to a remote server. It would be impossible to track him with just the information the server would provide. But he was curious and had to find the identity of the person responsible for this intrusion.

His main control center was gone.

Upon his command, the system had auto-immolated, igniting an internal burn protocol that melted terabytes of classified black ops and Council intelligence into pure, irrecoverable nothingness. A total digital kill. Every node, scrubbed. No recovery. No trace.

But he had prepared for this.

He dropped into a plush armchair. He powered on his laptop and waited. A black screen. A quick scan of the hard drive by a custom-designed antivirus software began. A few minutes passed. No boot animation. Just a pulse of deep red across the screen. The hum of a system

waking from hibernation, alive and listening.

System startup initialized.

A string of quantum hashes flickered. No OS. No manufacturer. Only the skeleton of a framework he'd written himself: bare-metal code stitched together for one purpose: survival.

Then came a second scan.

Malware sweep. Hardware integrity check. Multi-node authentication.

Good. Still clean.

Seconds dragged.

The air was tight, sterile. He stared at the code blinking on the screen.

They weren't supposed to reach him.

And though he suspected Holt had something to do with the intrusion, he needed to know who had inserted himself into his system.

And fast.

He launched the TOR browser and slipped into the dark web, his fingers gliding over the keys with practiced speed. Firewalls opened. Encryption protocols cascaded. Within moments, he reached his destination: The Nest, a private, invitation-only hackers' forum few had even heard of.

He was looking for one person: Sparrow.

A legend. A ghost. The kind of hacker governments feared, and corporations paid fortunes for his help.

He typed:

Sparrow. This is A\_01. I need your services. Urgently.

No signature. No delay.

He stood, poured himself another glass of Château Margaux, and walked to the bay window.

Manhattan stretched before him, vast, indifferent, alive. The city, a pulsing machine of power and oblivion.

He took a slow breath, replaying the day's events in his mind, dissecting every detail, every step, every oversight.

Sparrow would come through. He was sure of it.

Far below, crowds spilled from office towers; tired, anxious, unaware. They moved in waves through avenues and subway gates, utterly blind to the financial collapse his clients were already preparing to unleash upon them.

A soft chime.

He turned.

A single message pulsed on-screen:

At your service.

## Chapter Thirteen

Whitney emerged from his cluster of computers and phones, his fingers pausing over a keyboard as he took in his surroundings.

“Porter,” he began, but his voice trailed off as he glanced out the window. They had been on the road for a while now, the blur of the landscape shifting from dense forests to open countryside. For the three passengers, the weight of exhaustion clung to the air.

Finally, he exhaled. “We’re going dark, Porter.”

Besides Victoria, Martin remained steady, his patience masking the quiet turmoil within him. This was dangerous. It was far more than a simple mission, and far more than a game of deception. Martin wished she would run, leave this entire charade behind before it swallowed her whole.

He glanced at her, his expression unreadable.

“Whitney,” Victoria said, her voice composed despite the intensity and fear she felt

within herself. “I need a couple of hours to prepare. Then I’ll need an hour of secure internet access.”

Whitney nodded, rubbing a hand over his face. “Okay. We’re going to stop in Salzburg for the night. I think we can set you up there.” He turned. “How much longer, Martin?”

“Thirty to forty-five minutes,” Martin replied, his hands steady on the wheel.

“Good. I’m going to rest.” Said Whitney as he powered down his portable high-tech setup, carefully stowing away his equipment before stretching out across the back seat. Within minutes, he could be heard snoring.

Up front, Victoria and Sloan sat in silence, the road stretching endlessly ahead of them. The hum of the engine was the only sound.

Victoria reached over and found Martin’s hand, her fingers lacing through his. “You’ll keep me safe, right?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Martin turned, his steely blue eyes locking onto hers. In that moment, all he wanted was to pull her into his arms, to shield her from whatever storm lay ahead.

“I won’t ever let anything happen to you,” he said, his voice unwavering.

The world outside raced past them, but inside the car, time stood still.

Victoria thought of her life and of the boyfriends who had drifted through it, most of them self-proclaimed intellectuals who mistook constant talking for depth, enamored with their formidable insights. They were men obsessed with theories, addicted to the sound of their clever reasoning, too absorbed in their mental gymnastics to grasp a basic truth: the mind is sharper when the body isn’t falling apart.

Sloane’s body told the story of a man who meticulously cared for himself, likely eating

carrots and spending hours at the gym to maintain his physique. But he was kind, warm, and caring. And man was he handsome. She tightened her hand around his, as a gentle warmth stirred inside her.

#

Salzburg had an old-world charm that seemed untouched by time. The city's Baroque architecture, domed churches, elaborately stuccoed facades, and narrow alleys paved with centuries of cobblestones rose gracefully against the snow-dusted ridges of the northern Alps. Once the seat of powerful prince-archbishops, it was the political and ecclesiastical center of Salzburg for centuries, especially during the height of the Holy Roman Empire. "Mozart, a prodigy born into baroque grandeur, was born within its walls.

The city bore its history in weathered stones and soaring towers, where whispers of old legends and veiled intrigues were woven through centuries of power.

On this spring-like day, the warmth came early, and the city stirred with life. People crowded the café terraces and strolled along the Salzach River, their coats slung over chairs, faces turned to the sun.

In the heart of the Old Town, the Residenz stood in solemn splendor, its Renaissance arcades and stately courtyards echoing a time when clerics ruled like kings.

Nearby, the Franciscan Church, whose towering spires pierced the sky, was a fascinating example of Romanesque and Gothic styles. It was a more austere counterpart to the city's Baroque extravagance. Inside, centuries of quiet prayer lingered beneath vaulted ceilings and shadowed stone.

But out here, in the squares and gardens, the mood was light, almost festive. It felt less

like April and more like a brief, brilliant holiday in June.

Whitney had planned a meeting at the Center for European Union Studies, a short walk from the house they would occupy for the night. “I’ll go alone,” he said to Martin. Before stepping out, he took a moment to make a few subtle but effective adjustments to his appearance. Disappearing into the house, he rummaged through whatever clothing he could borrow, searching for the right pieces to alter his silhouette.

Five minutes later, he emerged transformed. A heavy, dark overcoat draped over his frame, adding at least thirty pounds to his appearance. The thick fabric bulked up his shoulders, making him appear broader, almost sluggish. A bomber hat, its ear flaps pulled down and visor lowered just above his eyes, cast deep shadows over his face, obscuring his features. In the foyer, he reached for a cane, gripping it with the practiced ease of someone who had relied on it for years.

With his disguise complete, Whitney gave a small nod of approval. “What do you think?” He asked them as he began to walk with a limp.

They both approved.

After a final glance at his phone, he slipped out of the house.

Victoria turned to Martin. “Is he going to be OK?”

“Yes. Don’t worry. He’s a tough nut.”

“Good. I am going to get to work,” Victoria said before turning and heading upstairs.

#

In the quiet of her room, she settled at the worn wooden desk, fingers poised over the keyboard.

The soft daylight of the sun pierced through the sheer and onto the surface of the desk. She had planned to work through the next hour or two, drafting a series of blog posts and later scheduling them through an automated social media platform. It was a routine task, but today, it gave her an illusion of normalcy.

As she began to write, the words blurred, the letters swimming in and out of focus. Her thoughts drifted, pulled away by the weight of everything that had happened. The room, though warm, felt too quiet, too still. Outside, the faint hum of traffic filtered through the window, a distant reminder that life carried on, indifferent to the chaos unraveling behind the scenes.

She exhaled sharply and rubbed her temples. It was no use; her focus had splintered. All she could think about was Martin: his steady presence, the calm in his voice when everything else felt uncertain... and the body she couldn't wait to explore.

Pushing back from the desk, she stood and paced the length of the room, arms crossed tightly over her chest. The need to move, to do something other than sit in front of a screen filled with half-formed messages, gnawed at her.

For twenty relentless minutes, she resisted the urge to step away from her work, trying to push Martin from her mind. But the more she tried, the more his presence lingered, his quiet strength, the way his eyes held hers as if he could see straight through her.

Frustrated, she abandoned the laptop, closing it with a soft click. Rising from her chair, she stepped into the hallway, her bare feet silent against the polished wooden floor. She found him in the living room, standing near the window, gazing out at the city beyond. His posture was relaxed, but there was always a readiness to him, as if he were waiting for the next move in a game never fully understood.



Without thinking, she moved toward him.

He turned just as she reached him, his expression unreadable.

Then, without a word, she lifted herself onto her toes and kissed him.

It was a slow kiss, at first, hesitant, as if testing the boundaries of something inevitable.

Then he responded, his hands came up to her face, deepening the kiss. Time seemed to fold in on itself, the rest of the world fading away.

For a moment, there was no danger, no conspiracies, no need for disguises or coded conversations. There was only this: the warmth of his touch, the quiet promise in the way he held her.

She pulled back just enough to meet his gaze, her heart hammering.

“Victoria,” he murmured, his voice low but deep and strong.

“I know,” she whispered. She didn’t need to hear the words. She already knew.

The city hummed beyond the window, oblivious to the quiet storm unfolding in the rented house where three fugitives would hide for the night.

Footsteps echoed down the hallway.

It was Whitney.

They separated. Victoria quickly returned to her work as Martin rose from his bed and moved to join Whitney. The air was thick with tension, the weight of their circumstances pressing down on them like an unseen force.

When Victoria finally made her way downstairs, she found a small workstation set up, antennas extending from Whitney’s rugged-looking laptop.

Max was waiting for her, his expression serious. He tapped a few keys, bringing the dark

screen to life. The Tor browser interface flickered open, its encrypted pathways offering a narrow but crucial window to the outside world.

“Use this flash drive to copy your documents from your computer to it,” he instructed, handing her a small device. “You’ll have internet access for an hour.”

“There’s a timer in the top right corner,” he continued. “Every four minutes, the VPN will scramble and reroute through a different country. One beep means pause and save whatever you’re doing. The next two beeps mean it’s safe to resume.”

Victoria nodded, slipping the flash drive into her laptop’s USB port. As the data was transferred, she cracked her knuckles and exhaled, trying to steady her nerves. Every keystroke mattered. Every word had to be carefully chosen.

She logged in the scheduling system. Her inbox was flooded with thousands of unread messages, worried comments, and theories spinning out of control. Some believed she had been silenced, others thought she had fled, but the truth was far more dangerous.

Her fingers danced across the keyboard.

*“Still here. Still watching. The storm is real. Stay alert.”*

It wasn’t much, but it was enough. Enough to let those who knew her work understand that the danger was real.

Whitney hovered nearby, arms crossed, his gaze flicking between her and the countdown clock. “Five minutes left,” he muttered.

Victoria hurried, uploading pre-written drafts and scheduling them to go live in staggered intervals. She embedded hidden signals in the wording, subtle references to her ongoing investigations. Words such as Pools, dirty water, full of dark ink, council, night, threats.

Just as she queued the last post, the laptop let out a sharp beep. One. Then another.

“Time’s up.” Whitney reached over and yanked the flash drive out before shutting the laptop’s lid with a decisive snap.

Victoria leaned back, pulse hammering. “That should buy me some time.”

Whitney studied her for a moment before nodding. “Let’s hope so.”

Behind them, footsteps sounded on the stairs. Martin appeared, his expression grim.

“It would be safer for us to leave now,” Martin said quietly, his voice edged with urgency.

Victoria exhaled, rubbing her temples. Exhausted from the incessant running. They had barely escaped Prague, and their supposed safe house near Český Krumlov had been anything but a disaster. The thoughts of Martin fighting these men alone, the explosion and machine guns firing, and her hours spent below ground in the farmhouse. All she had wanted was one night of stillness. One night to breathe.

Instead, they were on the move again, swallowed by the darkness.

As she slid into the car, a slow, creeping unease settled over her. The driver was unfamiliar; a thickset man with sunken eyes and a permanent scowl etched into his face. His hands gripped the wheel tightly, knuckles pale against the leather. Something about him felt... off.

“This is our driver for the next stretch,” Whitney said, his voice flat.

Victoria hesitated, her instincts bristling. She cast a glance at Martin, searching for reassurance. He gave her a subtle and measured nod, but it did little to calm the knot tightening in her stomach.

The car's engine rumbled to life, a low growl against the quiet. As they pulled away, the headlights carved through the empty road ahead, but Victoria couldn't shake the feeling that they weren't driving toward safety.

They were heading deeper into the unknown.

## Chapter Fourteen

The large black SUV moved deliberately through the streets of downtown Manhattan, its tinted windows reflecting the neon glow of the city. Inside, the atmosphere was hushed, the low hum of the engine the only sound. The Administrator had been summoned to an urgent meeting, one that could not be postponed.

The windows had been covered with black curtains, ensuring absolute privacy and blocking the view to the outside.

Even James, his ever-loyal driver, was shielded from his view by a partition. James never asked questions, never pried. His job was to drive, to remain unseen, and to follow orders without hesitation.

As the city pulsed outside, horns blaring, pedestrians weaving through traffic, the SUV remained an isolated world of its own, moving toward a destination known only to its driver and the men who had ordered the meeting.

For the Administrator, the ride was unnervingly smooth. His phone had been left behind at his apartment, a precaution the Council demanded to keep their meeting's location secret. Left without a phone, he decided to stretch across the back seat, the plush leather offering no comfort against the cold weight of uncertainty pressing down on him.

Trouble was mounting. The repeated failures to capture Max Whitney and Victoria Porter weren't just major setbacks; they were dangerous liabilities. The Administrator could already sense the growing impatience of those above him, the ones who operated from the shadows, where mercy was in short supply.

A slow, sinking realization crept over him. He wondered how much time he had left, if he would walk away from this meeting or if he'd soon be nothing more than another discarded body, his name erased, his existence a forgotten miscalculation. There was no escaping the Council of the Night. There had never been a way out. And the terror of that truth settled deep in his bones.

A sharp turn jolted him, nearly throwing him off the seat. The descent had begun, a long, spiraling journey into the depths of a subterranean chamber somewhere beneath Lower Manhattan, or so he assumed.

The administrator straightened up, bracing himself as the massive black vehicle wound its way downward in tight, disorienting circles,

Finally, the car rolled to a stop. The Administrator exhaled slowly, steadying himself. The dizzying descent had left him slightly woozy.

James stepped out first, pulling open the door.

The Administrator exited, his shoes echoing against the cold concrete.

The dim, flickering lights overhead cast fleeting shadows along the bunker-like walls, adding to the sense of unease.

#

A silent figure approached and gestured for him to step forward. A full-body scan followed, a routine precaution, but one that always set his nerves on edge. When the scan was complete, a heavy door slid open, revealing a pitch-black chamber.

He took a cautious step inside.

“We are concerned with your ability to protect us,” a distorted voice announced from the darkness.

His knees tensed as he lowered himself and sat onto a low, cushioned stool at the center of the room. Then, without warning, a blinding spotlight flared to life, piercing the darkness and locking onto him. Beyond its reach, the chamber remained an abyss of shadows.

“The situation is under control,” the Administrator said, forcing his voice to remain steady. “We do not agree,” the voice countered, cold and unwavering.

“Where is Max Whitney? Where is Victoria Porter? And what about the changes to SEC regulations we instructed you to stop?”

The Administrator inhaled slowly. He knew better than to answer too quickly or too carefully. Either could be taken as a sign of weakness.

He waited as his eyes adjusted to the harsh contrast between the blinding spotlight and the surrounding darkness. Slowly, he could make out twelve shadowed figures seated in a semicircle before him, silent, watchful, and expectant.

Clearing his throat, he spoke with measured caution. “I believe that Porter has joined

forces with Max Whitney. They are making their way back to the U.S., and as far as I'm concerned, I ask for your patience in handling this matter."

A voice cut through the darkness, cold and unimpressed. "Patience? We have granted you ample time to prove you could manage this operation, yet with every passing day, more failures, more breaches, more concerns arise." A pause, then a sharper demand. "Tell us about the intrusion into your network."

The Administrator suppressed a sigh, though the weight of the moment pressed heavily on his chest. He had expected this line of questioning, yet the sting of disappointment, both theirs and his own, was undeniable. He took a slow, steady breath, preparing to deliver his response.

"Sparrow is handling it," he said, referring to one of the best hackers available. The Administrator's voice was firm but carefully devoid of defensiveness. The Council of the Night had used Sparrow's services before, and every person in this room was aware of the hacker's near-superhuman skills. There was no need to convince them of Sparrow's capabilities, only that the situation was still under control.

"The best assets available have been deployed, and..."

He hesitated for the briefest moment, choosing his words carefully. He knew how this Council operated. They didn't tolerate missteps, and they certainly didn't tolerate failure. Every second that passed without concrete results chipped away at their already limited patience.

He straightened, pressing on. "Sparrow is working around the clock to trace the breach and neutralize the intrusion. I anticipate results soon."

A heavy silence followed. He couldn't tell if they were satisfied or sharpening their knives.



A distorted voice cut him off, laced with even more menace. “Your time to redeem yourself is running out. No more delays. No more excuses. We demand results.”

The mechanical timbre of the voice, filtered through layers of distortion, was unsettling, reminiscent of something between Darth Vader and a faceless executioner. It was designed to unnerve. And it worked.

The Administrator swallowed. He could feel the verdict looming.

This time, just as he was about to answer, the spotlight flickered off, plunging him into a suffocating darkness. The door to the room creaked open, and a man carrying a small flashlight stepped inside. The beam of light darted across the Administrator’s face before it moved down to his arm. Without a word, the man grabbed him roughly, his grip cold and firm, and guided him out of the room.

#

They walked in eerie silence down a narrow corridor, the low hum of distant machinery the only sound. When they reached the black SUV waiting outside, the Administrator’s breath hitched. Something felt wrong.

James, the ever-loyal driver, was nowhere to be seen. Instead, two large, masked men sat in the front seats. Their expressions were hidden, but their presence was unsettling. The door slammed shut behind the Administrator with an almost finality to it.

A sinking feeling spread through him. His pulse quickened as the engine roared to life, the low growl vibrating through the vehicle.

“Is this it?” The thought crossed his mind with chilling clarity, and he couldn’t shake the sensation that this might be the moment everything came to an end.

*They are going to kill me now.*

## Chapter Fifteen

“There was an intrusion on my server.” The Administrator said, furious.

Holt kept her expression neutral, but her pulse quickened. The markets were spiraling, crumbling in slow motion, and she was powerless to stop it.

“What can I do to reassure you?” asked Secretary Holt.

“Someone was trying to access my IP address and location.”

“A,” she snapped, “I told you, none of our intelligence agencies have been able to identify you.”

The Administrator knew exactly why. He had ensured their failure. But that wasn’t the point of this call.

“Facial recognition came back negative. Voice recognition? Useless. Your IP address, when we get a trace, it sends us everywhere but where you are.” Holt exhaled sharply. “So again, what do you want me to do, A?”

Silence.

Then, “We’ve seen no movement on the regulations. The SEC informed us that neither you nor the White House has requested a hold on their implementations.”

“We asked you for patience.”

“We have none to offer.”

Holt walked to her desk, lowering herself into the chair. Her secretary and assistant rushed in, faces tight with concern. She waved them off. They obeyed immediately, shutting the door behind them. “A, the markets need to stabilize.”

“Impossible.”

“Then if you refuse to analyze the situation and won’t respect our process, you’re leaving us no options,” Holt said

A pause. Then, soft but sharp, “No, Secretary Holt. You have no option to spare. You must comply.”

Another silence. This time, the weight of it pressed against her chest.

“Now,” the Administrator continued, savoring the moment, “let me tell you my side of the story.”

Holt placed the phone on her desk and switched to speaker. She was done humoring this phantom, done with the veiled threats of a man pretending to be righteous.

“Go ahead,” she said, voice cold. “Tell me why I’m the villain when you’re the one threatening to burn down America and the global markets. And let’s not forget, you act on behalf of a cabal of men who already have more wealth than they could ever spend.”

A chuckled. Low. Amused. Unbothered. “The way I see it,” he said, “you hired a private

investigative team to infiltrate my network.”

Holt remained still. No reaction.

He continued. “The independent contractor working for you and the President subcontracted a team of hackers to do what your intelligence agencies couldn’t or wouldn’t.”

Holt’s fingers curled into a fist. How the hell does he know that?

“Now,” A said, voice hardening, “this is a serious breach of trust.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

A cut her off. “Let me finish.”

Holt’s nails drummed against the desk.

“The White House has not been forthcoming. We believe Walter Lang is lying. He has no intention of reversing the regulations we demanded be withdrawn.

She inhaled slowly. “This is all fiction.”

A ignored her. “Worse, your independent security team and hackers are looking at things they shouldn’t.”

“Such as?” Holt challenged.

“This is my last warning, Holt. Their safety will soon be in jeopardy. Stop what you’re doing.”

Her stomach twisted. Phil Esposito was supposed to be invisible. Off the radar. How could this be happening?

“As of a few days ago,” the Administrator said smoothly, “there’s been chatter, searches, inquiries... into the Concilium Noctis.”

Holt exhaled sharply. “The Council of the Night.” A pause. “Your employer, perhaps?”

“This won’t end well, Secretary Holt.” A’s voice dropped to a whisper, almost regretful.

“Not for you. Not for me. Not for any of us.”

He raised his voice.

“Call this off, before the whole world goes up in flames, and you with it.

## Chapter Sixteen

Phil Esposito sat alone in his office, the low hum of fluorescent lighting barely audible beneath the weighted silence. The Treasury building was still quiet at this hour, too early for the usual shuffle of aides and staffers, too late for the janitors who came before dawn. The soft amber glow from his desk lamp cast long, warping shadows across the room, stretching past the polished walnut furniture and disappearing into the corners like secrets best left untouched.

The burner phone Monroe had given him, unregistered, preloaded with encrypted firmware, buzzed once. A short, sharp vibration. The sound snapped through the silence like a gunshot.

Phil picked it up without hesitation.

“Bridget here,” said a woman’s voice, low and surgical in its precision. “Georgetown. Shops at the Columbia. Jimmy’s Burger, 12:30. If you feel you’re not being shadowed, walk to the back of the restaurant. Pass the bathrooms. Next door marked Employees Only. Go through

it. Straight ahead, there's another door. Exit. Black van in the alley. Mr. Monroe. After 12:33, the van is gone.”

The call ended.

Phil glanced at his watch. 9:37 a.m. He exhaled slowly, eyes narrowing as he committed the instructions to memory, then placed the phone back on the desk beside an open dossier labeled only with a redacted code string.

He sat for a moment, the weight of the morning pressing in. He could feel the game shifting, lines of power moving beneath his feet like tectonic plates. When he finally stood, it was with purpose.

By 10:30, he was preparing to leave, but not before securing his space. Phil Esposito had spent too many years in hostile zones, Baghdad safehouses, Balkan wire rooms, jungle airfields outside Bogotá. He knew better than to assume his office in Washington was any safer.

Behind the desk, bolted into the concrete wall, was a Cold War-era government safe, with thick steel, redundant locking systems, and reinforced hinges. He spun the dial with practiced precision, the final click sounding like the turn of a key in a crypt.

Inside, amid layers of classified reports and optical drives bearing high-clearance seals, sat another burner phone. Smaller, older, and just as untraceable. He flipped it open and dialed.

Jane Holt answered on the first ring.

“This is a shit show, Phil. Give me some good news, please.”

“I'm on my way to check on the hackers' progress,” he said.

“Great. Call me later. Thanks. Phil, please be safe. They seem to be onto us.”

Phil grunted softly, then hung up, returned the phone to the safe, and began setting his



traps, the fail-safes only a man like Phil would think to use.

First, he unplugged the keyboard, mouse, and power cable from his desktop tower. The equipment was custom, air-gapped, no wireless capability, and wiped nightly. He locked the components inside the safe. No one breaching his office would think to bring replacements.

At the desk, he opened each drawer with care. Inside each lay a 9"x6" manila envelope, neatly sealed and filled with blank white paper. But these were not decoys in the usual sense. Each was glued with double-sided tape to the bottom of the drawer. A careless intruder would grab them, pocket them, never noticing that the true content, carbon-thin documents and memory cards, remained hidden beneath the adhesive layer.

Then he moved to the carpet. Phil knelt, steady on one knee, and peeled strips of transparent one-inch tape from a small roll. He pressed them carefully near the entrance, three lines in a staggered pattern just past the threshold. Any intruder would step on them. The tape would collect fibers, oil, traces of tread, or print. It was crude, yes, but it would work.

Finally, he turned to the door. He withdrew a coil of nylon thread from his coat pocket, measured the top corner of the frame with precise muscle memory, and secured the thread with a drop of fast-drying adhesive. The thread would snap at the slightest disturbance, leaving no doubt that someone had been inside.

Satisfied, he stepped back and surveyed the room one last time. The office felt sterile now, surgically sealed: an operating room for secrets. He armed the silent alarm, locked the door, and walked out without a sound.

For days now, Phil had been digging.

He'd been combing through intelligence databases, backdoor surveillance logs, metadata

captures, looking for any mention of The Council of the Night or its Latin shadow, Consilium Noctis. Every lead was faint, buried under layers of disinformation and foreign firewall jumps.

But what surfaced chilled him.

He had reached out quietly to the few remaining allies he trusted: field agents, retired directors, cybersecurity analysts now working in the private shadows of Langley and Luxembourg. And behind closed doors, in whispered exchanges, they confirmed the same thing.

The Council was real. It was a nefarious banking cartel made up of the cruelest, most dangerous actors.

They didn't leave trails. They didn't issue threats. They didn't need to. Their reach extended beyond governments into markets, currencies, private security firms, and entire elections. And when people got too close, they vanished.

One former intelligence attaché in Brussels simply said: "You don't want this, Phil. Don't pull that thread."

Another replied with a blank envelope and no return address, inside, a note: "Stay away."

But it was already too late.

Phil had spent a lifetime tracking men who killed with knives, bombs, and bullets. But these men were different. They were architects of collapse. The silent authors of global disruption. Anonymous, unaccountable, and impossible to trace.

And now, he felt them watching.

It wasn't paranoia, it was instinct, honed over decades of classified operations. Doors once open now shut. Sources who once volunteered information were suddenly growing cautious. Phone calls that dropped after a single ring. Old friends politely refusing to meet.

Phil knew the feeling well. He was being marked.

Even typing their name, The Council of the Night, was dangerous. Firewalls flagged it. Systems locked up. Warnings pinged from watchdog programs not even meant to run domestically.

Silence was its own kind of threat. And around him, the silence was deafening.

He stepped out of the Treasury building into the crisp morning air. The sky was low and gray. Across the street, a streetlight clicked off as if on cue.

Phil turned up his collar, mind racing.

He had survived insurgencies and back-channel coups. But this, this was something else.

This was a shadow war. And, to his regret, he was already in too deep.

## Chapter Seventeen

Their journey had taken them from Salzburg to Frankfurt, where they stayed the night in a modest hotel, careful not to attract attention. The next morning, Sloane took the wheel of a rental car and drove them toward Kiel, sixty miles north of Hamburg.

The city sat along one of the busiest waterways in Europe, a gateway between the North and Baltic Seas. But they weren't there for the sights.

A quiet bed-and-breakfast in the suburbs provided them with a much-needed reprieve. They spent the evening enjoying a warm meal and the temporary illusion of safety in this peaceful provincial town. But even amid the quiet, none of them truly let their guard down.

By dawn, they had switched rental cars, heading north toward Denmark.

As they approached Flensburg, the northernmost city in Germany nestled against the Danish border, they veered off the main highway, trading the smooth asphalt of the highway for narrower, winding roads that cut through dense stretches of forest and rolling fields. The ride

became slower, more deliberate, as if the landscape itself were urging caution.

Gone were the rush of passing cars and the sterile rhythm of the autobahn. Here, the trees grew closer to the road. Every so often, a red-brick farmhouse or the angled pitch of a thatched roof appeared between the trees; quiet reminders that they were nearing the old German-Danish frontier, where smuggling once thrived and tales of Cold War exchanges still lingered.

They stopped for coffee in Flensburg. The city had a quiet, brooding charm with deep harbors and centuries-old townhouses; it bore the layered weight of borderland history: naval trades, occupations, the final days of the Third Reich. Even the air felt different here, salt-touched and heavy with memory.

As the road narrowed further, the car's engine seemed louder than it should have, the gravel beneath the tires crunching like broken glass. They were far from the eyes of the state now. The winding route felt less like a detour and more like a descent into the unknown.

Victoria thought the scenery was breathtaking with rolling fields, dense forests, and the kind of rural beauty that felt untouched by the chaos of the world they had left behind. More importantly, they avoided major border crossings and the prying eyes of customs agents.

"How can a cartel of banks threaten the American government?" Victoria asked, turning to Whitney as she watched the landscape blur past.

"Power," Whitney replied without hesitation. "Immense power. Politically, it's the easiest; they bribe, blackmail, and lobby. And if that doesn't work, they threaten."

Victoria shook her head. "This is insane."

Whitney's expression remained impassive. "The cartel chasing us is the Council of the Night, or *Concilium Noctis*, which, I have to admit, sounds much better. What I just learned is

worrisome. They have chosen to sidestep the Administrator, their usual point of contact with the White House. The members of the Council are ghosts, far from the reach of the authorities. By stepping away from the Administrator, the government has to start its search from the beginning. Now, the situation is unpredictable.”

Victoria exhaled slowly. During their travels, they had little knowledge of what was happening back home: only whispers of the markets collapsing. But if Whitney was right, this was far worse than she had imagined.

They pulled over in Esbjerg, a bustling port city stretched along Denmark’s windswept western coast, where the North Sea met the land with steady force. The skyline was marked by cranes and cargo towers, silhouettes of steel and rust rising over container yards and fishing trawlers.

The city had the blunt efficiency of a working harbor, no frills, no polish, just the constant churn of ships arriving and departing, freight being loaded in silence, and longshoremen bundled against the coastal wind. Seagulls wheeled overhead in the gray sky, their cries drowned by the groan of metal and machinery.

To an outsider, Esbjerg seemed like a place of transit, a place people passed through. But for those who needed anonymity, it was perfect. The kind of city where questions weren’t asked, and where arrivals and departures blurred into the ordinary rhythm of port life.

They parked near the edge of the commercial dock. Somewhere nearby, a ship’s horn echoed, low, distant, and hollow.

Slipping into a nearby shop, Sloane re-emerged minutes later carrying a burner phone. His disguise was subtle. He wore a beanie masking his hair and glasses to soften the intensity of

his gaze.

Sloane spoke in perfect German to the shop clerk, but when the man responded in Danish, they awkwardly switched to broken English.

Whitney took the phone, dialed a number, and spoke briefly and in a low voice.

Then, without hesitation, Sloane took the burner phone and tossed the device into the back of a flatbed truck with German plates.

No digital footprints. No traceable calls.

As they stood by the curb, the sky darkened. Heavy clouds rolled in, thick with the promise of rain.

“We should eat before taking the road again,” Sloane said.

He ducked into a nearby bakery and emerged minutes later with a brown paper bag folded tightly at the top, grease spots already soaking through. The bag smelled of mustard, meat, and fresh bread. A fleeting touch of normalcy, comforting in its mundanity.

They drove in silence for ten minutes, cutting through a web of residential streets until they reached a small, nondescript park tucked between an old playground and a shuttered daycare. No signage. No cameras. Just a narrow strip of grass, a bench bolted to concrete, and a few skeletal trees swaying under the steel-gray sky.

“This’ll do,” Sloane muttered, parking the car behind the old daycare. The engine clicked softly as it cooled.

They ate quietly, tearing pieces from their sandwiches mechanically, eyes scanning the street for anything unusual: a parked car that hadn’t been there before, a pedestrian walking too slowly. They were ravenous.

The silence between them grew heavier with each passing minute. It wasn't just the food sitting badly; it was the knowing. The awareness that something irreversible was already in motion, that after this lunch break, the road ahead would be darker and perhaps, far less forgiving.

Sloane crumpled his wrapper and stared at the scene before him. Across the narrow patch of grass, the rundown daycare slouched under a sagging roof, its windows clouded with age. The playground beside it was a skeleton of happier days, one rusted swing hung motionless, the slide streaked with years of salt air and neglect.

He wondered how people lived here, in this part of the world. Not just survived, but lived, woke up each morning to these gray skies, the blunt winds off the North Sea, the slow grind of small routines and small towns. There was a weight to the monotony. An emptiness that seemed to echo off every concrete wall and quiet street.

And yet, the center of town had surprised him.

Esbjerg, for all its industrial grit, had a kind of quiet beauty, clean lines, modest storefronts, tidy cafes humming with quiet conversation.

What unsettled him more than the rust or the silence was the persistent cold, the remoteness, and the unyielding quiet. And yet, Esbjerg, he realized, was no different from any other place in the world. The people who stayed found their kind of beauty, hidden in the routine, the familiar streets, the steady rhythm of tides and seasons. They built lives from small rituals: morning coffees, nods between neighbors, laughter behind closed doors. What looked bleak to an outsider held meaning for those who called it home.

They set off on a short walk, stretching their legs as they waited for a message instructing



them of what would be the next part of the journey.

Victoria Porter considered writing a profile on Max Whitney, a reclusive financier whose fortune had long been the subject of rumor and speculation. Her first question was simple:

“Max, how did you make your money?”

Max smiled, as if amused by the directness. He turned toward Victoria and began to talk.

He traced his wealth back to the early 1980s, a time when computers were just beginning to disrupt the financial world. “It all started when speed became the edge,” he said. “Before that, it was just floor traders and phones.”

Max wasn’t on the trading floor. He was behind the screens that quickly multiplied within the many trading offices around Wall Street.

He had worked in the shadows of pioneers like Thomas Peterffy, the Hungarian-born programmer who built one of the first computerized trading platforms and helped lay the foundation for modern electronic trading. Others were building similar tools at NASDAQ, which had just launched its Small Order Execution System (SOES) in response to the 1987 crash. It was a set of systems that quietly changed everything.

“I wasn’t the visionary,” Max said. “I was the guy the visionaries came to when they wanted their ideas to work. Or when things became difficult.”

Max developed the core software architecture of what would soon become high-frequency trading systems. Execution engines. Order routing. Real-time risk analytics. The invisible plumbing of the financial system.

Sloane walked a few steps behind.

“Then came the twist,” Max said proudly. With a wry smile, he confessed he had

embedded something inside the early versions of his software: a few innocuous lines of code, deeply nested, easy to overlook. A backdoor.

“I knew most programmers wouldn’t bother rewriting it. They’d copy and paste, add a few lines for good measure, and charge their clients a fortune for the work. They always did.”

From one hedge fund to another, from proprietary trading desks to boutique quants, Max’s code spread like spores. Dozens of systems were built atop his foundation, carrying with them the same flaw, the same window left ajar.

Through that backdoor, Max retained quiet access. He could monitor, sometimes intervene, always stay one step ahead. He didn’t need to manipulate the markets directly; just knowing what others would do a fraction of a second before they did it was enough.

Victoria stared at him, unsure whether she had just uncovered a scoop, a crime, or a confession so old and obscure it would vanish on contact with the light.

Max only shrugged. “It’s not theft if they handed me the keys.”

“So that is how you made your money?” said Victoria.

“Well, not exactly all my money, but a significant portion of it,” Max said, his voice steady, measured. “I had the inside scoop on more than a dozen different trading platforms. Armed with the knowledge of their strengths, weaknesses, and vulnerabilities, I understood how, when, and what to trade. Remember, I had created the algorithms behind the scenes, the hidden mechanics most people never saw. Using this knowledge, I developed a high-speed trading application, engineered to keep me just a fraction of a second ahead of everyone else. It was like racing before the race even started.”

He paused, a slight smile. “That edge, that timing, it wasn’t just luck. It was engineered.

As I built on it, I branched out. I did consulting, worked closely with the Treasury, and, more importantly, I forged relationships with people who held real power, people who shaped policy and controlled the levers of the financial world.”

Max’s gaze darkened slightly. “By the time the 90s rolled in, followed by the new millennium, I could see the cracks forming beneath the surface; the systemic risks nobody else wanted to acknowledge. I knew where the market would break, when bubbles would burst. So I positioned myself accordingly, shorting markets and betting against the inevitable collapse.”

His tone grew almost conspiratorial. “It was never just about making money. It was about survival, control, and knowing the game better than anyone else.”

“You never married? No children?” Victoria asked softly, curiosity laced with something gentler.

Max slowed his pace and came to a halt. He turned to her, eyes steady, and gently took her hand, slipping it around his arm before they resumed walking together.

“I was married,” he said quietly, “married to my work.” He let out a faint, rueful smile. “Twelve, fourteen, sixteen hours a day glued to a screen doesn’t leave much room for flirting, or for real relationships.” He paused, searching her face. “I had girlfriends, plenty of them. But they left. I was always worried they’d marry me for my money. I never trusted easily. More than once, I hired private security to trail the serious contenders, the women I saw myself close to, testing if their interest was in me or just the fortune I carried.” His voice tightened, edged with bitterness. “And every time, the truth hit hard: it was always about the money.”

“So, yes and no,” Max said, almost to himself. “No family, no children, just me. My parents... they disappeared. Or, more accurately, I helped them disappear. Gave them a quiet life

far away from any retribution that might come my way. Because, believe me, I made enemies. Dangerous enemies.”

He glanced down, the weight of the confession hanging between them. “Once people found out I had built a backdoor into the very code they’d stolen from me, they were furious. And as the new millennium arrived, I realized I needed to step back.”

Victoria looked at him with new understanding. Holding his arm felt grounding somehow. Here was a man solid and calm, controlled but not cold. He didn’t seem interested in taking from others, just someone who had fought tooth and nail to survive in a ruthless world.

“So, you do have girlfriends?” she asked gently.

“Yes,” he replied, a trace of warmth in his voice. “I like them. But friendship... friendship is better than love. Friendship is unbreakable.”

Victoria hesitated before asking, “Why did you disappear?”

Max’s gaze darkened once again. “I disappeared for the same reason you are disappearing now. Because the game I’m playing, the chessboard I’m on, is dangerous. Very dangerous. And the Consilium Noctis? They will never stop until they get us.”

## Chapter Eighteen

A few miles away, a slick Learjet 70 descended towards Esbjerg Airport runway. It was unmarked and officially logged as stopping to refuel on its way to London.

Whitney and Porter followed Sloane at a distance as they slipped into the main airport. Their destination, the airport's commercial area. Moving like shadows through the crowd, they passed through restricted doors no one cared to watch, and within minutes, they were on board the Learjet.

Inside, the cabin was cold and quiet.

Whitney tapped at a laptop that he placed before Victoria.

“Use the VPN when signing in,” he instructed her. “Wait until we land in Albany to check personal emails. It's safer that way.”

The flight was uneventful.

Sloane sat in the back of the plane, resting. Since Salzburg, since that kiss, they had

danced around the line between camaraderie and something more. There had been subtle moments: the way her fingers found his in silence, the way they leaned into each other during lulls in conversation. A quiet gravity pulled them closer. But with Max Whitney constantly nearby, there was no room for intimacy. Whatever was growing between them would have to wait.

The tension in her shoulders eased slightly as her thoughts drifted to Max's story, how he'd built his fortune from obscure lines of code buried in high-speed trading software, and the storm now barreling toward them. The danger felt abstract at times, like a concept still taking shape, but when Max spoke of the Consilium Noctis, it was a stark reminder of the danger that lay ahead.

As if on cue, Max opened his sleek, military-grade briefcase with a practiced flick. Inside, screens lit up with encrypted feeds, graphs, and code. He slid on a pair of noise-canceling headphones and tapped a command into the console. His face, always composed, took on that familiar look of hyper-focus, the kind of expression that didn't invite questions.

Sloane glanced at him, then at her. Whatever came next, whatever threat lay ahead, was already in motion. And for now, there was nothing to do but enjoy this fragile and temporary peace.

#

Hours later, as the wheels of the plane touched down on American soil, they knew there was still no relief, only an unshakable sense of uncertainty.

They were home. But for how long?

A black van waited for them at the Albany airport. A quiet, discreet re-entry point into

America, where no questions would be asked. The plane pulled into a hangar, where the van waited.

They were now speeding down Route 87 South, heading towards Manhattan.

After a relentless week of non-stop travel, they had finally returned to U.S. soil. Up until now, they had remained completely off the grid: no phones, no internet, and no social media. Ghosts in a digital world.

Whitney owned a safe house in Harlem, a beautiful three-story brownstone he had purchased in cash years ago. He had poured a vast amount of money into transforming it into a secure, hidden refuge that no one knew existed. The fortified basement served as a high-tech security hub, buzzing with the hum of computers and servers, its walls covered in screens displaying live feeds from across the city.

“We’re one step closer to getting our lives back to normal,” Whitney added.

But neither Victoria nor Sloane believed it.

The tinted-window van maneuvered through the snarled arteries of New York City, weaving through traffic with precision.

“We’re going to stay in Harlem,” Whitney announced as the driver of the black van turned onto 128th Street, then left on 5th Avenue, before pulling into a wide alley on 129th Street.

“This is called Astor Row,” Sloane murmured, breaking his silence for the first time since they’d landed at the airstrip near Albany.

The three stepped out, pulling baseball caps low over their faces. The towering trees lining the street shielded them from satellite surveillance.

Whitney approached the door, swiftly punching a sequence into the keypad. A quiet beep, a mechanical click, and they were inside.

They had traveled light, no luggage, just a single backpack each.

The townhouse was massive. It was a three-story structure with a full basement that hosted Max's high-tech command center, a space that pulsed with raw energy. Banks of computers hummed, servers stacked like steel monoliths, and an entire wall was covered by monitors, each one feeding live data.

Sloane moved to the leftmost row of monitors. "Victoria," he said, motioning her over. "These three monitors are dedicated to security."

He gestured to a line of screens on the left.

"The top and bottom screens show camera feeds around the house. The center one monitors an unassuming building that looks like a charging station."

Victoria frowned. "And if someone finds us?"

Sloane's expression darkened. "If they track unusual power consumption, they'll check that building first. It'll raise alarms. The moment they investigate, every system will trip. We'll have a few hours to disappear."

"Why?"

Sloane exhaled. "Because this townhouse is directly connected to that power station. We're running our entire operation through it."

Clever, she thought. Very clever.

#

Victoria sat at the dining table, a large, modern wooden piece that could easily seat twenty. Each



cradling a steaming cup of coffee, Sloane and Whitney sat across from her.

Whitney stood, opened the fridge, and pulled out a few pastries, placing them in the center of the table. “Have you read the news?” he asked, breaking the silence.

Victoria nodded. “It’s terrifying.”

Whitney exhaled. “I need a day, maybe less, to get everything set up. Once I do, we should be able to communicate freely.”

Victoria drummed her fingers against the cup. “I’m more concerned with the violence. It’s getting closer and closer. How safe are we here, Whitney?”

Whitney leaned back in his chair. “We should be fine. There’s no way they can track us, except through city surveillance. That means cameras. But if we disguise ourselves, change up our appearances, and keep a low profile, we’ll be okay.”

“You may need to change your hair color or cover your hair,” Sloane added. “Wear bulkier clothes to alter your silhouette. Subtle adjustments, but they help.”

Victoria wasn’t convinced.

Whitney checked his watch. “As soon as I complete my safety protocol, I’m contacting Secretary Holt. Give me a few hours, and we’ll have access to secured communication channels.”

Victoria nodded, but her mind was elsewhere.

So that was the mysterious person Whitney had been conversing with all along during their trip: Secretary of the Treasury Jane Holt.

Whitney never ceased to amaze her.

Even in the quiet of the safe house, her thoughts refused to settle.

The Council of the Night was at war. An all-out, relentless war.

Day after day, the markets hemorrhaged value, plunging the World economy deeper into chaos. With no end in sight, America teetered on the edge of complete turmoil. The government appeared weak and paralyzed in the face of this global catastrophe.

But, behind the scenes, Whitney knew that President Lang was fighting a war of his own, hunting the criminals who orchestrated the collapse of the markets.

“Dangerous entities have been released,” Whitney said grimly.

Victoria absorbed the words, her pulse quickening. How much longer could they survive this madness?

The Council of the Night was beyond powerful. Even if she exposed them, what then? Would the public even believe it? Would the government act, or was it already too late?

She doubted Whitney’s schemes alone could bring them down. Not him. Not Sloane. Not even the government.

For the first time since this all began, she felt truly afraid.

Her only comfort was Sloane, for whom she had developed strong feelings. There was a closeness between them, a connection forged in secrecy, in danger.

But what would become of it?

She glanced across the table at Sloane. His face was unreadable, focused, prepared for whatever came next.

Her future was uncertain. But one thing was clear: there was no turning back.

## Chapter Nineteen

Phil Esposito left the Treasury two hours early. More than enough time to shake a tail, or confirm one. These days, assuming he wasn't being watched was the fastest way to get burned.

Stepping out of the Treasury, he boarded a bus, keeping his pace unhurried, natural. An older woman was the only other passenger getting on when he did; no tail yet. But cameras were everywhere, silent observers that could track his every move if someone knew where to look.

A few stops later, he got off, walked down a set of stairs into the subway, and caught a train, doubling back toward the Treasury as if he had forgotten something. The maneuver was a classic counter-surveillance trick, designed to frustrate anyone trying to follow him.

So far, nothing. No one was lingering too long. No unnecessary glances. No one was moving when he did.

Still, he wasn't satisfied.

On the train, he unzipped his backpack and swapped his black cap for a red one. The tan

sports coat vanished into the bag; a blue windbreaker took its place. Anyone tracking him by surveillance would now be looking for the wrong man.

By 11:15, he arrived in Georgetown. He walked in a zigzag pattern, ducking into various shops, occasionally glancing at reflections in the glass storefronts. He wasn't being paranoid. He was being careful.

The shops at the Columbia, a busy mall in Washington's West End, were bustling with the lunchtime crowd. Suits, students, tourists: anonymity at its best. The scent of grilled food and fresh bread wafted from nearby restaurants, but Phil ignored his hunger. He wasn't here to eat.

At exactly 12:30 p.m., he entered Jimmy's Burger, pushing through the crowded space. He walked straight past the tables, through the swinging employee door, and out the back exit into the alley.

No van.

Phil exhaled sharply. No contingency for this.

He waited, hands in his pockets, scanning the alley for anything unusual. As he decided to leave, someone brushed past him.

A firm nudge.

Monroe.

Phil didn't react, just turned and followed. They walked a short distance, their pace unhurried, casual: two strangers who enjoyed their lunch break walking in the same direction.

A black van was parked under a group of trees, protecting it from satellite view.

They got in.

Monroe drove in silence, his focus on the road.

“Good to see you, Monroe,” Phil said, watching him closely.

Monroe gave a curt nod, his expression unreadable.

A few miles later, they pulled off the road into a wooded area. The van slowed to a stop near another parked vehicle: a gray hearse with heavily tinted windows.

The driver of the hearse got into the van and drove away.

Phil smirked. “Plenty of room in the back.”

Monroe didn’t laugh. Instead, he reached into the glove compartment and handed him a black fabric mask.

“Sorry, Phil, but you have to put this on.”

Phil turned it over in his hands, feeling the smooth material. He exhaled, then nodded.

“Fine. I don’t think you’re going to kill me.”

Monroe didn’t answer, but Phil caught the brief twitch of a smirk. They both knew there was nothing funny about this. Every precaution mattered.

The car ride lasted about ten minutes, the smooth road eventually giving way to the crunch of pebbles under the tires. A garage door rumbled open, and the vehicle rolled inside.

“You can take the mask off now,” Monroe said.

Phil pulled it off and blinked, adjusting to the light. He stepped out of the car, taking in his surroundings.

Monroe gestured toward a door in the corner, pushed it open, and stepped aside. His face remained unreadable.

“After you.”

They entered through the kitchen. Despite the heavy curtains drawn over the windows,

the space was warm and inviting. A marble counter stretched across the room, covered in an array of food: Freshly baked muffins, a plate of chocolate chip cookies, a basket of bagels with a small dish of cream cheese. There was a crisp salad with bright greens and cherry tomatoes glistening under the overhead light, but it seemed to have been ignored. The rich aroma of a freshly brewed pot of coffee filled the room.

It was the kind of spread meant to make a person feel at ease.

The house was large, modern, and luxurious. The kind of place designed for comfort but fortified for secrecy.

“Let’s get on with this,” Phil said, his voice even.

Rahul entered the kitchen just as Monroe slipped away, disappearing into the shadows as effortlessly as he had appeared.

“Mr. Esposito, how are you?” Rahul said, his tone polite but measured.

Phil nodded. “Good, good. Thanks. Tell me about your progress tracking the Administrator.”

Rahul smiled but said nothing at first. Instead, he grabbed a muffin, pulled a chair, and sat down. He gestured toward the coffee machine. “Coffee?”

“Sure.”

Rahul walked over to the sleek, stainless-steel machine, pouring a cup as he finally spoke. “We’ve hit a wall.” His voice was calm, but Phil caught the undercurrent of frustration.

Phil’s grip tightened. That was the last thing he wanted to hear.

“When the Administrator noticed our intrusion, he lost his mind,” Rahul continued, handing Phil his coffee before taking a bite of his muffin. “His response was immediate; he

brought in the best hackers available on the dark web: Sparrow.”

Phil took a slow sip of his coffee, digesting the information.

Rahul leaned back. “Sparrow is a ghost, nearly untraceable.”

Phil’s eyes sharpened. “And?”

“Give me a moment to secure the room.” He pulled out his phone, dialed a number, and spoke. “We’re coming in.”

As soon as he hung up, Monroe reappeared, silent as ever. The three of them moved down a narrow corridor and into a high-tech command center.

The moment he stepped in, Phil felt it, an electronic pulse in the air, like stepping into the chest cavity of a living machine. Servers blinked like clustered stars, walls vibrated with processing power, and the temperature ran cool.

Three workstations dominated the space, cluttered with custom-built desktops, high-performance laptops, and cutting-edge technology Phil couldn’t even begin to identify.

On either side of the room, two figures stood behind their stations. They were clad in full-body jumpsuits, gloves, dark masks, and reflective sunglasses, completely unidentifiable.

Rahul gestured to the workstation in the center. “This is where I operate.” He moved the mouse, and one of the massive monitors zoomed in on a satellite map. “We believe the Administrator’s last communication took place here,” he said, pointing to a location marked in red. “The official building plans don’t show any room below ground, just parking, but based on our findings, we believe there is one, and that’s where the transmission originated.”

Phil listened carefully, already compiling his report for Jane Holt and the President.

“But we did find something else: an anomaly.”

Phil leaned in. “Go on.”

Rahul clicked a few keys, and another set of data appeared on the screen. “The electrical power consumption in this building doesn’t match what’s on record. The energy usage suggests a hidden facility that the bills don’t reflect.”

Phil’s mind worked fast. “So someone is running a massive operation off the books.”

“Exactly,” Rahul confirmed.

Monroe crossed his arms. His tone was low and measured when he spoke. “Phil, don’t get too excited. We are dealing with the Council of the Night: a banking cartel with reach beyond anything you can imagine. These men don’t just protect their secrets. They eliminate anyone who gets too close.”

Phil nodded, quietly acknowledging to himself that he knew the council was after him. “I understand. I’ve already started hearing whispers about them.” He kept his fear of being tracked and the unsettling sensation it brought to himself, unwilling to share it.

Rahul exhaled. “Then you should know, the Administrator, or whoever he is, has power beyond belief. That’s why we’re moving carefully. Slow, but steady.”

Phil pulled out a chair. “Mind if I sit?”

Rahul gave a small nod. “Go ahead. Just don’t touch anything.”

Phil smirked as he sat, scanning the dual monitors. “Besides the possible location, what else do you have?”

Rahul slid another chair closer, sitting across from Phil. “Your contract with us was to uncover the Administrator’s real identity. I believe we’ll have that for you within a few days.”

Phil frowned. “We don’t have that long, Rahul.”



Rahul simply smiled. “What’s a few days if it means your life or mine?”

“Phil,” Monroe said, his voice low and final, “we’re not trading lives for speed. You had full clearance and months of access. We have one shot, let us take it the right way.” Monroe’s voice was sharp, his authority unquestionable.

Phil turned to glance at the masked hackers on either side of the room. Both had crossed their arms over their chests, standing firmly as if to say: “We’ll find your man, but not at the cost of our lives.”

Rahul, sensing the tension, tried to ease it with another smile. “Phil, trust us. When we find him, we’ll know everything: his real name, his financials, his connections. Just be patient.”

In reality, Rahul knew they would likely uncover the truth in no time. But experience had taught him that under-promising and over-delivering was always the safest play. If he said three days and took a week, he was a failure. If he said a week and delivered in three days, he was a hero.

What neither Monroe nor Rahul told Phil was the truth; they had a secret. Acting on instinct, Rahul had gone dark, hiring two of the most elusive hackers the dark web had to offer. Their reputations were whispered about in encrypted forums, ghosts in the system.

After that first meeting with Phil, Monroe had turned to Rahul in private. His question was blunt.

“What do you think the Administrator’s next move is?”

Rahul didn’t hesitate. “He hires the best hacker money can buy, traces the breach, and hits back hard.”

Monroe nodded, his eyes narrowing. “Then why don’t we beat him to it? Hire the best

first. Put them on our side.”

Rahul blinked once. Then he smiled.

“Genius, Monroe.”

Monroe gave a quiet, knowing grin.

“It’ll be expensive,” Rahul added, “but it’s our best shot at staying ahead.”

Phil did not know any of this yet. Realizing they would not risk their lives for this project. Finally, he exhaled. “Fine. Safety first. Take the time you need.”

Rahul nodded, but his mind was already elsewhere. Once they identified the Administrator, everything would change.

The two hackers, BlackEcho21 and Sparrow, would vanish, boarding separate flights to remote corners of the world.

As for Rahul, he would remain here, at Nova. But he knew one thing for certain.

The Council of the Night was no longer in the shadows. They were circling closer than ever. And they wouldn’t wait politely at the door.

## Chapter Twenty

Secretary Jane Holt sat across from Max. Between them, President Walter Lang paced like a caged animal, his fury barely restrained.

“Greed, greed, and more greed!” Lang roared, slamming his fist onto the oak desk. The surface trembled beneath the force. “How is it possible that I, the President of the United States, am reduced to a powerless spectator in the face of such an affront?”

“You are not powerless, sir,” Whitney said evenly.

Max looked razor-sharp in a black suit and matching shirt, the monochrome palette giving him an appearance of authority. His beard was neatly trimmed, the angles of his face now precise, no trace of the exhaustion Holt had seen before he escaped to Europe. He was composed, alert, and in control. But beneath the crisp tailoring, Holt sensed something taut. His tension hadn’t vanished; it had hardened. Europe had changed him. That narrow escape, the one he once called *the cost of knowing too much*, lingered now like an invisible scar across his

posture.

Lang turned on him. “And what exactly are you suggesting? None of America’s intelligence agencies can identify this ‘Administrator.’” His voice broke, then steadied. “We don’t know who he represents or where he operates. We are fumbling in the dark.”

The president resumed pacing, his voice echoing off the high ceiling of the Oval Office. Light filtered in through the tall windows, casting sharp bars across the rug. Outside, Washington roiled in chaos. Inside, the President’s fury eclipsed even that.

The financial markets had been in freefall for days. Oil prices had spiked. Gas lines were forming in some states. Americans were angry and afraid. And the media, blood-scented and ravenous, had turned on Lang with glee. Headlines accused him of paralysis, weakness, and incompetence. A leader at the mercy of shadows.

Jane Holt leaned forward, her voice calm but edged with steel. “Then what if we strike back?”

Lang froze mid-stride. He turned to her slowly, eyes narrowed. “Strike back?”

He exhaled, running a hand down his face. “God. I’m so damn tired of this Administrator and his council of ghosts. I’d blow their damned Dark Pools to the wind if I had the chance.”

Max spoke then, his tone low and deliberate. “Then why don’t we?”

A beat of silence followed. Thick, loaded.

Lang’s expression shifted, fury giving way to something colder. Strategic. He straightened.

“As for the Administrator,” Max added, “don’t concern yourself. You’ll know who he is soon enough.”

Lang lowered himself into the leather chair behind the Resolute Desk. The weight of the crisis pressed visibly into his shoulders. He stared across the room, seeing things far beyond it.

“I believe Max has a solid plan,” Holt said. Her voice was measured, though a flicker of doubt passed behind her eyes. “At the end of the day, we’re dealing with criminals. A mafia.”

A mafia.

That was one way to put it. But these weren’t petty street thugs or smugglers. These men didn’t deal in guns and blood; they controlled indexes and capital flows. Their reach spanned continents. Their weapons were market crashes, their safehouses skyscrapers, and shell companies.

Max reached into his briefcase and removed nine crisp sheets of white paper, laying them one by one onto the polished mahogany coffee table. Each page aligned perfectly.

The center sheet bore a single word, in bold, thick black:

**ADMINISTRATOR**

Beneath it, in a smaller serif font: *Concilium Noctis*.

The room went still.

The name hung between them like smoke.

“We need to get to him first,” Holt said, her voice flat. She tapped the word *Administrator* with her index finger. Her nail made a sharp click against the paper.

Max’s arms folded across his chest, unreadable. “But if we act too overtly,” he said, “we risk collapse. We’re standing on the edge of a panic. What we need is precision.”

He took a pen from his inner pocket and turned to the top-left page. At the top, in clean, economical strokes, he wrote:

## STOCK MARKET

Under it, Max sketched out three branching options. He moved with assurance, a man who had rehearsed this in his mind a dozen times already. He paused, then circled the first option. Slowly. Deliberately.

Lang leaned forward, narrowing his eyes. The option was bold. Risky. But effective. Lang nodded. “This is doable.”

Max spoke again, outlining the operation in sparse, cool language. The conversation stretched on for thirty minutes, short bursts of dialogue, long silences, the quiet weight of calculation.

At last, Lang turned to Holt. His face betrayed nothing. “Can we do this?”

Holt didn’t blink. “You’re the President of the United States,” she said. “You can do whatever you want.”

Max said nothing. He watched them, two political creatures measuring risk against necessity.

“We’ll have to move fast,” Holt said, leaning in. “Very fast.”

Lang nodded. “We start by securing our allies. Quietly. Then we act.”

Another silence. The kind that settles before history bends.

No one moved. No one breathed.

They understood the line before them. And that crossing it meant no retreat.

Lang rose from his chair. The leather creaked. He adjusted the buttons on his jacket with a practiced hand, a small, ceremonious act.

He looked from Max to Holt. His voice, when it came, was low. Resolved.

“We could give up,” he said.

The words hung, sharp and absolute.

He met their eyes. His jaw clenched.

“Or we could fight.”

A single beat passed.

Lang nodded once.

“Let’s fight.”

## Chapter Twenty-One

Gabriel Alden was a numbers man; steady, disciplined, methodical. There was little excitement in his life, and he preferred it that way. He wasn't a great dancer, nor an artist, nor the kind of man who lit up a room with his presence. But he was content. He liked things simple.

He dressed the way he lived, precisely, without excess. A navy-blue blazer, pressed slacks, a plain white shirt, and a red tie completed his outfit. His hair was neatly parted, the dark strands beginning to silver at the temples. Aging early ran in the family. He was lean, average height, with a quiet, bookish posture that made him seem shorter than he was. Nothing about him drew attention, but that, in itself, was deliberate.

Lately, however, simplicity had eluded him. His request to implement regulations over the many Dark Pools had changed that.

As Director of the Securities and Exchange Commission, Gabriel had spent months pushing for these regulations, fair, reasonable measures designed to ensure transparency, protect



the average investor, and provide the government with a safeguard should these unregulated markets collapse. He had warned of the dangers, how dark pools operated like underground casinos for the richest and most powerful, shielded from oversight while manipulating the financial system at will. The common investor played by the rules, but those in the shadows? They played a different game entirely.

A week ago, he had sat across from the President and Secretary Jane Holt, laying out the risks. He had explained how, if left unchecked, the enormous influence these dark pools wielded over the economy could one day bring America to its knees. The President had listened intently, his expression unreadable. Secretary Holt, on the other hand, had been more cautious. She agreed with him, mostly. But she hesitated, going back and forth, seemingly torn between supporting his efforts and slowing them down.

And now, on this bright, crisp morning, he was on his way to another meeting at the Treasury. Holt had called him in at the last minute. She wanted to delay implementation again.

Gabriel exhaled. The traffic was lighter than usual, probably due to school vacation week. No school buses clogged the roads, a rare moment in Washington's usual chaos.

His life, in many ways, had entered a good season. Just a few weeks ago, he and his wife had driven their daughter to Georgetown University to begin her freshman year. She had been all excitement and nerves, and they had been so proud. Their youngest was still in high school but would be leaving for college soon as well. Perhaps that was why he and his wife had recently reconnected. They had started traveling more, stealing weekends away in places they had always meant to visit.

Despite the stress of his position, somehow, he had found a way to manage it. He left

work at the office, most days, at least. He had reconnected with old friends, gone out to dinners, and rediscovered a part of himself that had once been buried under too many work obligations.

He was content.

This morning, as he merged onto Constitution Avenue, he reached for the radio, intending to listen to a political podcast he enjoyed. Something light, something unrelated to markets and regulations.

Then, without warning, the car in front of him came to an abrupt stop.

Gabriel cursed, slamming on his brakes. His tires screeched, jolting him forward against the seatbelt. His heart pounded from the near collision, and frustration took over.

He rolled down his window.

“Hey, what the hell are you doing?” he yelled.

The driver’s door of the car ahead swung open.

A man stepped out, tall, broad-shouldered, menacing. He wore a baseball cap pulled low, sunglasses, and a light blue medical mask, the kind people still occasionally wore, remnants of old habits.

Gabriel barely had time to register the details before the man reached into his jacket.

A gun.

It happened too fast.

Gabriel’s mind struggled to process, to react. He wasn’t a man who lived taking chances. He wasn’t a soldier or a spy. He was a regulator, a bureaucrat. A man of numbers.

The gunman raised the weapon.

A single shot.

The bullet tore through Gabriel Alden's skull, and in an instant, his life, the plans, the worries, the regulations he fought for, the family he loved, ended.

Just like that.

Boom. That was it.

The man slipped back into his car and drove off, vanishing into traffic before anyone could react.

Gabriel Alden slumped forward against the steering wheel, blood pooling beneath him, his last thoughts lost in the silence of a world that no longer cared.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

The Washington suburb was just beginning to stir as the first light of dawn crept across the horizon. But inside the safe house, the air crackled with urgency. It was 5:00 AM, and Rahul and his two hackers hadn't slept in over 24 hours.

Earlier in the evening, they had managed to pinpoint the Administrator's location: Manhattan, 5th Avenue. The breakthrough had come from Phil Esposito's vague description of the man, but there was a problem: it was likely a mask, a disguise. They needed a real face.

Sparrow was a spectral presence in the digital world, a genius with a keyboard and a myth in most intelligence circles. Long before the Administrator reached out, Sparrow had already been on the job, contracted by Nova Security on behalf of the US government.

#

*When the Administrator enlisted Sparrow, he granted him full access to the Council's server architecture, a decision that would become his fatal mistake.*

#

In the process of navigating New York's surveillance grid, Sparrow had stumbled upon a hidden data stream: encrypted, armored, and humming with Council-level energy signatures. Intrigued, he followed the trail, tracing it back to the Administrator's remote backup server.

He had slipped in, quietly, catalogued what he saw, and just as quietly copied the backup server's data.

By the time the Administrator sent the encrypted message, Sparrow already knew more than he should.

He'd seen the server architecture, parsed the Administrator's habits, and recognized the pattern of paranoia. But he said nothing. Not yet.

Blinded by urgency and by anger, the Administrator walked straight into the trap Rahul and Monroe had set for him.

Days earlier, they had hired Sparrow, not just to monitor traffic and surveillance feeds, but to be their inside man.

A ghost in the Council of the Night's system. Watching, waiting, and reporting back.

Sparrow decided to track the Administrator using high-resolution satellite imagery.

With the right tools, the earth itself could be turned into a map of footprints; its ghosts etched in sharp, color, and detailed photographs. Using a network of commercial and covert satellite feeds, Sparrow layered imagery with Geographic Information System data, narrowing the grid with forensic precision.

GIS wasn't just for cartographers anymore. It was the backbone of modern crime mapping, capable of reconstructing events down to the second. Law enforcement agencies used

it to retrace escape routes.

Sparrow used it to hunt the most elusive man of all. The man that no government intelligence had been able to track.

Sparrow already knew the approximate location of the Administrator's primary command center; somewhere above the financial district, camouflaged by decades of misfiled permits and shell-company front addresses. More importantly, he had the server's death timestamp: the exact moment the Administrator's mainframe had self-immolated.

That timestamp was the key.

By aligning the satellite feeds with GIS overlays, Sparrow could scan for irregular vehicle movements, heat blooms from emergency power sources, or encrypted satellite pings; anything that might betray an escape route in the moments following the digital purge.

He went to work.

The screen before him pulsed with incoming data. Satellite grids. Time-stamped layers. Urban topography.

And somewhere in that stream of light and numbers, the Administrator.

If the Administrator had stepped onto the street even once, they would have him. But this wasn't enough. They needed more than an image; they needed a name.

The second hacker, codenamed BlackEcho21, had spent the night buried in city records. Ownership filings, tax documents, and shell companies. He had gone through every entity that held property in the Administrator's suspected building.

Nothing.

No single individual owned a unit.

Instead, its owners had built a fortress of financial secrecy. A cocktail of Russian oligarchs with shell companies worldwide was the owner of records for almost fifty thousand square feet of commercial space. A multinational bank with corporate headquarters scattered across Europe and South America owned various floors.

Every unit accounted for except one.

The penthouse at 40<sup>th</sup> and Park Avenue.

Listed as vacant.

Officially, it was owned by CN Incorporated, a shadowy firm registered in Cyprus. But Monroe, the team's strategist, recognized the initials immediately.

"Concilium Noctis," he muttered.

Rahul shot him a look. "You sure?"

Monroe nodded. "It's Latin. Council of the Night. It's come up before in financial crime circles, but no one's ever proven a connection." He turned to Sparrow. "Keep digging."

And then the news broke.

Gabriel Alden, Director of the SEC, had been assassinated on his way to work, in broad daylight, a clean kill. A single gunshot to the head, no witnesses, no suspect. The timing was no coincidence. Someone was sending a message.

Rahul exhaled sharply. "They're escalating."

The room fell into silence. The hunt for the Administrator had just turned into something much bigger.

By early afternoon, Monroe had reached out to an old contact, Detective Manuel Dos Santos, a seasoned Long Island cop who knew how to work the shadows. Manuel had discreetly

been dispatched to survey the penthouse at 40<sup>th</sup> and Park Avenue and soon confirmed activity in the penthouse. It wasn't abandoned at all. The place was furnished, and more importantly, a maid had been spotted entering and leaving. Someone was living there.

Monroe's instructions were clear: be extremely cautious, get proof.

At 3:00 PM, Manuel left his perch and hailed a cab straight to B&H Photo, New York's legendary camera store. Inside, he made a beeline for Kenny, the rental manager and a long-time contact.

"I need something powerful. Long-range, no distortions, and the camera needs a super high ISO capability."

Kenny knew the drill. A Sony A9, paired with a 600mm lens, and mounted on a heavy-duty tripod to minimize movement.

"Hope you're watching birds," Kenny muttered, not expecting an answer.

By 4:30 PM, Manuel was on the rooftop of an adjacent building, camera set up. For a few hundred dollars in cash, he could get access to any location. Access to the rooftop across the street from the penthouse cost him \$400; no questions asked.

The penthouse was still dark. He unwrapped a sandwich and settled in.

It could be a long night.

At 7:00 PM, as the last amber streaks of the sun bled into the city skyline, the penthouse came alive.

The lights flicked on.

Manuel tensed, his hands steady on the camera. He locked in, adjusting the focus. Then, movement.



Through the massive floor-to-ceiling windows, a man appeared.

Pale. Dark hair. Lanky. Dark Circles under his eyes.

Manuel's heart pounded as he squeezed the shutter, unleashing a rapid burst of photos.

Click-click-click-click. The buffer needed to catch up, he paused, took a breath, and fired again.

The man was on the phone, pacing back and forth. There was an intensity in his expression, one of calculation, control. This was a man used to giving orders.

Then, suddenly, the conversation stopped.

The man turned.

Straight toward the window.

Manuel froze. Don't react. Don't move. Just keep shooting.

The Administrator's face was clear now, illuminated by the warm glow of the penthouse lights. It wasn't a mask. This was the man he had been hired to photograph.

The noise of the traffic below faded into the background. Manuel kept his finger on the shutter as the target lifted his gaze westward, watching as the last remnants of daylight grew dim.

The Administrator reached for a remote on the coffee table.

The curtains moved and slowly sealed him off from the outside world.

Manuel exhaled. He knew when the show was over. But he had what he needed. "Got you," he muttered under his breath. He didn't waste a second. He walked to the WeWork location at 450 Park Avenue and rented a private office for two hours. He knew WeWork's network would be more secure. After grabbing a coffee, he sat at the desk of his little office and began to load the photos onto his hard drive. After a quick edit, he began to forward images to Monroe and Rahul.

Rahul stared at the photos on his laptop, adrenaline kicking in. “That’s him.”

Monroe didn’t hesitate. He picked up his phone.

“Phil. Same location. One hour.”

Phil didn’t ask questions.

They knew where the Administrator resided.

They knew where he worked.

They had a photo, a real face.

And most importantly, they knew someone was getting in and out of the penthouse.

This was the break they had been waiting for. And now, the hunt was officially over.

The Administrator was no longer a phantom lurking in the shadows, no longer a whispered threat operating with impunity. His time was up.

Rahul clenched his fists, his pulse hammering. No more chasing ghosts. No more unanswered threats.

Now, they were coming for him. And the Administrator was going to pay.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Bridget stood six feet tall, a formidable presence of strength and grace. A former soldier with a background in intelligence, she had retired from the army only to find herself drawn back into the world of covert operations. She was strong but poised, feminine but unshakable. At fifteen, she had already earned her third-degree black belt in karate. Fearless, brilliant, and beautiful, she walked the streets of Manhattan with quiet confidence, undaunted by the madness of the city that never slept and the dangers lurking within it.

After years of traveling the world, she had settled on the Upper West Side and joined Nova Security, a private firm operating in the shadows. She had met James D. Monroe through a mutual acquaintance. He had been searching for someone with a clear understanding of Nova's operations, someone who could handle more than just clerical duties. The two had hit it off instantly, and she was hired on the spot.

Bridget rarely paid much attention to her surroundings, but Nova's recent contract with

Phil Esposito, brokered on behalf of the government, had put her on edge. Something about it felt wrong, and for the first time in a long while, she had started watching her own back.

In the heart of Chinatown, tucked inside a nondescript three-story building, Nova Security operated quietly beneath the surface.

The company occupied the basement, which was officially listed as a storage room, but was actually Nova's server facility for cybersecurity and IT operations. Half of the second floor served as Nova's office space: glass-walled, sparsely furnished, and intentionally forgettable.

From the street, the building looked like nothing. Just another dull address in a neighborhood full of ghosts.

But inside, Nova Security was very much alive, monitoring signals, shielding data, and serving corporations large and small.

The tenants above Nova, Bridget believed, were all part of the Chinese mafia; money laundering, parallel accounting, and a variety of illicit services operating behind closed doors to protect themselves from prying eyes. None of these tenants ever entered through the building's front door. Instead, they used a separate entrance in a building across the street, slipping into a passageway beneath the asphalt, through a reinforced metal door, and into the basement that housed Nova's hidden offices and their active servers.

But on this gray morning, something felt off.

Bridget knew she hadn't been followed; she was sure of it. She had stepped off the train at Canal Street station, her instincts as sharp as ever. Yet, as she made her way up the stairs and out of the station, her work phone vibrated in her pocket. She pulled it out and glanced at the screen.

WARNING—INTRUSION. WARNING—INTRUSION.

A large red triangle flashed across the display.

Bridget didn't hesitate. She walked straight into the nearest coffee shop, ordering an herbal tea and a pastry as she took a seat by the window. From there, she watched the street, scanning for anything out of place. Nothing. But that didn't mean she was safe.

Nova had prepared for moments like this. Their physical office consisted of little more than two empty rooms. No files, no records, just Monroe's and her DNA, should anyone go looking. The computers were wiped clean daily, and drawers were left empty. Their entire business existed in the ether, stored on multiple secure servers in upstate New York, far beyond reach.

Her order arrived, but she barely touched it. Instead, she pulled up Nova's security feed on her phone and replayed the last thirty minutes. The time stamp read 5:02 AM.

She watched as two men breached the first door, using small explosives to blow the frame apart. They were slow but methodical, taking their time to get through the second set of reinforced doors.

Her phone rang.

"We have visitors." Monroe's voice was calm, as always. "All clear on your end?"

"Yes, nothing upstairs," she said. "They won't find the server, but even if they do, I wiped everything last night, just in case."

"Good."

“What’s the next move?” she asked.

“We run the emergency plan. Lay low. Use burner phone number six to communicate. I’ll check in soon.”

Monroe had been awake the moment the security alarm sounded, an unpleasant noise, programmed specifically for this kind of breach. He pulled up the same security feed and watched the two men work on the second set of doors.

Nova had contingencies for this. Their fallback location was a secure building in Harlem, where they would remain until the situation stabilized. Monroe had his suspicions about who was behind this; likely the Council of the Night. If that was the case, things were about to get worse.

By the end of the day, they had put their emergency plan into motion.

Monroe arrived at the Harlem safe house to find Bridget already there, settled into her temporary quarters. The loft-style space was compact but secure: six bedrooms, a small kitchen, a large living room, and an office area. It would do.

Bridget sat by the window, her laptop open, combing through digital traces of the men who had broken into Nova’s office.

Her phone buzzed.

The call came through Nova’s main office line, rerouted to her burner phone. She hesitated, then answered.

“Nova Security.”

A distorted voice crackled through the receiver.

“We’re onto you. And we’re going to get you. We know you’re working for Max Whitney, and we’re going to track you down. Your office is gone, burned to the ground. But

don't worry... We'll find you."

The line went dead.

Bridget clenched her jaw and relayed the call to Monroe. He listened, unfazed. "It'll take them a while to track us down," he said. "I'm not worried."

Before she could respond, Monroe's other phone rang.

He answered.

"Bad news," said a familiar voice. It was Max Whitney.

Monroe's grip tightened around the phone. "Go on."

"Phil Esposito's home office was ransacked last night. They found his body in a wooded area nearby this morning. They killed him."

Silence.

Monroe exhaled slowly.

Now it was war.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Located on the Lower East Side, tucked within a row of unassuming offices, was the domain of the man known only as the Administrator. His headquarters, nestled within 427 Broadway, was an architectural relic, a classic Beaux-Arts building that stood as a quiet testament to old-world opulence. His office, however, was something else entirely. Designed by one of Europe's most exclusive interior decorators, it was a curated masterpiece, a sanctuary of wealth and power.

Rare artifacts adorned the space: bronze statues from the Roman Empire, a signed Picasso lithograph, an antique Persian rug so intricately woven that it seemed to shift under the light. Every detail was deliberate, every object a silent display of his reach. Yet, for all its beauty, the office remained cold, transactional. A throne room for a man who thrived in secrecy.

Most of the Administrator's days were spent solving problems, never his own, but those of the Council of the Night, the shadowy organization that had employed him for the past six years. Today, however, had been different.



Today had been... ominous.

A long, strange day. A day of premonition.

Dark clouds loomed, not in the sky, but in the unseen world of high finance. Something was shifting. He had been assured by his network of hackers that his systems were clean; no spyware, no viruses, maybe an attempt at an intrusion, but no breaches. Yet, an unease had settled deep in his gut.

And then, the first real problem appeared.

Anaconda, one of the Council's most profitable dark pools, had begun to glitch. Then, around midday, their other dark pool, MX Grand, abruptly shut down. And while it lasted only a few minutes, it was a disruption that sent alarms through his mind. Their servers, located in a discreet facility in northern New Jersey, had shown no signs of attack. That, in itself, was unusual.

At 3:00 PM, his phone rang.

He was in his office, sitting in a leather chair with a glass of cognac waiting to be consumed on the desk before him. He stared at the stock market. The room, with its dark wood paneling and intricate moldings, exuded the grandeur of a 1920s luxury estate. It was his place of power, and he kept it untouched by the chaos outside.

He answered.

"Sir, this is Triggs. We believe Whitney is no longer in Europe."

The Administrator's grip tightened around the phone. Max Whitney had vanished from their radar.

"Leave a small team in Prague," he ordered, his voice even. "See if there's any sign of

him and get back to New York.”

Max Whitney was too dangerous to lose track of.

His second phone rang.

“This is James, sir. Will you need a ride soon?”

The Administrator exhaled, glancing at the antique clock on the wall.

“Pick me up in forty-five minutes, James. Thank you.”

The Administrator lifted the lid of his customized MacBook Pro and launched the Tor browser. His fingers moved with precision as he dialed the IT Center that managed the Council’s dark pools.

The data center was buried deep in Volgograd, Russia, a strategic location, carefully chosen for its team of elite hackers.

Among them was Yuri Bogdonov, a cyber prodigy, a master hacker with the build of a heavyweight boxer, and the mind of a digital phantom. It was said he had been recruited directly by the Russian government, but the Council had bought his loyalty years ago.

The line crackled.

“Allo,” Bogdonov said, his voice low and gruff.

“Have you noticed a glitch with Anaconda?” The Administrator asked.

A pause.

“Yes,” he replied, sparing no extra words. After a pause, Bogdonov continued, “The interference came from Manhattan. But we’re on it.”

The Administrator’s blood ran cold.

Manhattan?

“Good. Keep me updated.”

“I will,” Bogdonov said. “But, at their request, my direct reports go to the Council first from now on.”

A silence.

For the first time in years, a sliver of doubt crept into The Administrator’s mind. Had he become disposable? A pawn to be discarded?

He shoved the thought away.

“How about MX Grand?” he pressed.

“Still investigating.”

“Understood.” He ended the call.

The Administrator began his ritualistic purge, erasing all data from his machines. Three MacBook Pros and a custom-built Panasonic rugged laptop, designed to withstand cyber warfare.

He took the private elevator, descending four floors down to street level.

Before exiting the building, he activated a secure, encrypted line.

A voice answered, a modulated, artificial tone that always unsettled him.

“Yes?”

It belonged to his only contact with the Council of the Night.

“I spoke to Bogdonov. He informed me that he will be reporting directly to the Council about today’s issues from now on.”

A pause.

“Don’t concern yourself with Bogdonov.” The voice was emotionless. “Focus on Secretary Holt and the SEC’s regulations. And find Whitney.”

The line went dead.

The Administrator remained still for a moment, staring at the now-silent receiver. They were shutting him out.

As he emerged from his sanctuary, he slid into the back seat of his limousine. For the first time in years, he felt exhausted.

The ride through Manhattan took thirty minutes. The streets were uncharacteristically light with traffic, but he didn't care. He rarely did.

James, his driver, pulled into the underground parking garage of his penthouse tower. Another private elevator took him straight to his home, a sprawling sanctuary high above the city. He stepped inside, letting out a long breath.

The sun was dipping below the horizon. He loved this moment, the golden sliver of light, the calm before the world turned black.

But tonight, the peace felt... hollow.

A bitter taste settled in his mouth.

He wasn't safe. Not anymore.

And then, "Hello."

A voice behind him.

His heart nearly stopped.

No guest had ever entered his penthouse. No one knew where he lived.

This was bad.

He turned. Secretary Holt stood before him.

Beside her, two masked soldiers, faces obscured, rifles slung across their chests.

He tensed up. Another movement behind him.

Two more soldiers. He was surrounded.

“Surprised to see me?” Holt asked, her voice smooth, her eyes impenetrable, steady, cold.

The Administrator said nothing. His mind raced: scenarios, escape routes, contingencies.

But none of them mattered now.

He had been unmasked.

His days with the Council of the Night were over; they were never going to let him walk away alive. Was there a sense of relief within him?

“How did you find me?” he finally asked.

Holt smirked. “It doesn’t matter, does it?” She paused, tilting her head. “What matters is what happens next.”

She wasn’t going to tell him the truth.

She wouldn’t tell him that Rahul from Nova Security had outbid him for the best hacker in the world. That Sparrow had already been working for them when he thought he had gained access to him.

No, she wouldn’t tell him that. Because it didn’t matter anymore.

The Administrator glanced around the penthouse. The empire he had built was crumbling around him.

Slowly, he walked to the bar, pouring himself a whiskey, and turned back to Holt, glass in hand.

“You can’t escape the Council,” he said. “They’ll hunt you down. They are cold-blooded killers.”

Holt's expression didn't change.

"Well," she said, voice casual, "before they get to me, they'll probably kill you first.

That's one option, at least."

His stomach sank.

"What do you propose?" He asked

As if on cue, a man entered the room.

Max Whitney.

The Administrator stiffened. The very man he had spent months hunting.

Whitney didn't speak. He simply walked to the couch, sat down, and gestured to the chair across from him.

The Administrator hesitated... then sat.

The game had changed. And for the first time in years, he was no longer the one pulling the strings.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

In the early morning of an ordinary grey day, the world awoke to grave news.

A blogger by the name of Victoria Porter had released an incriminating post that sent shockwaves across the globe.

Every media outlet scrambled to make sense of it. In her post, Miss Porter accused a secretive group known as the Councilium Noctis, or Council of the Night, of orchestrating the recent financial crash. She claimed they had threatened the U.S. government with economic collapse if President Lang refused to comply with their demands.

Victoria Porter's 1.2 million followers quickly shared the lengthy blog post, which opened with a request: "You are requested to copy and disseminate the following article summary across all available social media platforms without delay."

At first, major news outlets hesitated, unsure of how to proceed. But by 8:30 AM, several facts were undeniable: Victoria Porter was legitimate. She had recently vanished after connecting

with Max Whitney, a prominent figure in the financial world.

After months of silence, Whitney, who himself had disappeared to safety, resurfaced and publicly confirmed Porter's report.

But the most shocking news came mid-morning, when the White House issued a brief statement: President Lang is aware of Miss Porter's claims and has no reason to believe they are untrue.

The question loomed: Who was the Council of the Night?

The story exploded. Victoria's website was immediately targeted, overwhelmed by an influx of visitors. Malicious hackers, hired to silence Ms. Porter, launched a massive distributed-denial-of-service attack, or DDoS, attempting to bring her website down. But in their old factory, in the northern part of the city, Whitney's cybersecurity team was ready. They had anticipated such an attack. Multiple layers of encrypted passwords shielded the site's backend, making it nearly impossible for intruders to break in. Even with advanced hacking methods, it would take days to crack the system.

As the attack failed, copies of Victoria's website began to multiply using the .com, .net, .info, .me, until the information she shared spread worldwide. Copies of her site surfaced under .fr for France, .de for Germany, and other country-specific domains. Shutting the website down completely became an impossible task, even for Bogdonov's most skilled cyber teams.

Victoria and Max Whitney decided to release as much of the story as quickly as possible. Within 12 hours, the world was warned.

Governments that had braced for financial turmoil joined forces.



The story presented by Victoria Porter unfolded as follows:

Through a mysterious figure known only as “The Administrator”, whose true identity remained unknown, the Council of the Night had allegedly delivered its ultimatum to American President Lang. The message was clear: “Do not regulate the dark pools we control.”

The world was in shock. Could such a shadowy organization truly threaten the power of the American president?

The story continued, stating that after realizing the gravity of the situation, President Lang took drastic measures. No longer trusting his Secret Service, he surrounded himself with a team of Green Berets tasked with ensuring total secrecy and his safety. Initially, Lang and his advisors considered slowing down or dismissing financial regulations on dark pools to avoid a potentially dangerous confrontation.

But as intelligence reports soon revealed, the Council was composed of the richest, most powerful, and most dangerous individuals in the world, elite financiers whose immense wealth and influence extended far beyond banking, shaping governments, controlling economies, and orchestrating events from the shadows. The proposed regulations on dark pools had threatened their dominance. Now, they were making their position clear: comply, or collapse.

President Lang knew there was only one choice: fight back or remain under their control forever.

The Council of the Night retaliated.

The stock market plummeted, a controlled detonation orchestrated by unseen hands. Numbers bled red across global exchanges. Panic erupted on trading floors from Wall Street to Tokyo. Retirement funds were erased in an instant. Bankers, investors, and ordinary citizens

scrambled for safety, but there was none.

And yet, this was only a warning.

A world away, in a dimly lit Harlem loft, Victoria and Max knew they were running out of time.

Victoria pulled her coat tighter around herself, standing by the window, watching the streets. It seemed so calm, so peaceful. Her breath fogged against the glass. The weight of what they were doing, of who they were up against, pressed down on her. She had spent so much time peeling back the layers of secrecy surrounding the Council of the Night, exposing its hidden hands in global finance. And now, the Council knew.

Max sat at his desk, surrounded by glowing monitors. He was locked into an encrypted network, watching as digital defenses collapsed one by one. They were close, so close to unlocking the doors to the most powerful dark pools. It was now a matter of time for Max and his team to complete their task.

Uncovering the names behind the Council's faceless empire had been assigned to BackEcho21. Known simply as Bee, she typed with furious precision. The math prodigy and hacker extraordinaire had become a legend long ago. At 12, she had already written an entire operating system so advanced that governments had failed to track her. The Puerto Rican-born hacker had disappeared at fourteen, after looting hundreds of thousands of dollars from the island's corrupt governor's personal slush fund.

The group "Anonymous" had taken her in, given her a new identity. In the hacker underground, she was a superstar.

Now, her fingers danced over the keyboard, unraveling encrypted layers deep within the

Council's network.

"I'm in."

Max turned, his pulse spiking. "How deep?"

Bee's smirk was sharp. "Deep enough to make them sweat."

The walls were closing in on the Council. But Max knew this wasn't just about data; it was about survival. For every layer they peeled away, the Council had mercenaries, intelligence networks, and kill teams ready to strike. And worse, they were hunting them.

Freelance hackers from China, cyber operatives from Russia, and ghosts from Europe had joined forces. They weren't just exposing the Council of the Night; they were declaring war on its infrastructure, on its core, and its existence.

In the shadows, Sparrow, their most powerful weapon, was about to deliver the first real strike.

Sparrow had taken longer than the others to reveal his identity. At twenty-nine, he was cautious, calculated, and intensely private. Where others relied on instinct, he relied on method. Every problem was a puzzle to be deconstructed, every obstacle a code to be rewritten.

When assigned a task, he would sit perfectly still, eyes closed, dissecting the challenge in his mind before ever touching a keyboard. It was a ritual, one that made him eerily efficient.

Tall, thin, and with a shaved head, Sparrow moved with an unsettling stillness, his crystal-clear blue eyes always focused on something unseen. He looked like a specter, otherworldly. An alien, maybe. A predator built for silence. Every motion, every decision, was deliberate, controlled. Even in the chaotic world of cyberwarfare, Sparrow was an anomaly.

And yet, he had been the key to tracking the Administrator.

Sparrow had been the trap the administrator fell for.

Rahul knew the first rule of cybersecurity warfare: The best defense is deception.

When the Administrator detected an intrusion into his network, his response was predictable. He needed the best hacker money could buy.

And so, he did exactly what Rahul expected.

He hired Sparrow.

Within forty-eight hours, the Administrator had unknowingly walked into a carefully constructed trap. By granting Sparrow access to his backup network, he had invited a wolf into the heart of his system. The hunter had become the prey.

Now, Rahul had a direct line.

The Administrator's encrypted communications.

His hidden financial transfers.

His inner circle.

Rahul's orders were clear: Sparrow needed to track the Administrator's associates. The list included James, the driver, Mr. Churchill, the enforcer, Higbee, and Triggs, the two nefarious and unseen hands.

Each name led to another. Each transaction, each encrypted message, exposed another piece of the Council's hidden empire.

And with every discovery, BlackEcho21 went to work, cross-referencing data, stripping away layers of secrecy. Within a day, they had their answer: twelve individuals were pulling the strings.

But they still remained faceless.

Protected.

Shadows.

How long before their true identities were uncovered?

How long before names replaced code words?

How long before they could tear through the wall of offshore corporations, shell accounts, and encrypted networks to expose the twelve most dangerous people in the world?

But the deeper they dug, the clearer the real threat became.

The Council of the Night had an army of overpaid, overzealous, and trigger-happy mercenaries with no allegiance to anyone, except to money. They moved like shadows, erasing problems before they could exist.

And worse, they weren't the only ones watching.

Other forces were closing in.

The international freelance hackers were probing for weaknesses, hunting for the identities of the ones helping Max Whitney.

Digital predators in a world where no one can hide forever.

Yet, for all their discoveries, one truth remained locked behind layers of darkness.

Who were the men behind the Council of the Night?

And what would it cost to find them?

## Chapter Twenty-Six

The Rockefeller Bar was a classic New York City establishment, dimly lit, its walls lined with rich, dark wooden panels and adorned with abstract modern paintings by 1970s Lower East Side artists, who, at the time, were still chasing their elusive breakthrough. The thick, wall-to-wall carpet swallowed the noise, no matter how raucous the crowd. Leather chairs, handcrafted in an old restored boathouse in Maine, were inspected, repaired, or replaced every year.

The bar itself, a long stretch of polished mahogany, was manned by a young, attractive bartender serving Wall Street traders burning through their obscene bonuses. The dining area, however, catered to old-money New Yorkers, quiet, composed, and insulated from the frenzy of the financial world. It was a sanctuary, a place where comfort outweighed cost and where time seemed to slow.

James sat at the bar, nursing a Macallan 15-Year-Old, its rich amber liquid catching the dim light. The smoky, oaky scent curled from the cut-glass tumbler, served neat, just the way he

liked it. He spent most of his evenings here, waiting for a message from the Administrator.

Ann, the 26-year-old waitress from Kentucky, slid the check onto the polished surface in front of him.

“How’s the city treating you?” James asked.

Ann sighed, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “I don’t understand how anyone can get used to this place.”

“Not a fan?”

“I am. But the cost of living, the rats, the trash, it’s a lot.”

James handed her his corporate card, a sleek, matte-black rectangle with “Noctis Inc.” embossed in silver. Ann had no idea what “Noctis” meant. Greek? Latin? Italian? She assumed it was a company, but she never cared to ask.

However, she always wondered how men like James afforded such a lifestyle.

He didn’t look like much, unremarkable, one may say, the kind of man whose build suggested old strength rather than gym-sculpted vanity. His dark hair was cut short but uneven, as if done in a rush or by someone who didn’t care. His suit, a standard off-the-rack suit, fit him well enough but lacked the crispness of real money. No expensive watch, no flashy accessories, nothing to indicate wealth. Just a man who blended in, forgettable in a crowd. And yet, here he was, dropping well over a hundred bucks on a steak and fries, a glass of Chardonnay, a single malt, and a \$30 tip like it was nothing.

Meanwhile, she could barely afford her morning coffee at Black Fox Roasters, a cramped East Village café run by a Russian couple who never smiled. The place smelled like strong espresso, its air always thick with the hiss of steaming milk and the low murmur of exhausted

workers nursing overpriced Americanos.

She turned to James, who seemed to struggle with his phone, his broad fingers clumsy against the tiny screen.

For James, each message felt like a battle, his large hands tentative, awkward. He was like a man using chopsticks for the first time.

Ann returned with his card. "Here you go, sir."

"Told you to call me James."

She smirked. "Oops. Sorry."

James didn't respond. His focus had already shifted.

Ann turned back to the group of drunken traders at the far end of the bar, debating when to cut them off.

The door swung open.

A tall black man entered, moving with the measured assurance of someone who expected the room to accommodate him. Lean, fit, but self-assured.

Ann thought she caught the hint of a limp.

The man ignored the Wall Street crowd and made his way to the bar, sliding onto the stool beside James.

Ann approached. "What can I get you?"

The man's dark, smoky glasses hid his eyes. "Good evening, Miss, Diet Coke, please." A gold ring on his right pinky flashed under the bar lights, solid, unadorned except for the engraved initials "CN".

James wasn't too happy to see him. "Mr. Churchill," James muttered, anxious.



“James,” Churchill said. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing really,” He began nervously. It’s just that I have not heard from the Administrator. Usually, he cuts me loose by now. Tried to call a few times. Nothing. I am just following protocol.”

Mr. Churchill was the crisis manager for the Council of the Night, the man you called when things went sideways. If the Administrator was compromised, Churchill had to know immediately.

Though James respected Mr. Churchill, he also feared him. Mr. Churchill was the nickname James had given him. It seemed to match the person.

Mr. Churchill had an unflappable composure and controlled presence. Tonight, he wore a black suit tailored perfectly to his frame, paired with a black turtleneck and polished black Oxfords. He exuded a quiet authority, precise, intentional, and without excess.

Mr. Churchill stood abruptly and walked a few paces away to make a call.

Ann placed his Diet Coke on the bar. “Anything else, James?” she asked with a smile.

But James wasn’t listening. His attention had shifted again.

Ann walked off.

Mr. Churchill returned, scanning the room. The stock traders, louder now, drunk off their latest win. Across the room, a group of well-heeled Upper East Side mothers, basking in their momentary freedom from their spoiled kids, drank the night away. A lone man at the other end of the bar was hunched over his phone, seeming lost. A broken heart, perhaps.

Churchill sat back down. “Why the concern?”

James exhaled sharply. “The Administrator is predictable. He’s either at home, in his

office, or on the move. But tonight, no dinner order, no check-in, no call dismissing me. And when I tried to reach him? Nothing. It's past eleven."

Churchill considered the information for a moment. Then: "Let's go."

They entered the building through the parking garage, weaving down to the second basement. A steel door loomed ahead. Churchill entered a code. Access granted.

James hesitated. How the hell did Mr. Churchill have clearance for this?

Mr. Churchill gestured. "Your turn."

James pulled a key from his pocket, inserting it into the slot marked P for Penthouse. The moment the lock clicked, he turned to find Mr. Churchill holding a gun. A big one.

James swallowed hard but said nothing. The doors slid open, revealing the penthouse bathed in the cold glow of city lights. It was quiet. Too quiet.

They stepped inside. Nothing was out of place, the sleek furniture, the marble bar, the curated emptiness of a man who kept no personal attachments.

But something was wrong.

James moved deeper into the room, scanning. No coat was draped over a chair. No drink left sweating on the counter.

Churchill moved fast, pulling out his phone and pacing toward the window. He spoke in low, clipped tones.

James couldn't make out the words, but the tension was palpable.

"Cameras?" Mr. Churchill asked.

"None inside. The basement ones have been down since I started."

"Call him."

James dialed the Administrator's number.

A faint vibration hummed from somewhere.

And then he saw it.

His stomach dropped.

The penthouse wasn't just empty.

The Administrator was gone.

#

*This is bad. Really bad.* Thought James

"Let's talk to the doorman."

They took the elevator down to the lobby. Glenn, the night-shift doorman, greeted James.

A few minutes of polite conversation. A large bill from Mr. Churchill's wallet. A trip to the security room.

The footage didn't lie. The Administrator, flanked by two large men, was riding the common elevator down, exiting the building.

James's pulse quickened. He knew what this meant.

Mr. Churchill's phone buzzed. He glanced at the screen. "I've called in a team. We got the plate number on the vehicle. James, you stay put till the team gets here."

James nodded, but his mind was already working. He knew too much. And now he was a liability. "I'll go to my place."

Mr. Churchill was already turning back toward the elevator, dismissing him with a wave.

“Sure. Whatever.”

A minute later, James walked out. He was no fool. He knew exactly what would come next. It was time to erase this identity. It was time to move.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Inside the White House, the atmosphere was grim. The usual hum of bustling aides and the occasional laughter of staffers had been replaced by an eerie stillness. The nation was teetering on the edge of something ominous, though only a select few knew exactly what.

Alfred Winslow, a veteran butler, walked cautiously through the corridor, his polished shoes barely making a sound on the marble floor. At sixty-eight and recovering from two years of grueling treatment for an aggressive prostate cancer, he felt tired, beaten. The once effortless glide of his movements had been replaced by a deliberate, measured pace.

‘Morning, Al,’ a giant of a soldier greeted him as he finally reached the door of the Oval Office. The man’s uniform was pristine, his posture rigid. His presence still felt unusual to Alfred, after years of expecting Secret Service agents at this post, he now faced a masked sentinel instead.

“How are you doing, Al?” the soldier asked.

“Good morning,” Alfred replied, his voice thin and worn from the aftermath of five weeks of daily radiation treatment, monthly hormone injections, and the lingering fear that the disease still lurked within him.

Alfred loved his work, and President Lang was a good man. But something felt off. Why was this mountain of a man guarding the president instead of the Secret Service?

Alfred glanced at the suited secret service agents sitting idly a few feet away, watchful but disturbingly passive.

“I’m not going to hold this tray forever,” Alfred muttered.

The soldier knocked on the door and, after a moment, pushed it open. “Go ahead.”

Stepping inside, Alfred was struck once again by the majesty of the Oval Office. The sheer history of the room never ceased to amaze him. The weight of past presidencies, the decisions that had shaped the nation, all of it lived within these walls.

Across the room, President Lang sat alone at his desk, hunched over documents while on the phone. He looked up briefly and gestured toward the coffee table before returning to his call.

“How are you, Alfred?” Lang asked as he ended his call.

“Well, Mr. President. Thank you.”

“Sit down, Alfred. Get yourself a cup of coffee.”

Alfred hesitated. “Not sure I can do that, Sir. That would be breaking protocol.”

“Sit down. That’s an order. I am your president, Alfred. Whether you voted for me or not, I work for you, and right now, you are the only person that matters.”

“Well then... thank you, sir.”

Alfred poured two cups of coffee, then gingerly settled onto the magnificent couch,

feeling the richness of the fabric beneath him. It felt wrong to sit in such a place of power, but Lang had insisted.

“How are you doing, Alfred?” Lang asked again, this time with genuine concern.

“These are challenging times, as you know,” Alfred said in his usual quiet and resolute demeanor.

“Do you have a retirement account, Alfred?” Lang asked.

“Oh yes, sir. I am very lucky,” Alfred replied, a bit surprised by the question.

“Sell everything today; mutual funds, stocks, everything.”

Alfred stared at him. Shocked. Was the president of the United States telling him to get out of the market?

“This morning, at 9:00 AM, when the markets open, sell everything, keep cash, or buy gold,” Lang said, his voice edged with a weight Alfred couldn’t quite place.

“I will,” Alfred said hesitantly.

Something in the president’s tone unnerved him. Lang walked over and sat across from Alfred. He changed the subject, asking about his grandchildren; his “angels.” They spoke for a while like old acquaintances catching up, though Alfred sensed an underlying urgency in Lang’s voice.

Outside, the Green Beret guarding the door shifted, checking his watch. Alfred had been inside too long.

“Why is life so complicated?” Lang mused, gazing out the window. “So much hate, violence, and greed.” He paused, shaking his head. “And yet, we could so easily all live in harmony.”

Alfred sipped his coffee, only half listening, the other half picturing the dignitaries, world leaders, and historical figures who had once sat where he was now.

“Thank you for your service, Alfred,” Lang said softly. “I know you’ve been sick, and I want to thank you for your steady hand.”

Alfred swallowed the lump in his throat. To have the President of the United States acknowledge him not just as a butler, but as a man, meant so much. He fought back the unexpected surge of emotion. “It has been a privilege to serve you, sir.”

Lang stood and turned on the TV. The screen lit up with CNN. Though the volume was muted, the headlines were damning. The network was tearing into his administration, his failure to curb economic collapse, the worsening global wars, and the public’s growing discontent. Alfred watched as Lang absorbed the criticism in silence.

Taking the cue, Alfred stood. “Would you like more coffee, sir?”

Lang shook his head. “Thank you, Alfred.”

Alfred picked up the tray and walked toward the door, but stopped suddenly. A rare impulse pushed him to speak. He turned back.

“Mr. President... why the Green Beret? Why the warning about my retirement account? Are we at war? Should I be worried?”

Lang exhaled, leaning back against his desk. His eyes, weary and burdened, met Alfred’s.

“Alfred, America is always at war with someone,” he said. “The Cold War, covert ops, spies, and traitors. Bullies and greedy bankers. We never know who will stab us next, your confidant or your enemy.”



Lang glanced toward the door, where the soldier stood guard.

“For now, the soldier out there is the one in whose hands I place my trust.”

It was only 6:30 AM, yet the president looked exhausted.

Alfred studied him for a moment, then nodded.

“And yes, Alfred, we’re at war. Be safe.” Lang concluded.

Alfred left the Oval Room puzzled and returned to one of the sub-basement rooms, where he sat reflecting on the interaction he had with President Lang.

His phone was heating up in his palm. For weeks, it had been acting up, but he knew he would soon need a new one.

By 9:10 AM that morning, Alfred was on hold with his broker, a young woman with a Southern accent. At first, she had resisted, trying to dissuade him from liquidating his entire portfolio, but after his repeated insistence, she finally relented. It took ten agonizing minutes to process the trades, ensuring they were executed immediately. He still wasn’t sure why he was doing this, but he trusted the President and followed his order without question.

The day continued as usual, the hum of routine pulling Alfred away from thoughts of the president’s cryptic warning. By noon, President Lang had left the White House, and the pace of work slowed. The staff, now unhurried, lingered and enjoyed the feast the kitchen had prepared for the day. The food would have gone to waste otherwise, so they indulged while they could.

Sitting at the metal kitchen counter, Alfred sipped his tea and nibbled on a pastry while chatting with the sous-chef, a lively Frenchman with an endless supply of stories. Alfred liked his accent, the way he spoke of his travels, his time working in the world’s most exclusive restaurants, cooking for royalty, celebrities, and heads of state. It was a welcome distraction.

One more hour, and Alfred would be done for the day. He was looking forward to his evening with Natasha, his six-year-old granddaughter. He cherished their time together; she was so full of curiosity, so brimming with life.

On the kitchen TV, CNN tracked the markets, their red graphs plunging lower and lower. The anchors' voices grew more urgent. Then came the inevitable announcement: the exchanges would close early. The market had reached its maximum allowable drop, triggering an automatic shutdown. It had become an almost daily occurrence. Investors' sentiment was one of deep concern.

Alfred stared at the screen in disbelief. His stomach clenched at the realization of how close he had come to financial ruin. He silently thanked President Lang for the warning. If he hadn't acted this morning, his savings would have been negatively affected.

The kitchen door suddenly slammed open.

Agent Thorpe, a man wound too tight, always barking orders with a tone of perpetual irritation, rushed inside.

"The White House is on lockdown," he said sharply.

Neither Alfred nor the sous-chef reacted. White House security alerts were nothing new. They both exchanged a glance, expecting it to be just another drill or a minor security threat.

Then, Alfred remembered the president's words, his voice grave, his eyes tired. "We are at war. Be safe, Alfred."

Something cold trickled down his spine. He turned to Thorpe, his voice low, edged with unease.

"What the hell happened, Thorpe?"

The agent hesitated for only a second before delivering the blow.

“The Vice President has been killed.”

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

Miles to the south, inside the sleek, glass-walled penthouse overlooking the Empire State and the Chrysler Building, Mr. Churchill stood in the dim glow of the city. Manhattan's skyline reflected off the polished marble floor, a cold, glimmering reminder of the power he served. He straightened the cuffs of his tailored suit, a small ritual that surfaced whenever he was lost in thought.

A high-ranking enforcer for the Council of the Night, Churchill was on the hunt. His targets: The Administrator, who had gone dark, and James, his former driver, who had been instructed to wait for the retrieval team, but had vanished instead.

Mr. Churchill's reach was vast. He deployed Triggs, just back from Prague, to oversee a team of cyber experts combing through anomalies in New York's security camera system, searching for his prey.

Triggs was a blunt instrument, better suited for violence than technology, but for now, he

would have to do. His focus would be on Max Whitney and Victoria Porter, the infamous blogger.

Higbee, however, had been closer to the Administrator. Too close perhaps. But that made him useful, for now.

Mr. Churchill turned to Higbee. “Any signs of trouble?”

Higbee shrugged casually, but Mr. Churchill saw the tension in his jaw. “Nothing.”

“You worked with him closely.”

“Not really,” Higbee answered. “The Administrator would call with orders. That was it.”

“And James?”

A flicker of amusement crossed Higbee’s face. “James? I liked him. Always had a joke.”

Mr. Churchill’s voice remained steady. “What was your business with him?”

“Deliveries. Cash for services rendered. Photographs of persons of interest. The usual.

However, all communications were discreet, sealed envelopes containing cash, photos, and instructions.”

Churchill was not sure James, the driver, knew anything beyond the surface.

Mr. Churchill nodded, his gaze sweeping across the Administrator’s penthouse. It was too perfect, too untouched. A fortress of wealth built on secrecy.

Higbee exhaled sharply.

“Can I be frank?” he asked, but didn’t wait for an answer. “James is gone, man. Long gone. Why would he stick around? Even if he didn’t know the full scope, he knew enough to recognize a nefarious operation when he saw one. He had an exit plan. Hell, by now, he’s probably sipping something cold on a beach with a new name and no regrets.”

Mr. Churchill said nothing. Exit plans, he knew all about those. He had one himself.

His phone buzzed. Once. Twice. Then a flood of messages. The insistent pinging was an irritation, an alarm bell inside his head. He sat on the leather couch, exhaling slowly as he scrolled through the incoming texts.

The Council was furious.

Their orders had been ignored. The Administrator had ordered Secretary of the Treasury Jane Holt to halt regulations on the dark pools. Holt refused. President Lang had hesitated, weighing his options. The Council responded in blood. The Director of the SEC was assassinated in broad daylight.

Then they traced a name: Phil Esposito, a former intelligence officer. A loose end.

Mr. Churchill read the final lines of the report:

Operatives located Esposito. Neutralized him as he stepped inside his home. His body was discarded on an empty stretch of road.

Mr. Churchill swallowed. His grip on the phone tightened. Would the Administrator go so far as to fake his kidnapping just to escape?

And yesterday, the Vice-President was killed in broad daylight.

His fingers moved swiftly over the screen.

He typed, "Nothing here. When I last saw James, he was calm. Said something before I rushed off to speak with the doorman. Something about his apartment, I think."

The reply came instantly.

"We understand. Thanks for jumping into this mess."

Mess. That was one way to put it. Mr. Churchill slipped his phone back into his pocket.

His escape plan had been in place for years.

The million-dollar-a-year retainer had passed through so many shell companies and offshore accounts, it was practically vapor. Three safe houses were scattered across South America. A Brazilian beauty named Anna was waiting in one of them.

He glanced once more around the penthouse, taking in its cold opulence.

“Wrap it up, gentlemen.”

Even though the Council of the Night moved among the world’s elite, congressional halls, embassies, and royal estates, they employed the most dangerous of men.

Churchill’s phone vibrated once more.

“We’re sending Luchenkov.”

The Council had made its decision. They were sending their deadliest asset.

His stomach tightened.

Viktor Luchenkov. Nicknamed the “Maiden Killer”. His name was whispered in fear across three continents. He had butchered twenty young women inside a church, execution-style, simply because they had given shelter to a witness.

No warnings. No survivors. No mercy.

Mr. Churchill stepped into the elevator, descending smoothly from the luxury penthouse. He exited through the underground parking, walked half a block, blending into the early morning rush.

A cab rolled up. Mr. Churchill slid inside.

Hoping to never be seen again.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

In the sprawling township of Harlem, nestled in a quieter pocket untouched by the city's restless energy, the safe house remained undisturbed. The old industrial complex, once a thriving mill factory, now hosted a collection of dubious businesses, a limousine service with Serbian mafia ties, and an import-export firm with little trace of legal trade. It was a fortress in disguise, a forgotten relic amid a city that never slept.

Inside, the scent of coffee permeated the dimly lit computer room. The loft's interior was lined with high-tech equipment, servers, monitors, and custom-built consoles that flickered with streams of encrypted data. This was the nerve center. Max, Rahul, Sparrow, and BlackEcho21 sat in silence, their eyes locked on their respective screens.

Whitney, their elusive benefactor, had secured this space through one of his offshore companies, ensuring their operations remained undetected. He leaned forward, his voice steady. “We have three tasks before us. The first is accessing a highly secure server, owned by a Russian



named Bogdonov. His group controls the digital infrastructure for every dark pool the Council of the Night operates.” He paused, letting the weight of his words settle over the team.

“I’ve heard of Bogdonov,” Rahul muttered. “He’s a ghost. Untouchable.”

“I’ve hacked Anaconda and MX Grand, two of their dark pools,” Max continued. “But this time, we need a total takeover.”

Sparrow was already typing furiously, his fingers moving like a pianist playing a violent concerto.

“What else?” Rahul asked, his tone sharp.

“We’re looking for a man who goes by the name James, the Administrator’s driver. No photos, no known aliases, but we tracked his vehicle leaving Manhattan; plate number Z39WC2. He’s running from the Council. That much we know.”

BlackEcho21 straightened. “I’ll dig into that. Plate number again?”

Max repeated the digits.

“Sparrow, you want Bogdanov?” Rahul asked.

“On it.”

Max’s fist slammed against the table, a sharp bang that cut through the hum of the war room. The clatter of keyboards stopped. Heads turned. Every eye was on Max.

“We work together,” he said, his voice hard. “Any clue, no matter how small, gets shared immediately.”

“Understood,” Rahul replied with a curt nod, posture rigid.

Across the table, Sparrow and BlackEcho21 exchanged a glance, cryptic, almost defiant, before silently returning to their screens, fingers dancing across the keys.

Max's voice rose, sharper this time. "That's not good enough."

The two hackers froze, unused to being called out. Slowly, they turned.

"We get it, Max," BlackEcho21 said, tone clipped. "Every shred of data must be shared."

Max held his stare for a beat longer, then gave a terse nod. The room exhaled, and the tapping resumed, but the tension didn't break. It just shifted, coiled tighter beneath the surface.

"Sparrow, let me fill you in on how I hacked the two dark pools." Max marched over to him.

Soon, Max returned to his computer, and Rahul sat next to him. Within seconds, Max was hunched over his laptop, eyes locked on cascading lines of code. The glow of the screen flickered against the exposed brick walls of the Harlem warehouse.

"I'm going to slow the various exchanges that host most dark pools," Max said, his voice low, measured.

Rahul leaned in. "How?"

Max turned, eyes sharp. "You want in?"

"For sure." Rahul grabbed his laptop, fingers itching for action.

Max nodded and began, his tone precise. "Most of the traffic between these dark pools is routed through High-Frequency Trading, or HFT. Fifty to sixty percent of all daily trades happen in dark pools."

Max let that sink in before continuing.

"These firms running off-the-grid exchanges, these dark pools, depend on speed. Shaving off microseconds during execution is how they profit. Every tiny fraction of time matters."

Max tapped the screen to his far left, a schematic of interconnected servers glowing

faintly.

“They rely on massive data centers to handle those trades at blistering speeds. And that... is where we hit them.”

Rahul leaned over Max’s shoulder as he pulled up a network schematic. “How?”

Max tapped a screen, enlarging a technical diagram. “Most of these data centers use Free Space Optics, or FSO. High-powered lasers transmit data through the air between nodes. No cables, just line-of-sight beams. They can handle massive bandwidth over distances up to ten kilometers.”

He pointed to a cluster of red lines on the map, interlinking towers across a remote tech campus.

“But the catch?” Max continued. “Alignment. It has to be precise. A few millimeters off, and the beam degrades.”

Rahul grinned. “Let me guess. If it’s not perfect...”

“They lose speed. A lot of it.” Max leaned back, eyes locked on the screen. “And we’re going to knock them off by just enough to make chaos look like coincidence.”

Rahul absorbed the information. “Where do we start?”

Max tapped a second monitor, pulling up a map labeled *Network Infrastructure, Greater NYC Metro*. Three locations lit up: Equinix, QTS, and CenterSquare, all clustered in Secaucus, New Jersey.

“The New Jersey Triangle,” Max said, highlighting the triangle between them. “Forget Mahwah, that’s NYSE turf. Carteret, 45 miles south, is NASDAQ’s fortress. But Secaucus? That’s where the other exchanges hide their dark pools. Their Off-exchange trading platforms,

where billions move in the shadows.”

Rahul let out a low whistle. “Never heard of any of these places.”

Max smirked. “Exactly. That’s by design. These data centers aren’t just buildings; they’re the lungs of the system. You choke them, you suffocate the flow.”

Rahul cracked his knuckles. “So, we disrupt the FSO transmissions?”

Max’s fingers flew across the keyboard, pulling up live network telemetry. A web of glowing red lines pulsed across the map.

“Not disrupt. Cripple.” He pointed. “These are active Free Space Optics links, laser-based, line-of-sight data connections. Interfere with their beam alignment, spoof the weather, introduce slight thermal distortion or dust particulates, we don’t need to destroy anything. Just slow them down.”

“No microsecond edge,” Rahul murmured. “No HFT dominance.”

“Exactly.” Max leaned in. “High-Frequency Trading firms live or die by latency. If they lose even a few microseconds, their models collapse. Orders get leapfrogged. Arbitrage fails. Billions evaporate in digital smoke.”

Rahul’s mind raced. “And these FSO links... they’re really that fragile?”

Max’s smile sharpened. “They require perfect conditions, crystal-clear air, dead-still optics, clean line-of-sight. Introduce the right interference, fog, heat haze, even micro-vibrations from nearby HVAC units, and their laser signals degrade. No cables mean no fallback. The whole system’s an invisible house of cards.”

Rahul exhaled slowly. “This could work.”

Max turned to face him fully. “It will work. We just need precision.”

Rahul nodded, adrenaline kicking in. “What’s the next move?”

Max’s phone buzzed. He checked the screen and went still.

Rahul caught the shift. “Problem?”

Max’s jaw tightened. “Maybe.”

A beat of silence. Then the warehouse’s overhead lights flickered, once, twice, before stabilizing.

Rahul’s stomach twisted. “That normal?”

Max shut his laptop with a snap. “No.”

For the first time, Rahul noticed the faint hum of static in the air, a pressure that hadn’t been there before. Was someone else listening?

## Chapter Thirty

The newspaper lay open on the Resolute Desk, the headline screaming louder than any voice in the room:

### **VICE PRESIDENT HARPER ASSASSINATED IN COLOMBIA.**

Below it, a grainy photograph captured the exact moment the chaos erupted, security agents lunging toward the stage, hands raised, mouths open in warning or horror. And there, frozen in monochrome tragedy, Vice President Amelia Harper lay collapsed behind the podium. One shot. Center mass. No chance.

President Lang stared at it again. Then again. His fingers didn't tremble. But his jaw flexed with tension, each time he read the headline sinking deeper into his gut like a blade being twisted.

This wasn't just an act of violence.

It was a declaration of war.

The door creaked open. One informed the president that his guest had arrived.

President Lang waved him in.

Sam Levine, shoulders almost too broad for the door, entered. His 6'4" frame was nearly grazing the door frame. He had the stiffness of a man used to combat discipline, not political pageantry. His tie was crooked, and he looked like he hadn't slept in days.

"Sir," Levine said, voice low and cautious. "We have the preliminary field report."

Lang didn't look up right away. He closed the paper slowly, folded it once, then again, like he was packing away grief.

Only then did he meet Levine's eyes. "Sit."

Levine sat awkwardly, perched on the edge of the armchair like it might reject him at any second. He opened a leather dossier, pulled out a single sheet, and cleared his throat.

"The vice president landed at Catamaran Air Base at 14:06 local time," he began. "The motorcade was rerouted per local intel, a possible threat near the highway. They adjusted the security perimeter around the cultural center where Vice President Harper was to speak."

Lang held up a hand. "Get to the kill shot."

Levine nodded grimly. "Five minutes into her speech. One round, 7.62 mm, high-velocity was fired from approximately 830 meters. Approximately half a mile. It took a second for the bullet to travel 800 meters or about 2650 feet. The shooter was on the rooftop of an abandoned textile mill across from the venue. A suppressor was used. No one heard it at first. Harper dropped instantly."

Lang's eyes didn't blink. "They find the sniper?"

"Gone. Clean extraction. We found brass casing, boot prints, and tripod marks. But no

prints, no DNA. Colombian authorities are combing through satellite and drone feeds now. The only strange item at the shooting site was two letters freshly painted with red paint. The writing was located inches from the casing we collected.”

Levine handed President Lang a color photograph, “CN”

Lang leaned back. This was a clear message from the Council of the Night. He remained silent.

Levine hesitated to continue.

Lang rose from the desk, stepped to the window. The White House lawn was perfectly manicured, bathed in the morning light that felt strange in contrast to what the world had just witnessed.

“Amelia was more than my second,” he said quietly. “She was the spine of this administration. She was fearless, methodical, and incorruptible.”

“She was a threat,” Levine said, “to the wrong people.”

Lang turned back around, sharp now. “What do we know about the textile mill?”

“Long lease, shell company. Traced it to an LLC in the Caymans. Which ties to a firm from Singapore. Ultimately? Dead end.”

Lang returned to the desk. “This wasn’t just to destabilize the executive branch. This was coordinated to send a signal.”

Levine agreed but said nothing.

“How good of a shooter one has to be to shoot from that distance with such efficacy?” asked Lang.

A trained military sniper can effectively shoot at a distance of 800 meters. In perfect



conditions, 1500 meters.”

President Lang, dejected, waved Levine off.

Levine stood, about to exit, when Lang’s gaze sharpened. “And Sam…”

“Yes, sir?”

“Don’t give me another clean report filled with blanks. I want names.”

Levine saluted. “Understood, Mr. President.”

Lang watched the tall man leave, the door clicking shut behind him. Then he looked down at the folded newspaper again.

**VICE PRESIDENT HARPER ASSASSINATED IN COLOMBIA.**

He whispered the words this time, as if they’d be easier to believe.

But they weren’t.

And now, someone had to answer for it.

## Chapter Thirty-One

A few miles north, shielded from the chaos creeping through the city, Max's brownstone stood like a fortress of quiet. Inside, behind blackout curtains and closed doors, Porter and Sloane lay tangled in the bedsheets, exhaustion wrapped around them like a heavy shroud. The air was thick with the scent of steeped tea, warm skin, and the lingering sweetness of freshly baked cookies, an almost absurd contrast to the danger still pressing in from the outside world.

Sloane had once imagined a moment like this, but thought it would never materialize. *Stillness*. Not in his life. He was a man shaped by movement, by survival, always on the run, always hunting or being hunted. Yet here he was, his chest rising and falling against Victoria's, the calloused edge of his hand resting on the soft curve of her hip. *She was the calm in his chaos*. She was *his*.

She shifted beside him, her wavy blond hair spilling across the pillow as she propped herself up on one elbow. Her eyes met his, steady, unafraid.

“What are you thinking?” she whispered.

He reached up, tracing her jawline with a slow, reverent touch. “That I could get used to this.”

She smiled, and in that second, the world outside ceased to exist.

Their lips met, soft at first, a question. Then deeper. Her fingers curled into his hair. His arms drew her closer. Their bodies pressed together, skin to skin, heat rising in a wave of memory and need.

Sloane rolled gently, hovering over her, their eyes locked. There was no need for words, only the quiet understanding that time was borrowed, but this moment was theirs.

They made love again, slowly, with the urgency of people who knew the clock was ticking, and didn't care. They held one another tenderly until Sloane moved and stretched beside her. No words were spoken. He reached for her hand as she turned to lay her head on his shoulder.

Whatever peace they'd found suddenly vanished as a shrill beep split the silence.

Sloane was out of bed in an instant, pulling on his clothes with military precision.

Victoria followed, her heart pounding. This was her new reality, she realized. A dangerous world, with guns and people chasing you.

Downstairs, the basement glowed with the cold light of security monitors. Sloane scanned the feeds, his eyes narrowing. The property appeared to be safe. Sloane stared at each screen carefully. One at a time, he scanned the screen for any movement.

Three men. Moving near the power station, a few blocks away. Too close.

“I'll check it out.” He grabbed his weapon, moving toward a hidden passage beneath the

steps.

“Be careful,” Victoria said, gripping his arm.

He pressed a burner phone into her hand. “Call Whitney. Now.”

She barely nodded before he vanished.

Victoria dialed. The line came to life.

“We have visitors,” she said, her voice steady.

“Where?” Whitney asked.

“Power station.”

“Where’s Sloane?”

“He went after them.”

“Get out. Stay away until it settles.”

Victoria hesitated. “I have the burner. I’ll stay away.”

She ended the call, but her feet refused to move. Instead, she turned back to the weapons cache Sloane had revealed. Her fingers brushed over cold steel before settling on a compact pistol. She checked the chamber. Loaded. Her father, a soldier, had taught her well. But no one, not Sloane, not Max, knew just how well.

She stepped into the night.

The city buzzed around her, oblivious to the silent war unfolding in its veins. She moved with purpose, blending in, a New Yorker listening to a political podcast, on her way to purchase an overpriced coffee.

The three men, dressed in black, were at the power station door now. One jimmied the lock, another kept watch. They finally opened the metal door.

*Where the hell is Sloane?* She wondered.

Clutching her weapon tightly in her pocket, she crossed onto 125th St., when someone grabbed her arm.

Her heart leaped into her throat as she spun, gun half-raised.

She turned.

It was Sloan. His eyes locked onto hers, a silent command.

They walked briskly, moving away from the power station.

“What happened?” she asked under her breath.

“Nothing,” he said. “Yet.”

Higbee, the leader of the three-man team, tapped his earpiece. “Building’s clear. Move out.”

Higbee’s voice was tight, frustration curling around each syllable. Another dead end. Another failure. They had been a step behind all the way, chasing ghosts around the world. He hated the feeling.

The three men moved toward the waiting black Suburban. Higbee, a broad-shouldered man in his late forties, led the team. His close-cropped hair was silvering at the temples, but his eyes were sharp and restless.

Behind Higbee, Mason and Torres, two lifelong mercenaries, followed. Mason, stocky and built like a linebacker, rolled his shoulders as he walked, his outfit tight around his chest. Torres, leaner but just as formidable, kept his hands in the pockets of his tactical jacket, scanning the area with the quiet wariness of a man who had seen things go bad too many times before.

The men climbed into a black SUV, the engine purring to life. They were quiet,

disappointed that once again none of them had found what they were looking for tonight.

#

“We need to sit,” said Sloane.

Victoria followed him to a park called Marcus Garvey Park, where he sat on a bench while she went to get coffee. The park was quiet.

Sloane pulled a controller out of his pocket. It had a screen. An image appeared on the controller.

The intruders appeared on the small handheld screen.

Sloane had launched a drone earlier, and it now hovered silently overhead, tracking the vehicle’s movement with precise, mechanical grace as the unwelcome visitors drove away.

Victoria approached with two steaming coffee cups in hand. She handed him one and slid onto the bench beside him, her eyes narrowing as she caught the flicker of the screen.

“What is that?” she asked, leaning in.

Sloane took a sip, eyes still fixed on the screen. “Insurance.”

He toggled the controller, guiding the drone as the SUV merged onto 9A South. Traffic was light. The black SUV was alone on the road. Sloane’s thumb hovered over the button.

Then, he pressed it.

A flash of light, then a fireball filled the screen. The explosion was precise, almost clinical. No collateral damage, no stray casualties. Just three men, gone in an instant, reduced to ash and memory.

Sloane didn’t flinch. He had seen it before, clean kills, calculated flames, and dreadful endings. But he also knew the truth: this was just the beginning. As the enemy crept closer,

relentless and methodical, the body count would rise. Precision would give way to chaos, and the cost would no longer be measured in numbers alone, but in lives lost.

Sloane exhaled, his jaw tight. “That’s for Esposito.”

Victoria swallowed hard. The man she had fallen for was lethal, precise, and cold. And as the fire reflected in his eyes, she realized something else.

This was far from over.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

The reality of the situation was unbearable. An airliner bound for Washington, D.C., had been hijacked, its course possibly aimed at the White House. The demands of the attackers were impossible to meet, untenable ultimatums that left the government with no room to negotiate.

At 5:47 AM, President Lang made the hardest decision of his presidency. He gave the order.

In the twilight of morning, a pair of F-16 fighter jets intercepted the Boeing 747, shadowing it for miles as it sped toward the capital. The pilots waited for a miracle, some last-second intervention, a deviation, a surrender. None came.

A last demand to surrender was sent. But without a response from the hijackers, John McCain, the squadron leader, stated the single command, and began the countdown- 10, 9, 8... in unison, the jets fired.

The missiles struck their target with horrifying precision. Fire exploded across the pre-



dawn sky, a violent bloom of orange and black as the 747 disintegrated midair, its shattered fuselage raining down in a storm of twisted metal and human lives. All 320 passengers and crew perished in an instant.

Minutes later, every news outlet received the announcement: A Boeing 747 had exploded, eighty miles off the Washington D.C. coast. No reason had yet been provided. The waking nation watched the news in stunned silence. Half an hour later, every television network had its helicopters survey the scene. News anchors cut to live footage. It was a nightmare. Soon, every social media platform ignited with questions, doubts, and not-so-far-fetched scenarios for the crash. America was in shock and outraged. The raw, unfiltered aftermath of the moment replayed in an endless loop, screen after screen flashing images of debris floating on the stormy sea, a somber graveyard.

But the next event was difficult to disguise as an accident.

Shortly after the scenes of the plane appeared all over the world, it became clear: This was not just a crisis.

This was war. America was a nation under attack.

At 8:36 AM, an oil delivery truck barreled through the security gate of the FBI field office in Minneapolis. The lone driver of the ten-wheeler, silent and resolute, smashed through the barricade, forcing the armed guard to dive for cover. Without slowing, the truck veered toward the underground parking structure and vanished beneath the building.

At the same moment, a second, much larger oil tanker roared through the glass entrance of the FBI office, reducing the lobby to a storm of shattering glass and crumbling concrete.

Alarms blared. Employees screamed. Chaos erupted.

As terrified employees flooded toward the exits, two additional oil trucks positioned themselves at opposite corners of the structure. Four suicide bombers. Four synchronized detonations.

The explosions ripped through the building's foundation, sending a fireball of gasoline and debris shooting skyward. In under two minutes, the 12-story building imploded, pancaking down in a thunderous collapse.

Inside, an estimated 400 FBI agents, analysts, and staff were buried alive.

Outside, the streets were filled with smoke, ash, and the chilling wail of sirens.

At FBI Headquarters in Washington, D.C., Acting Director Elliot Grayson watched in horror as live security feeds from the destroyed field office flickered and died.

“Get me Homeland Security, now!” he barked, his voice cutting through the frantic room.

Within seconds, the Bureau's Emergency Operations Center went into full lockdown. Teams from the Counterterrorism Division, the National Security Branch, and Cyber Operations worked in overdrive, scanning for chatter, tracking suspicious financial transactions, and decoding intercepted messages.

One thing was clear: This was no accident.

The Council of the Night had delivered a message in fire and blood.

The President's War Room was a secure bunker ten blocks from the white House and four floors underground.

President Walter Lang prepared to address the nation. His unofficial team of Green Berets had grown to twenty soldiers constantly by the president's side. They were stationed outside the door of the conference room. He received classified briefings as the entire country

spiraled into fear and panic.

His National Security Advisor, Ethan Wells, leaned in. “Sir, if we don’t act decisively, we’ll lose control of the narrative.”

Lang nodded grimly. “The narrative? What the hell is that supposed to mean? We’re at war,” he snapped, already knowing what was coming. The pre-markets were in freefall. The global community was watching. And in the eyes of his people, the United States government had just been caught flat-footed.

The imprisoned Administrator’s words echoed in his mind: “America will burn.”

With a deep breath, Lang stepped into the make-shift press briefing room, facing a nation on the edge to capture a pre-recorded message.

“My fellow Americans,” he began, his voice steady, yet weighted with the gravity of the moment. “Today, we have suffered two unprecedented acts of terror designed to strike at the heart of our justice system and our way of life.”

He paused, letting the gravity sink in.

“I want to be clear: We will hunt down those responsible. We will dismantle their networks, cripple their finances, and sever their lines of communication. And to those who believe they can sow fear in the heart of America, hear me now. You have not weakened us. You have only awakened the unshakable resolve of the United States of America.”

Satisfied with the intensity and firmness in President Lang’s delivery, his assistant swiftly uploaded the speech to a secure server. An email was then dispatched to every major news network worldwide, containing a direct link for immediate download and broadcast.

Across the country, millions watched in silence, in homes, in bars, and in office buildings

where people huddled around computer screens.

But in the shadows, those who orchestrated the attack were already preparing for their next move.

The worst was yet to come.

The aftermath of these two events was horrendous; markets were now in freefall.

The stock market had lost over 25% of its value for the year, wiping out trillions of dollars in wealth. The financial system teetered on the edge of collapse, as mutual funds crumbled, IRAs evaporated, and pension accounts disintegrated.

This was no ordinary downturn. This was a financial catastrophe.

And now, the Councilium Noctis, the organization that had lurked in the shadows for years, was executing the final phase of its nefarious plan.

The Administrator's warning had been clear: the money hidden in dark pools, the shadowy, unregulated exchanges used by financial elites, would flood the market with sell orders at an unprecedented pace. Billions, then trillions, would bleed out of the system as investors, corporations, and power brokers dumped their assets in a desperate bid to escape the chaos.

It had been ten days since the Administrator's chilling threat reached the White House. In that short span, the markets hemorrhaged under relentless pressure, unraveling decades of financial stability. Panic spread like wildfire. Banks, once fortresses of economic power, found themselves on the verge of collapse, executives scrambling to secure government bailouts just to stay afloat.

Hedge funds, bloated with reckless leverage, crumbled overnight, entire portfolios wiped out within hours. The financial sector reeled, each failure sending shockwaves through an

already fragile system. The air was thick with desperation, and Washington was running out of time.

Secretary of the Treasury Jane Holt, once a force in Washington, had become a ghost. Where was she? The nation demanded answers, but Holt had faded into the background, offering only a single and vague press conference in a feeble attempt to tame the public's concerns.

It wasn't enough. Nothing was enough.

This was bigger than a stock market crash. This was the systematic unraveling of America's economic dominance.

And the world was next.

### Chapter Thirty-Three

The converted warehouse, nestled deep in Harlem, was a sanctuary for the best hackers in the world. Owned by billionaire Max Whitney, the space was a fortress of digital warfare, brick walls enclosing a vast room with wood floors, dim lighting casting long shadows, and windows blackened by thick curtains. In one corner, an industrial-style kitchen churned out endless cups of coffee, fueling a team that had been working nonstop through the night.

BlackEcho 21 had been tasked with tracking James, the Administrator's driver. Within an hour, she had a location. She had hacked the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, the primary agency responsible for analyzing satellite images and geospatial intelligence, or GEOINT. Unbeknownst to most, the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency's satellites captured every moment and everywhere in high-resolution images in real-time, a constant, unblinking eye in the sky. Every frame was archived, allowing analysts to rewind time, track movements, and uncover hidden patterns.

A suspect appearing in one location could be traced backward and forward, their past steps illuminated like footprints in the sand. Layered with data from satellites, drones, reconnaissance aircraft, and ground surveillance, the imagery painted a multi-dimensional picture, vehicles shifting, ships docking, and figures slipping through alleyways. Even the cover of night offered no escape; infrared and synthetic aperture radar pierced through darkness, clouds, even dense urban landscapes. And when something changed, a hastily abandoned vehicle, a newly erected barrier, AI-powered detection flagged the anomaly, feeding intelligence teams the breadcrumbs they needed to close in. There was no hiding, not anymore.

BlackEcho21's fingers flew over the keyboard, screens flickering with data streams as she tracked James' movements in real time. The Administrator's driver was on the move, heading south, and he was very careful.

"He's smart," Sparrow, looking over Bee's shoulder, said, eyes darting between satellite pings and heat maps. "He's swapping transport, throwing off digital footprints."

James wasn't taking any chances. He had ditched his car in a six-story, long-term parking lot near Newark Airport. Not at Departures, not even at Arrivals, he parked in a public lot, walking away without looking back. Security cameras caught him boarding a shuttle to a rental car facility.

Minutes later, BlackEcho21 cracked into the rental car company's backend, scrolling through flagged transactions. There. James had rented a gray sedan under a false name.

"Got him," Bee whispered. She followed the digital trail, but it vanished.

The car never made it to the highway.

She cursed under his breath. "He swapped again."

James had driven less than forty miles before dumping the rental at a rest stop. He walked inside, changed clothes, and exited through the side door. Footage had to be highly enhanced to clearly show James slipping into the back of a long-haul bus bound for Richmond, Virginia.

“We need more,” BlackEcho21 said. The man would soon become a ghost. He moved like someone who had done this before.

They pivoted, hacking into the Department of Transportation’s network. Every ticket purchase, every transit log, every facial recognition hit at a toll booth became a data point in their hunt.

Buses, trains, even traffic cameras. Anything to get ahead of James.

Another hit, Washington, D.C. Greyhound station. James had purchased a ticket, climbed the few steps into the bus, but had gotten off and disappeared. Another gap. Another trick.

Then the mistake.

Bee’s screen flashed red. “Wait.” She expanded the data logs. “He’s in a train station. He just,”

“He made a call,” BlackEcho21 finished.

James had broken a basic safety protocol.

A burner phone, traced to a Sarasota, Florida, number. The recipient? His girlfriend, most likely.

The algorithm locked in on the cell tower, triangulating his exact position.

“He’s in Washington Union Station,” Sparrow said, helping Bee now.

BlackEcho was already moving. “He just picked up a rental car. We’ve got him.”

The team had more than James to worry about. A discreet microphone, planted inside the



Administrator's mansion, had provided crucial intel. Two more names had surfaced, Mr. Churchill and Viktor Luchenkov.

Mr. Churchill was the well-dressed enforcer, a man of refinement in the brutal world of Manhattan's underbelly. Stylish, poised, and ever polite, he carried himself with the quiet confidence of a man who had long thrived in the shadows. But beneath the tailored suits and measured charm lay a ruthless operative, one who had cleanly, efficiently, and without hesitation removed obstacles for The Council of the Night.

Yet now, he was the obstacle.

The moment Churchill learned that Luchenkov, the Council's most ruthless, blood-soaked executioner, was on his way to Manhattan, he knew his time had run out.

Luchenkov wasn't just a killer; he was a force of nature, a man whose presence alone meant the Council had no intention of asking questions.

Churchill had failed. He had not delivered the Administrator, and in the Council's world, failure was unforgivable.

There was no time to fight, no negotiation to be had. He had seen others in his position before, men who had thought they could reason with the Council's wrath. Their remains had been unrecognizable.

So Churchill did the only thing he could; he disappeared. He abandoned the life he had built, the networks he had cultivated, and the power he had wielded. None of it mattered now. Survival was the only currency left.

He had to be found, and BlackEcho 21 was immediately assigned to track him.

Sparrow, meanwhile, was fighting an uphill battle, struggling to breach Bogdonov's

heavily fortified servers.

By 2 AM, BlackEcho 21 had joined Sparrow, their screens glowing with cascading lines of code as they worked in tense silence. Firewalls loomed like digital fortresses, Intrusion Detection Systems (IDS) lurked like sentinels, watching for the faintest anomaly. Every keystroke had to be perfect; one misstep, one detected packet out of place, and alarms would flood the system, alerting their unknown adversary.

Sparrow exhaled sharply. “We’re in their outer perimeter, but it’s dense, multiple layers of defense.” He gestured to a shifting map of network nodes, each one a potential tripwire. “This isn’t just security. This is paranoia.”

BlackEcho 21 cracked her knuckles. “Then we play patient.”

They deployed a cascade of diversionary pings, flooding lesser nodes with harmless requests, hoping to draw attention away from their true target. At the same time, they activated a polymorphic malware packet, an evolving ghost program designed to slip past heuristic scanners undetected. Every time it reached a gate, it changed, adapting, rewriting itself mid-transmission to mimic harmless system traffic.

Still, progress was agonizingly slow.

“Damn it,” Sparrow muttered. The proxy routing was stalling, forcing them to reroute through servers in South Korea, then Prague, then São Paulo, a scattered digital trail designed to obscure their true origin. But the delays were excruciating. The encryption key they needed remained buried deep within layers of obfuscation, hidden behind shifting security protocols that adapted in real time. Whoever had set this up had anticipated intruders.

A sudden spike in network activity flashed red on BlackEcho’s screen. Her heart

pounded. Had they been spotted?

“Hold still.” BlackEcho froze their outgoing requests, forcing the system to idle. If someone was watching, they needed to look like ordinary background traffic. Seconds passed. Too long.

Sparrow whispered, barely breathing. “If they trace us, we’re done.”

Finally, the activity normalized.

Max Whitney stepped into the dimly lit operations room, the hum of machines filling the air like static. In his hands, he carried a matte black laptop: sleek, unmarked, and heavier than it looked. He placed it carefully on the metal table between the two hackers.

Both paused, fingers hovering above their keyboards, eyes narrowing. Max didn’t hand them just any device; this one radiated a quiet menace, like it *knew* things.

“This just came from DARPA,” Max said. His voice was calm, but it carried weight. “Most advanced AI-hacking software ever designed. Prototype. No off switch. No manual. Built to breach, adapt, and evolve faster than anything we’ve ever seen.”

Sparrow glanced at BlackEcho21, then back at Max, raised an eyebrow. “You brought us a ghost machine?”

Max gave a half-smile. “Something like that.”

BlackEcho21 leaned forward, inspecting the device without touching it. No labels, a few ports visible, no brand. Just a smooth, obsidian shell that seemed to hum with potential. “What should we know before we turn it on?”

Max replied. “It’s a weapon.”

Max nodded once. “Plug it into your primary rig. Don’t boot it independently. The

moment it connects, this laptop becomes the brain, and your entire system becomes the body. Every processor, every thread, every shred of bandwidth will be rerouted under its control. Think of it as a parasitic override, but friendly. Mostly.”

Sparrow frowned. “Mostly?”

“It won’t steal your data,” Max said. “But it will run its own logic tree. It’s programmed to learn your habits, anticipate your moves, and optimize them. It’ll get faster than you. Smarter, if you let it. You’ll be the fingers, it’ll be the mind.”

BlackEcho21 looked at the device like it might bite. “So... this thing just takes over?”

“It thinks,” Max said. “Faster than you, smarter than both of you combined, and it doesn’t sleep. It learns your habits, predicts targets before you find them, and refines attacks mid-deployment. That’s why DARPA sealed it.”

BlackEcho21 crossed his arms. “And now you unsealed it?”

Max’s expression hardened. “We’re out of time. The Council is hiding behind systems even the NSA can’t touch. This is our scalpel.”

There was a long silence.

Sparrow tapped the lid of the laptop lightly. “What happens if it turns on us?”

Max gave a dry chuckle. “Then let’s hope you’ve backed up your souls.” He turned to leave but stopped at the doorway.

“The moment you lift its cover, a window appears. Enter your prompt. Like, access this network. Give it the most recent IP address, and any VPN information you have, and sit back.”

Max answered.”

“Great. We have been struggling with Bogdonov’s network.”

“You give it access, and it’ll tear through encryption like wet paper,” Max said as he stepped back from the table. “Take your time. Ask questions.”

He returned to his station, then stopped, just before disappearing down the hall. “Oh, and once it’s in... don’t try to outthink it. Just hang on.”

BlackEcho21 exhaled, wiping sweat from his brow. He entered his prompt and all necessary information and turned to Sparrow. There was no margin for error.

They watched as the DARPA laptop pressed on, slipping deeper. Finally, after an agonizing fourteen minutes, the algorithms found their way in. The encryption key flickered onto the screen. A string of hexadecimals. A gateway into the system’s most sensitive layers.

Bee allowed herself a small grin. “We’re in.”

But the feeling of triumph was short-lived.

A new alert flashed, one neither of them had triggered.

Someone else was in the system. And they weren’t alone. They work furiously to render their code invisible. It worked.

By 5 AM, they had successfully inserted themselves into the system, subtly altering access codes and embedding a few discreet lines of text. It was an uphill fight.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

At precisely 5:00 AM, Agent Elaine Steele boarded a private FBI jet at Washington D.C.'s Reagan National Airport, bound for Sarasota, Florida. The morning air was crisp, the city still cloaked in darkness as she settled into the leather seat of the nearly empty cabin. Steele, 38, was a Midwesterner through and through; straight-talking, methodical, and possessed of an easy smile that masked her razor-sharp mind. She had always been meticulous, a trait that served her well in the Bureau, though sometimes veered into the realm of obsessive-compulsiveness.

Alone in the cabin, she reviewed the details of her assignment. The hum of the engines was a steady white noise as she flipped through her notes, committing the finer details to memory. The flight was uneventful, just as she liked it.

When she landed in Sarasota, the Florida sun was already burning away the morning mist. The small, private airstrip was nearly deserted, except for one man leaning against a government-issue sedan, arms crossed.

John Beckwith.

The veteran agent had a face like old leather, his skin weathered by years of long stakeouts and bad habits. He was probably counting the days to retirement.

“Beckwith,” Steele said as she approached, her voice level.

The older agent gave her a nod, his gravelly voice thick from years of smoking. “Yeah, got your message. Drop you off, wait in the car, call for backup if needed, then drive you back.”

“Great,” she said, sliding into the passenger seat.

The drive out of Sarasota proper took them toward the outskirts, where the buildings grew sparse and the roads more desolate.

The Blue Pelican, her destination, was the kind of place where time stood still. The diner had seen better days. The faded blue paint peeled in long strips from the wooden siding, and the neon sign flickered intermittently, buzzing like a dying wasp. Inside, the scent of burnt coffee and greasy bacon clung to the air. The floor tiles, once white, had yellowed with age, and the vinyl booths bore the scars of a thousand customers.

Steele stepped inside, her eyes sweeping the room in a single, calculated glance.

In the far corner, a man sat alone.

He wore a cloth cap pulled low over his eyes, a thick beard masking the sharpness of his jaw. His Hawaiian shirt and worn flip-flops screamed tourist, but Steele knew better.

Damien Spade, also known as James. The former driver for a very dangerous person in New York City.

She slid into the booth across from him, pulled out her badge, and placed it on the table between them.

“Mr. Spade? Do you mind?” she asked, her tone neutral but firm.

He exhaled slowly, his fingers tightening around his coffee cup. “Depends,” he said, his voice measured. “What’s this about?”

Steele rested her hands on the table, adjusting the silverware with precise movements. She straightened the paper napkin, squared off the condiments tray, and exhaled. The compulsive need for order always flared up in situations like this.

“Or shall I call you James?” she asked, letting the weight of the question settle.

Spade’s eyes flickered with something: surprise, irritation, maybe anger.

She pulled out her phone and dialed her chief in Washington. The call was brief. After a moment, she hung up and looked back at Spade.

“Well,” she said, slipping her phone into her pocket. “Lucky day for you. We’re not taking you into custody.”

Spade let out a slow breath, shoulders relaxing. “That so?”

“Yeah.” She leaned back. “But we need the address of the high-tech center the Administrator used, and his office.”

Spade blinked, incredulous. “The Administrator told you about that?”

Steele didn’t answer. She just watched him, letting the silence stretch. Spade studied her face, then exhaled, shaking his head.

“Four floors below ground,” he muttered at last. “Parking garage. New York City.”

James kept going, sharing crucial details: address, access code, location of surveillance cameras. It took a few minutes.

Steele nodded, noting the location.



Her job here was done.

She slid out of the booth, left a few bills on the table for the coffee she did not drink, and walked out into the Florida sun. Within the hour, she was back on the FBI plane, leaving Sarasota in the rearview.

Case closed, for now..

Steele's next destination sounded appealing at first: Montego Bay, the jewel of Jamaica's northern coast, known for its white sandy beaches and turquoise waters. But Steele wasn't here for a vacation. She was heading to Rose Heights, one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in the city, a place where even the authorities warned tourists not to venture.

Montego Bay had a staggering murder rate, averaging over three per day, and the man Steele was after had a brother who ran a gang there.

Her target was a man known only as "Mr. Churchill", the Council of the Night's ruthless enforcer.

The FBI jet touched down at Sangster International Airport at 3:00 PM. The humid air hit her as soon as she stepped onto the tarmac, thick and sticky, carrying the scent of saltwater, charred meat from roadside grills, and the faint but ever-present tang of gasoline.

The sun was merciless, forcing Steele to shade her eyes as she stepped off the plane. Unlike her previous mission, this time she was met by a larger team, six local FBI agents, two armored SUVs, and enough firepower to make their presence known.

The tension was palpable as she approached the lead agent, a tall Jamaican with sharp eyes and a weathered face that spoke of years in the field. His stance was relaxed, but Steele knew better; this was a man who had seen too much to ever truly let his guard down.

Steele wasted no time. “What’s the setup?” she asked, her voice sharp, her eyes scanning the gathered men.

The agent nodded. “Mr. Churchill is staying at the Water’s Edge Guest House, about fourteen miles west of Montego Bay. It’s a luxury retreat and is paid for through his brother’s company. The brother is a local warlord, controls most of Rose Heights. We assume he’s got eyes on every street.”

Steele nodded, absorbing the information. “And his movements?”

“Churchill never sticks to a routine,” another agent chimed in, checking a worn notebook. “One day he’s up at dawn, the next he sleeps until noon. Plays golf once, then doesn’t go back for a week. Never eats at the same place twice. He’s careful.”

“Smart,” she said. “So, how do we get him?”

“His girlfriend,” the senior agent replied. “She’s got an appointment, chiropractor, hair stylist, something like that. We don’t know if it’s a regular thing, but we know one thing for sure: he’ll drive her there.”

Steele exhaled, considering the angles. “That’s our window.”

Mr. Churchill had vanished from Manhattan the day the Administrator disappeared, slipping into the lawless underbelly of Jamaica, convinced he had erased his past. He no longer wore the gold ring emblazoned with “C.N.”, a remnant of his former allegiance to the \*Concilium Noctis\*. Once a figure of power and intimidation, he now moved cautiously, stripped of his once-commanding presence.

The resort was a temporary sanctuary in a country that didn’t ask too many questions, but even careful men made mistakes. And today, his mistake was trust.

The ambush was swift, brutal. Four men closed in on him in the dusty lot behind a small, nondescript building, a squat concrete structure with rusted metal bars on the windows and a battered sign that had long since lost its letters. The heat was suffocating, sweat trickling down the men's faces as they moved.

Mr. Churchill barely had time to react. A sharp cry of protest left his lips before he was slammed against the hood of a car, arms wrenched behind his back. The fight was over before it began.

Back at headquarters, he confessed everything within minutes, hoping for leniency. But there had been too many murders, too many crimes. Forgiveness was never on the table.

Two hours later, he was shackled and escorted onto a plane bound for the United States.

As Steele wrapped up the operation, her phone buzzed. She answered, already anticipating her next orders.

Her chief's voice was clipped. "We can't locate Lukechankov. Go to New York City."

Steele closed her eyes for a brief moment, letting the weight of the next mission settle in. The hunt wasn't over. If anything, it was only the beginning.

Time to move again.

## Chapter Thirty-Five

Victoria jolted awake, her mind restless, her body tense. The air in the room was thick, heavy with the lingering warmth of sleep. The soft hum of the city outside barely penetrated the stillness of the townhouse. She blinked, her eyes adjusting to the dim golden glow of the digital clock on the nightstand, 2:09 AM. The numbers cast faint, ghostly reflections against the polished wood, their glow the only sign of life in the otherwise silent room.

She turned to the other side of the bed, her fingers grazing the cool silk sheets, empty. A hollow space where Martin should have been. A pang of unease curled in her stomach, sharper than the chill creeping along her skin.

The last few days had been a whirlwind of doubt, emotion, and fear. Her life had changed forever on that fateful day, the day she had answered that single message in her inbox: “Want the scoop of a lifetime?”

She had typed a simple response: “Listening.”

Now, she wondered what might have happened if she had ignored it.

The scoop of a lifetime had cost her more than she could have ever imagined.

Slipping out of bed, Victoria padded barefoot down the sleek wooden staircase, the townhouse silent save for the soft creak of polished floorboards beneath her steps. The air carried the faint scent of espresso.

She found Martin perched on the windowsill, his silhouette outlined against the city lights. His gaze was distant, lost in thought.

"What's up?" he asked without turning.

"I don't know, Martin," she murmured, stepping closer. She touched his arm, warmth radiating through his skin. He turned to her, eyes dark with something unspoken.

She kissed him, slow and lingering, as if trying to memorize the shape of him, the taste of him. When they parted, her voice wavered.

"I'm confused." A whisper. "About us. About the blog. About the violence."

Martin exhaled sharply. "I'm so sorry, Victoria."

She shook her head, her fingers tightening around his. "I wish you'd left me in Prague. I wish I'd never answered that damn message. But I did. And now... I don't know."

The chime of a car horn echoed through the window. The space around them was warm and inviting, the kind of place meant for safety, not shadows.

The Astor Row townhouse was a testament to old New York elegance; red brick walls, high ceilings, and polished mahogany floors gave the home an air of understated luxury. She looked at the bookshelves that lined the wall across the room, filled with hundreds, perhaps thousands of books, their spines a mosaic of faded colors, gilded lettering, and well-worn

paperbacks, each carrying the weight of countless stories and the touch of eager hands. A Persian rug softened the stark modern furniture.

Victoria stepped away from Martin, pressed a button on the La Marzocco espresso machine, a top-of-the-line Italian import, its sleek metallic surface reflecting the dim glow of the kitchen appliances. The machine purred to life, a low, steady hum that filled the silence as the rich aroma of freshly ground coffee swirled through the air, warm and indulgent. She reached for the milk and poured just enough into the gleaming steel pitcher. As she turned the steam wand, a sharp hiss cut through the quiet, frothy clouds rising as she carefully swirled the milk, coaxing it into a silky, velvety texture. A simple ritual, grounded in its familiarity, yet outside these walls, chaos waited, patient and unrelenting.

Martin's voice broke the quiet. "We have to move."

She turned, heart pounding. "Why?"

"There was a glitch at the Harlem factory. Max wants us all to be safe."

Another move. Another safe house. More guns. More running.

"Where?" she asked.

"Not far. We'll meet Monroe, Max, and the rest of the team."

Victoria sipped her coffee; its warmth and strong flavor gave her a sense of peace, grounding her.

Since she had published her article, the blog had detonated like a bomb, sending shockwaves throughout the world. It wasn't just a story; it was a reckoning. Governments scrambled to remain silent, but none denied the existence of the Council of the Night.

The Intelligence agencies, which had secretly served the nefarious cartel, distanced

themselves from the truth; they were accomplices. The shadowy spies who thrived in anonymity refused to have their names dragged into the light.

Overnight, Victoria had gone from an investigative journalist to a disruptor of power, her words shaking the foundations of institutions that had long operated unrivaled.

It had started with whispers in the dark corners of the internet, theories spun in underground forums. Then, it became a wildfire. Her audience had skyrocketed from 1.2 million to 2.3 million subscribers in a matter of days.

The Councilium Noctis had once been nothing more than whispers in the shadows, a ghost story, a legend murmured among those who knew better than to ask too many questions. But now, its name carried weight, spoken not just in fear but with the uneasy reverence reserved for those who operated beyond the law, beyond consequences. Once an undeniable force, whose influence reached the highest echelons of power, saw its authority begin to wane.

Victoria, thanks to Max and his team of genius hackers, had traced, with relentless precision, every move the Council of the Night had made toward total supremacy over the world's financial markets, every clandestine transaction, woven through a labyrinth of offshore accounts and digital black markets, now unmasked. A tactical triumph of financial forensics accounting.

The team unearthed patterns where others saw only randomness. They dissected cryptic messages buried deep within obscure financial trails and exposed the intricate web of alliances that upheld their empire. Each revelation was a crack in the façade, pulling the strings that held the Council together and threatening to unravel everything.

And with each revelation, the Council had now turned its gaze toward her and the group

she had joined. What had once been an invisible war was now personal, and she knew there was no turning back.

Secrets had been exposed, alliances shattered. The deeper she dug, the more dangerous the game became. She had survived assassination attempts, cyberattacks, and relentless threats. But survival came at a cost: paranoia, constant relocation, the weight of knowing too much.

And now, it seemed, they were coming for her again.

The alarm chirped softly, low, discreet, but enough to raise the hairs on her arms.

Martin pivoted to the security screens. "Someone's outside."

Victoria moved closer. The high-end cameras snapped shot after shot, each image revealing a figure lurking near the townhouse's perimeter.

"Who is he?" she asked, voice tight.

Martin's jaw clenched. "An unwelcome guest, I think."

The man loitered for another moment, then disappeared into the shadows.

Martin quickly forwarded the images he captured from the surveillance cameras to Max. His message was brief: "Can we get an ID?"

Five minutes later, his phone buzzed with a notification. A reply from Sparrow. Martin read it aloud, his voice low and tense.

"Viktor Luchenkov. 'The Maiden Killer'. Russian asset. Extremely dangerous. Beware."

Victoria's pulse thundered in her ears.

They weren't running fast enough.



## Chapter Thirty-Six

The administrator had been in custody for a week, locked in a featureless, gray-walled cell that reeked of disinfectant and despair. The fluorescent light overhead buzzed softly, its cold glow erasing all sense of time. The mattress on the cot was thin, barely more than a slab of padding over steel. There was no mirror, no window, just the unyielding presence of four blank walls pressing in. He had always been the one in control, the one who dictated terms. Whether it was in high school, college, or at his various jobs, he always managed to have his way. Now, he had no control at all.

He heard steps getting close and stopped. The steel door groaned open. A short, unimposing man with a slight limp entered, his presence as colorless as the prison itself. He wore an unremarkable gray suit, and in his hands, he carried a two-inch-thick blue folder. The blue was the only touch of color in the cell, the Administrator noticed.

“My name is John Smith.” The man’s voice was nasal, clipped, and emotionless. “I work

for the U.S. government. Office of Special Affairs at the Justice Department. Mr. Clint Andrew Marlow, you are in very big trouble, I would say.”

The Administrator sat rigid, his hands clasped so tightly his knuckles whitened. He had not been called by his birth name in a long time. Though he tried to keep breathing normally, inside, his stomach twisted. He felt the weight of the week pressing down on him, sleep deprivation, the sterile cold, the crushing silence. His skin itched from days without proper hygiene, his once-pristine nails were ragged from anxious picking. The last vestiges of his carefully curated life were slipping away, leaving only the raw, exposed truth: he would never, ever be free again.

Smith settled onto the metal chair that a guard had brought and sat across from Marlow. As the Administrator, he was the most feared man. But Smith did not care. He placed the folder on the bed beside the Administrator. Methodically, he flipped open the folder and began to slowly turn the pages. Surveillance photos. Financial records. Names. Places. The evidence was damning. A lifetime of shadows laid bare in cold ink.

“No need to go into details, Mr. Marlow. You were there, after all.”

Marlow said nothing, his jaw locked. But inside, rage boiled. Not at the evidence, he had known it existed. Not at Smith, he was a tool, nothing more. But at the betrayal. Triggs. Churchill. James. They had all talked. He had built an empire on silence, on secrets. And yet, here he was, abandoned, deserted, undone.

“Higbee was killed in Manhattan,” Smith said flatly and paused for emphasis. “Did you know he had a passion for writing thriller fiction?”

The Administrator did not answer.

“Your problem, sir, is that the idiot lacked any imagination, and so he made *you* the subject of his first novel. His first draft read like your personal calendar: the kill orders you demanded, the violence you directed. His notes were an entire laundry list of violence, threats, and the murders you commanded. All of it in full detail, with dates, names. His most recent pages mention a certain *Matt Whitfield*. We’re assuming that the mission was targeting Max Whitney. It was so precise... so specific... we know everything now. Not your greatest hire, I would say.”

A silence stretched between them, taut with fury, shock, and regret. Marlow’s shoulders slumped.

Smith exhaled, then leaned forward, hands folded on the table. “Your choices are simple. You can rot in a high-security cell until the end of your miserable days. Or,” He slid a document across the table. “You sign. You tell us everything. And maybe, just maybe, one day you’ll see the sky again as a free man.”

Marlow’s fingers twitched against his knee. His ivory tower had collapsed. His kingdom, reduced to four walls and the relentless ticking of time. He glanced at the paper, the words blurring in his vision. His hand trembled as he picked up the pen. A signature. A single act of surrender.

With shaking hands, he signed.

Smith smiled, a barely perceptible shift of his lips. He retrieved the paper, smoothing it with meticulous care before tucking it away.

“Good.”

The door opened again. Two masked soldiers entered, stepping aside as the air in the

room seemed to change, charged with something sharper, heavier.

Secretary of the Treasury Jane Holt strode in, her presence a stark contrast to the drab, lifeless cell. Impeccably dressed in a tailored deep blue suit, she strode in, her heels clicking against the concrete floor. Her hair was swept into a severe bun, not a strand out of place. But it was her eyes, cool and sharp as steel, that made Marlow's breath hitch.

She tilted her head, studying him with an unreadable expression. Once, he had dismissed her as a bureaucrat, an obstacle easily maneuvered around. Now, she stood over him, victorious, the weight of justice or vengeance settling on her shoulders.

A slow, knowing smirk tugged at the corner of her mouth.

"How are you doing, A?" she asked, her voice smooth, almost amused.

Marlow clenched his fists, but he didn't answer. He couldn't. Because for the first time in his life, he had no words. No power.

And Jane Holt knew it.

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

Lang heard a soft knock on the door. Then, a voice. “Sir. We have to move.” He looked up.

One stood in the doorway, unreadable as ever. His most trusted Green Beret. A man who never wasted words.

Lang exhaled slowly. “Where to?”

“One hour west. Farm’s secured. No signals, no eyes. Off-grid, just like you asked.”

“Let’s go.”

They turned toward the waiting convoy, boots crunching on gravel. But One stopped short, his voice low and firm.

“Sir,” he said. “I think we have a mole.”

The president turned back, expression unreadable. “Do you?”

“Something doesn’t add up,” One said. “Movement patterns. Timing. The hit on Vice President Harper and the head of the SEC. Too clean. These were professional hits.”

Lang studied him for a moment. The air between them felt heavier.

“How deep do you think it goes?”

“Deep enough that my team’s not talking in front of anyone.”

Lang’s jaw tightened. “You trust your men?”

“With my life. This team is a closed circle. But intel’s leaking from somewhere. Not chatter, directional movement. Someone’s signaling.”

Lang glanced toward the armored SUV, then back at One, the man he’d personally pulled out of a black ops unit in Niger. “I have maybe three people I still trust,” he said. “And two of them are quite busy right now.”

One didn’t blink. “Then we work from the inside out. Quiet. Surgical.”

Lang gave a nod, more to himself than anyone else.

“Once we get to the farm, I’ll give you names. People who might help.”

One’s eyes flicked up to meet his. “Understood.”

Lang’s voice dropped to a growl. “We find the leak. We seal it. And if this Council of the Night has someone in my house...”

He let the thought hang in the air like a blade.

One gave a slight nod. “Then we burn the house down.”

Lang turned toward the car. “Good.”

The motorcade slipped out of the White House under the cover of night. Ten Green Berets. No Secret Service. The order had been clear: no one outside the small inner circle of soldiers could be trusted.

But trust was already broken.

Max Trutter, a seasoned Secret Service agent, moved unnoticed through the shadows. As the President's SUV idled, he approached the vehicle. His fingers discreetly placed a black and tiny disc, no larger than a raindrop, on the front bumper: a tracker. He pressed it into place. The tracker latched on seamlessly. Black on black, no one would notice it.

Then Trutter stepped back, blending into the group of Secret Service agents waiting uselessly by the vehicle.

Seconds later, the convoy pulled away, rolling into the streets of D.C. The President believed he was vanishing into the night.

He wasn't.

#

They travelled to Loudoun County, Virginia, forty-five minutes outside the capital, to a farm. It sat nestled in rolling hills, isolated, quiet. Perfect for disappearing.

The team spread out, securing the perimeter with practiced efficiency. Twenty Green Berets were already in position, with another sixty forming a one-mile ring around the property. Two unmarked trucks had rolled in hours earlier, unloading crates of weapons and ammunition. Assault rifles, machine guns, and handguns, enough firepower to arm a small battalion. Boxes of ammo were stacked beside gear cases packed with grenades, breaching tools, and surveillance equipment. Explosives had been prepped for fallback points. Overhead, drones swept the skies in wide, silent arcs. Motion sensors blinked to life along tree lines and approach paths. No margin for error.

Lang stepped out of the SUV. The air smelled of damp earth and wood smoke. For the

first time since Harper's assassination, he let himself breathe.

Over the next few hours, President Lang settled in and began to adjust to this new reality, so many murders, so much turmoil, and all of it just to satisfy the immense greed of a banking cartel.

He called Holt and learned the Administrator was in a secure location. In exchange for his life, he had given all the information they asked for. Everything, except what mattered most, he did not know the identities of the men behind the Concilium Noctis.

"So what is the plan?" asked Lang

"Whitney is moving fast, 2 days maybe, and we should have all the information we need."

"That's if we survive the next two days." Answered Lang, pessimistic. They hung up.

The sun was setting. A bland dinner of rice and beans was served, no fancy meal, no special treatment. Lang was fine with that.

He retired to a large room. It had a patio, and Lang decided to sit there for a while.

The Council of the Night had grown too brazen, and soon they would pay the price.

He looked at his outfit, a pair of dark brown curderoys, a beige knit sweater, and a pair of Mephisto leather shoes. He was comfortable.

The world had turned dangerous and violent. Maybe it was time for an equal response..

His body ached. His mind was heavy. But, thankfully, sleep came quickly.

The night was still.

Too still.

Outside, crickets chirped, a rhythmic, living pulse cutting through the silence.



Then came the knock. Sharp. Measured.

Lang stirred. “Yes. Come in.”

One stepped into the room, a laptop tucked under his arm. His expression said everything.

“We have one of our moles,” he said.

Lang sat up straighter, instantly alert.

“Sit,” he ordered, gesturing to the empty spot beside him on the couch. “Talk to me.”

“One opened the laptop and angled the screen. “It’s not good news, sir.”

A video file was already playing. The camera feed showed the White House. Then the SUV Lang had used to get here.

“What is this?” Lang asked, leaning in.

One pointed at the screen. A man approached the SUV. He moved with the casual confidence of someone who belonged there. He reached down and touched the front bumper.

Lang narrowed his eyes. “Max Trutter,” he said slowly as he turned to face One. “Veteran Secret Service. Been with us for years. Exemplary career.”

“Trutter placed a tracker on the SUV. This location’s compromised.” Said One.

Resting in his palm was a tiny black dot no larger than a raindrop.

Silence followed, thick and cold.

But a shift in the air had taken place. A prickle on the skin. A presence, unseen but undeniable.

Lang’s eyes snapped wide. He knew that feeling.

One’s radio crackled. A burst of static. Then a voice, strained, barely audible.

“Contact, east side perimeter. Repeat, we’ve got movement.”

Lang stood. “Get me out. Now.”

“Incoming. Multiple hostiles.” The voice on the radio continued.

Lang’s stomach dropped.

In an instant, the night exploded.

Helicopters roared overhead. Gunfire ripped through the silence. Flashbangs detonated, sending up clouds of light and dust. Shadows moved through the treeline; mercenaries, fast and disciplined.

One shoved Lang toward cover. “We hold.”

The firefight was instant, brutal. Bullets tore into the farmhouse walls. A helicopter swept low, its spotlight carving through the darkness.

Lang’s men fought hard, silencers snapping, bodies dropping, but they were outgunned.

Then, a sharp pain in Lang’s side.

He stumbled, hand slick with blood.

One caught him, eyes flashing. “You’re hit.”

Lang forced a breath. “Can I still move?”

“Not the point. We move you.” Said One.

The sound of rotor blades thickened. Reinforcements. Not theirs.

The mercenaries were closing in.

One signaled his exit.

Smoke grenades burst, swallowing the battlefield in a thick haze. Shadows blurred.

Gunfire punched through the fog.

Lang's vision blurred. He could feel himself slipping.

One's grip tightened. "Stay with me, Mr. President."

A helicopter, right above them.

A voice crackled over loudspeakers.

"We have him."

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

Rahul peered over Max Whitney's shoulder, his brow furrowed. He struggled to make sense of Max's rapid keystrokes.

"Max, we know where the backup server is located." Said Sparrow.

Max stopped typing and walked over to the hackers' station. Without a word, he picked up his phone and dialed. "We have Bogdonov's place of business in Volgograd and the location of the Backup server."

"You are a godsend, Max," Said Jane Holt. "Text me the coordinates. I'll be sending teams there immediately."

Max hung up and passed the phone to Sparrow. "Text Bogdonov's locations' coordinates to the last number listed." He said as he returned to his station and began to type furiously.

"Slow down," Rahul finally said.

"Sorry. Just stop me anytime," Max replied, his fingers never pausing. But he began to

break down his process step by step, guiding Rahul through the complex maneuver. Rahul, an exceptional hacker in his own right, quickly grasped the method.

Secaucus, New Jersey, has emerged as a critical hub for data centers, hosting numerous facilities that served a variety of financial exchanges.

Notable data centers in the area include Equinix's NY2, NY4, and NY5 facilities, CoreSite's NY3, and H5 Data Centers' NJ01. These centers provided colocation and low-latency connectivity to exchanges such as Direct Edge, CBOE, ICAP, Knight Capital, ISE, and BOX. But beyond the public exchanges, these data hubs also served many more companies. Some that appeared respectable, but too often dealt with the shadowy realm of high-frequency trading, the dark pools that the Council of the Night may control.

Dark pools, the private exchanges where large institutional investors could trade stocks in secret, away from the prying eyes of the public market, had grown in number since their humble beginning with Instinet in the 80s. These alternative, off-exchange venues allowed for massive trades to be executed without causing volatility or revealing the intent of the buyer or seller to the rest of the market, especially the one most trusting Americans used. The low-latency, high-speed infrastructure of the Secaucus data centers played a crucial role in facilitating these hidden transactions. Without the speed and reliability of these centers, dark pools would quickly grind to a halt, as trades would become slower, more vulnerable, and subject to the market's natural fluctuations, like everyone else.

Slowing down the speed of the data transfer of these data centers would have a devastating impact on dark pools, potentially throwing this parallel financial and secretive world of institutional trading into chaos.

Orders would fail to execute in time, trades would be exposed, and the carefully constructed veil of invisibility surrounding large financial moves executed within these dark pools would disappear. For those who thrived on manipulating the market from the shadows, such an interruption would be catastrophic.

Max and Rahul identified a network of forty access nodes transmitting data to the exchanges all around Secaucus. These nodes were an integral component of the data transmission infrastructure, often utilizing Free Space Optics, or FSO technology.

FSO employed high-powered lasers to transmit data across nodes through the air, requiring precise alignment to maintain optimal performance. The slightest adjustments to these nodes could significantly impact data flow, potentially disrupting the operations of the financial exchanges they served.

Understanding the strategic importance of these nodes, Max and Rahul's mission was to subtly adjust their alignment aims to interfere with the FSO links. This action could degrade the efficiency of data transmission, thereby impacting the operations of various financial institutions relying on the Secaucus data centers. The delicate nature of modern financial infrastructures relied on the alignment of these nodes.

After a while, Rahul grew confident. "Let's split Secaucus in the middle. You cover anything north, I'll do the south of that imaginary line."

"Remember, we need to insert ourselves and take command of a few of these nodes."

"I get it," Rahul confirmed, already launching into action.

But as they worked, Max couldn't shake an unsettling feeling. The brief flicker in the electricity earlier had unsettled him.. Something was off. He picked up his phone.

“Can we get protection?”

“How many?” the voice on the other end asked.

“Twelve.”

“Send coordinates,” came the response. “Half an hour?”

“Great, but I have a bad feeling, so the sooner the better,” Max replied and hung up.

The team pressed on, fingers flying over keyboards, eyes locked onto monitors filled with scrolling lines of code.

Twenty minutes later, twelve soldiers arrived at their door. Max greeted them, sizing them up.

“Tom,” Said one of the men, introducing himself. “I’m the team leader.”

“Tom,” Max repeated, shaking his hand. “Thanks for coming. We’re fine for now, but I’ve got a bad feeling. I need everyone to be safe.”

“Not a problem. We have an extra six men watching on the periphery. We’ll spread out around and leave four men here. They’ll focus on extraction in case it becomes necessary.”

“Fantastic.”

The soldiers spread out, scanning the warehouse and securing an escape route. Two stayed in, and two remained outside.

An hour passed. Then Max’s phone rang. He answered it almost absentmindedly, his focus still on the code in front of him.

A rough, foreign voice crackled through the speaker. “We’re going to get you, Whitney.”

Max froze. His grip on the phone tightened. “Who is this?”

“Concilium Noctis.”

The line went dead.



## Chapter Thirty-Nine

“I have to get out of here,” Victoria Porter said, her voice sharp, almost brittle. She stood barefoot at the top of the stairs, her silk robe loosely tied around her waist, chest rising with shallow breaths. Her cheeks were flushed, but not from pleasure.

They’d made love three times since midnight. Every time had been desperate, fierce, as if physical closeness could shut out the chaos. But the chaos always found a way in. She wasn’t looking for more passion. She was looking for air.

Martin emerged from the steam of the shower, towel wrapped low around his hips. Water glistened on his chest, dripping off his defined torso, abs taut and glistening in the morning light. He looked like every woman’s fantasy. But fantasy was the last thing Victoria needed right now.

His expression shifted instantly. Not frustration. Concern. A quiet understanding. “Sure, Victoria. Let’s get out of here. We’ll go for a walk. Give me five minutes. I’ll get dressed and get the iPad for security.”

She didn't answer. She jumped into some clothes and stormed down the curved staircase of Max Whitney's brownstone townhouse on Astor Row. The old Harlem gem with its wrought-iron gate, red brick facade, tall windows, and dignified history was too quiet for her.

Victoria couldn't breathe in it. Couldn't think.

Outside, the city was just waking up. A dog barked in the distance. Somewhere, jazz played softly from an apartment window.

Victoria walked past the dining room, past the elegant curved mirror Max had purchased from a gallery auction.

Martin came down five minutes later, more like ten. But he was dressed in a dark grey wool short coat, wide at the waist, jeans, and boots. The shoulder holster was hidden under the coat, invisible. He had the iPad zipped inside his messenger bag.

"We're going out the front door," he said with a grin.

"There is a front door?" she replied, almost managing a smile.

They stepped out into the pale morning. The wind was cool, not cold, just enough to sting her cheeks. A delivery cyclist whizzed by. A garbage truck rumbled at the far corner. New York City, indifferent and alive.

Victoria walked quickly, like she had somewhere to be. She didn't.

Martin noticed the pace and sensed the tension within her. The uncertainty in her steps.

"What's troubling you?" Sloane asked gently.

She stopped. Then exhaled. Her shoulders dropped. "I don't know what we're going to do," she said. "I can't imagine being away from you. And I cannot imagine being around so much violence. So many murders. SUVs exploding on 9At. Men in masks chasing us. I cannot

live like this, Martin. I need my life back. A normal one. Walks in the park. Coffee. A boring Tuesday.”

Martin nodded. He looked down the street. “This is exactly what I wanted too. When I took this job with Max, I thought I had left it all behind. For almost a full year, I drove him around, never had a gun, and installed security systems in his many residences. It was easy. Mundane. Then the Concilium Noctis started sniffing around. He was in too deep. Investigating them. And once that happened...”

“Martin, Secretary Jane Holt called. She was freaking out. She could not reach Max and the President was missing. There are too many murders, and now we have this ‘Maiden Killer’ after us.”

Martin reached and pulled her close. “I didn’t ask for this either. And I don’t want it.”

“And yet,” she whispered. “You have two guns.”

“And you took one,” he replied, with the trace of a smile.

She didn’t laugh.

They reached the corner of 130th and 5th. The buzz of Harlem was louder now, shops opening, voices rising. Life, indifferent to their unraveling. Victoria stopped again and looked at him.

“I’m thirty-four,” she said. “I want a child. I want a family. I want a man who will teach his daughter or son how to swim, ride a bike, and read bedtime stories. Not someone who checks the window every five minutes for a sniper.”

“I want that too.”

She looked into his blue eyes. Clear. Honest, or at least trying to be.

“I believe you,” she said. “But what are we going to do, Martin?”

He didn’t answer right away. He took her hand. She didn’t pull away. They stood there, on the edge of a decision. Of many decisions.

He pulled her into a kiss. It wasn’t fiery. It was slow. Tender. Reassuring.

And when it ended, they stood forehead to forehead, her breath on his lips.

“What are we going to do, Martin?”

He looked around. Then looked back into her eyes.

“We’re going to get coffee.”

They walked in silence for a few blocks.

Delivery vans parked along sidewalks, dog walkers pulling on their many leashes, a teenage couple laughing in front of a mural, the city was waking.

Martin had picked the coffee place he liked. A long and narrow place on Lenox and 130th, no sign, just a red door and a chalkboard with *Single Origin Colombian* scribbled across it. The owner nodded to Martin like he knew him. Maybe he did.

Victoria ordered a cappuccino. It was strong. She loved it.

As they turned the corner, something caught her eye, a white-painted brick townhouse stood out amid the darker, brick-red brownstones. It was striking, elegant, and charming.

In front of the building, a woman wrestled with a real estate sign, the wind flipping the wooden frame and nearly toppling her.

“I got it,” Martin said, already stepping ahead.

Victoria watched from a distance as he caught the sign before it fell, his movement smooth, practiced. Everything about him was efficient, even kindness.

“Oh, thank you so much,” the older woman said with relief. She was in her late sixties, elegant in a beige wool coat and ankle boots, her silver hair tucked under a velvet beret.

“Are you selling this house?” Martin asked.

“I’m the real estate agent, yes,” she said. “The owners are overseas. Left everything with me. I was just trying to set up for a showing. That sign’s got a mind of its own.”

Victoria stepped forward. “It’s beautiful,” she said, honestly.

“Oh, you’re sweet. Would you like to take a quick peek?”

Victoria looked at Martin, eyebrows raised.

He shrugged. “Sure. Why not?”

Inside, the townhouse was even more breathtaking. The white-painted brick carried into the interior, softened by warm wood floors and matte-black iron railings. The basement had been completely refinished, there was a laundry nook, a guest suite, even a small home gym.

Upstairs, there were two large bedrooms on the third floor, and a third smaller one on the second. They both quietly agreed the room would be perfect for a nursery. The first floor had a den with floor-to-ceiling windows and a small but charming garden space in the back. Enough for wine in the summer, and for a child to play in the dirt.

Victoria’s heart swelled. “This place is gorgeous,” she said aloud.

“How much are they asking?” Martin asked, his voice low.

The woman smiled, almost conspiratorially. “It’s \$2.7 million. They just finished renovations. All the plumbing, electrical, HVAC systems are new. They did it right.”

Martin nodded. “Thank you. Truly.”

They two stepped back outside.

The city smelled like early summer.

Neither of them spoke for half a block.

Then Martin stopped. "I'm going to talk to Max," he said firmly.

Victoria turned toward him, uncertain.

"I can't keep doing this. Hiding in penthouses. Carrying weapons in my coat. That's not a life. Not with you. And especially not if..." Sloane trailed off, glancing at her hand. Her future. Their possible family.

"I want a job that uses my training but doesn't steal our lives," he continued. "There are private firms here. Government contracts. Secure buildings. Hell, I could do private consultations with no risk."

Victoria sipped her coffee. She didn't want to cry.

"New York is your home, I don't want you to move," he said. "You've built something here. Your work, your friends, your clients. You have a life. And I want to be part of it. I want to stay. I want to make it work in New York City, with you."

She didn't say anything. She reached for his hand. Their fingers intertwined.

"I mean it," he said. "Let's see if we can make it go. Let's imagine that house. A real home. No shadows. No more guns under the floorboards. Just us."

Victoria looked back at the white townhouse as they walked farther down the block. It stood quietly against the skyline, like a dream daring them to reach for it.

She closed her eyes and let herself hope.

In a state of joy, Martin had slipped. He never slipped. But today he did, and it may cost him everything.

A hundred yards away, standing in the shadow of another meticulously cared-for brownstone, the Maiden Killer lit a thin cigarette. His long fingers were trembling, though not from cold. His pale eyes, glacial and dead, never left Martin Sloane.

Ready to strike Viktor Luckechekov moved closer.

## Chapter Forty

Jane Holt sat alone in the dimly lit war room beneath the Treasury Building, her elbows resting on the cold steel table. The overhead lights flickered occasionally, more a symptom of age than sabotage, but the unease it cast over the room felt appropriate. She hadn't slept in twenty-eight hours. Maybe longer.

On the wall, a dozen screens blinked data, stock indices plunging in red, currency graphs convulsing in reaction, and a real-time feed from Max's control Center.

DARPA's autonomous AI platform was burrowing through the encrypted server of the Councilium Noctis. The banking cartel, which had held governments in a chokehold for a while now.

But something was shifting.

She glanced down at the steaming cup of coffee beside her, untouched. Her fingers trembled slightly as she reached instead for the photo on the table: Phil Esposito. The man whom



she had brought into this mission, the friend who had kept her grounded through this crisis and many others before, was gone now. Murdered. Silenced. Another cost in a war no one deserved to be killed over.

Jane shut her eyes, swallowed the wave of grief, and turned to the screen.

"Volgograd," said a voice behind her.

She didn't turn. "Yes."

"Whitney's team just relayed that the breach is holding. DARPA's AI hasn't tripped any of the Council's secondary protocols. Sparrow says they've never seen a system respond this fast. It's like it's thinking ahead and at lightning speed."

She turned now, just slightly, to face her aide Jackson, tall and pale from too much time underground. "It is thinking ahead. That laptop was a miracle. DARPA spent years training that neural net in predictive exploit strategies. What we gave the hackers is a weapon."

Jackson shifted uneasily.

She let silence stretch for a beat too long.

"Are we discovering who the Council's members are?" she asked.

Jackson moved with quiet precision, a tall and lanky silhouette often mistaken for awkward.. "We have partial identities, shell corporations, indirect ownership structures, private airfields, offshore trusts. This network is deeper than we imagined. It's not just finance. There are military contracts. Pharma. Satellite networks. Media groups."

"Of course there are," she murmured. "This isn't about money. It never was. It's about control and power."

She stood slowly, her body stiff. She crossed the room to a large digital board and

dragged a timeline across the interface with her fingertip. The collapse had started subtly: a run on a mid-sized bank, a panic in Singapore's sovereign wealth fund, a plunge in the Euro after a rogue trader's "suicide." But these events weren't accidents. They were engineered. Trial balloons from the Council. Probes.

"Where are we with Whitney's operation?"

"Latest update: New Jersey Triangle hit was successful. He took down or disrupted over seventy-five percent of Free Space Optics infrastructure across the exchange corridor. Latency is up by twelve milliseconds. The dark pools are losing their edge."

"Temporarily," she said.

"Yes. But DARPA's AI also intercepted a command node inside the Volgograd servers that routes internal signals through a quantum backbone. The Council's decision hub."

Jane spun toward him. "Wait. You're saying we have a line into their executive channel?"

"We think so."

She clenched her fists. "We need names. I don't care how encrypted it is. I don't care if they used dead languages encoded in DNA strands. We need *their names*."

"The two teams are on the ground in Russia and waiting for your approval." Said Jackson.

"Confirm immediately. It's a go." Jane returned to her seat, her voice quieter now. "Time is what we don't have. The markets are hemorrhaging. Confidence is collapsing faster than liquidity. And I haven't heard from the President in over 24 hours."

Jackson hesitated. "You think he's..."

"I don't know what I think. But I know this: if Lang is out of the picture, we're flying

blind. The Council will strike and strike until we give up or we're dead.. They'll short the system to its knees. Mass panic, economic coup, and then... silence."

Her voice cracked with exhaustion. She sipped the coffee now. It was cold.

"Any update from the Administrator?"

"Still under heavy guard. He's still claiming he doesn't know who the Council's core members are. Says they're compartmentalized. Said even Churchill never met them in person."

Churchill. The Council's blade. Now in custody thanks to Whitney's team.

Jane shook her head. "It's not enough. Every time we think we've cut off a head, three more emerge. We need the source. We need the root. There are too many loose ends."

Jackson stepped forward. "Let's be methodical and address each issue one at a time."

"Let's go," she said without hesitation.

He nodded, sat at the desk, opened a notebook, and wrote: Loose Ends."

She leaned back, exhaling shakily. Phil once told her, "*You can't regulate what you can't name.*"

"First, we need names." She began. "Second, there is a killer loose in Manhattan. Luchenkov..."

"Lukechenkov, Mam. The Maiden Killer. Agent Steel is traveling, but his whereabouts are unclear."

"Yeah, put him on the list. Finally, we need to get every government on board. We need to shut down the markets. Get me the team chief. I want to know what's going on."

Jackson reviewed the list. "So," he began, his voice seemed forced. Jane recognized the slight lisp that became more pronounced as his stress level increased. "Volgograd should be

resolved within the next hour. With the DARPA computer in their possession, Whitney's team will soon uncover the identities of the men of the council. Finally, I spoke to the international team negotiating a market pause; they seem to be moving forward smoothly. The problem may be that the Council hears about it and snaps. Lukechenkov is loose; that is a real problem.

"You're telling me that our only problem is the 'Maiden killer' and we should just be patient." She responded, her voice firm and unforgiving.

Jackson did not answer.

Secretary Holt pulled out a secure phone and stared at the encrypted call log. No contact from Lang. Nothing from One, his personal protection. Even Max Whitney had gone dark.

The silence was starting to feel like a storm.

A chime sounded on the console. New feed from Volgograd. The hackers had accessed a video feed they were now sharing with her. The title of the video read: Imminent Warning.

She tapped it open and frowned. Strings of untranslated code scrolled across the screen. Then an image. Blurry at first, then clearer.

A conference room. Dark suits. No faces visible. Just silhouettes behind mirrored glass. But they were real. And they were meeting now.

Then came audio.

Only one line was heard, filtered, and distorted:

"Accelerate the collapse. Execute Protocol Midnight."

Jane's blood ran cold.

She reached for her redline handset and keyed in her emergency override.

"This is Secretary Holt. Connect me to Fort Meade. Now. Scramble Cyber Command.

We need to intercept every outgoing signal from Russia immediately. And prepare market circuit breakers. All of them.”

She stood again, fire in her eyes now.

It wasn't over.

## Chapter Forty-One

Yuri Bogdonov kissed his wife goodbye, the warmth of her lips lingering as he pulled on his thick wool coat. The chill of early morning nipped at his skin as he stepped outside, his breath curling in the frigid air. Frost clung to the edges of his car windows, glinting in the weak dawn light.

His brand new BMW 540i xDrive waited in the driveway, a sleek beast of metal and power. He slid into the driver's seat, inhaling the intoxicating scent of fresh leather. The dashboard gleamed with polished precision, each button and dial a testament to German engineering. He ran his fingers over the steering wheel, appreciating the craftsmanship before pressing the ignition. The engine rumbled to life, purring with barely a sound.

Bogdanov stood at just 5'1", but there was nothing slight about him. Built like a boxer, his compact frame carried the kind of strength that turned heads and commanded caution. In his youth, he had wrestled with the insecurities that came with his height, and anger simmered just

beneath the surface, always feeling underestimated. But as the years passed, his body changed. His shoulders broadened, his chest thickened, and the boy who once walked in fear of the school's bullies grew into a man no one dared overlook. His presence wasn't just physical; it was forceful, deliberate, and carved from years of compensating, enduring, and surviving.

Volgograd had been his home once before, long ago. As a teenager, he had left for Moscow, chasing a dream that turned into a career, one that had made him indispensable to dangerous men. A prodigy, they had called him, able to breach any server, manipulate firewalls like a master pianist playing the keys of a grand piano. He had outclassed the government's finest hackers and secured his place in the shadows, maintaining the Council of the Night's dark pools and encrypted networks.

But Volgograd, with all its history and charm, had called him back. The city, once Tsaritsyn, then Stalingrad, like most of Russia, had witnessed centuries of war and rebirth. It bore its scars with pride, monuments, battlefields, and architecture that whispered of resilience. Compared to Moscow, though, it was quiet, a good place to raise his children. Yet something gnawed at him. An unease he couldn't shake.

He pulled up outside Café Gogol, a trendy coffee shop tucked between old Soviet-era buildings. The scent of freshly ground espresso beans drifted from the open door, mingling with the crisp morning air. A light knock tapped against the driver's side window. He turned.

Polina, the young waitress, stood there with his usual order, a tall cappuccino, steam curling from the lid. Her blonde hair was tucked into a knit cap, her cheeks flushed pink from the cold. The café's neon sign flickered behind her, casting a soft glow on her pale skin.

He rolled down the window.

“Good morning, Polina,” he said, handing her a large bill. The edges of the note fluttered in the breeze. “How are you today?”

“Good, Mr. Bogdonov.” She flashed a warm smile and turned back toward the café.

The air was sharp, the kind of cold that carried a warning.

His phone buzzed. He momentarily ignored it. One sip of coffee before the madness began. But the phone buzzed once more. He turned the phone to see the identity of the caller. Unread messages stacked up, and urgent notifications blinked on the screen.

Over the last few days, someone had been testing his servers’ firewalls, probing for weaknesses. He had doubled security, rerouted traffic, and set his servers to back up every fifteen seconds to a remote site. Just in case.

He didn’t know much about the Council of the Night. He only dealt with one man. One voice on the other end of the line. A man who did not tolerate failure. A man who rarely offered second chances.

The traffic light ahead turned red. He eased to a stop and glanced up. His office building loomed before him, a solid brick structure he had called his professional home for the last six years. Its façade, a mix of Soviet-era architecture and modern glass panels, stood resilient against the elements.

The second-floor windows caught the morning light, casting sharp reflections on the street and the building across the street. Bogdanov breathed in. His mind still for a moment, he admired the clean lines, the polished glass. This was his domain, the small empire he had built. A man of few indulgences, he allowed himself this one: pride.

He took one last breath as the light turned green, but as he engaged first gear of his



BMW, his office exploded. Every window shattered in a deafening roar. Shards of glass and twisted metal rained onto the street. Flames burst outward in a violent bloom as smoke soon billowed from the gaping wounds in the building's façade. The shockwave rocked the intersection, tossing debris all around. In a second, everything changed.

Bogdonov felt pressure in his chest, the concussive force rattling his car. The few pedestrians screamed, their silhouettes fleeing in every direction.

His phone buzzed. Once more.

He swore and snatched it up. A security breach alert.

His backup server, hidden in a nondescript suburban warehouse, was under attack.

With shaking hands, he pulled up the live feed from the warehouse's security cameras. The screen flickered. The server racks, gone. Only severed cables remained, coiled like dead snakes on the floor.

He adjusted the camera angle.

A cold dread settled in his gut.

Men in black tactical gear moved through the room with precision, their faces obscured by masks. They wheeled the stolen servers onto a waiting truck, moving like ghosts in the early morning raid. The headlights of the vehicle cut through the darkness of the warehouse, momentarily illuminating the cold concrete floor. One of the men glanced toward the camera, only for a second, but it was enough to send a chill down Bogdonov's spine. This was not random. This was calculated.

Bogdonov's pulse thundered. He reached for the burner phone he carried for this exact moment.

His wife answered on the third ring, groggy with sleep.

“Yuri?”

He took a breath. His life in Volgograd was over.

“Sorry, honey, but we’ve got to put Plan B in motion. We’ve got to go.”

## Chapter Forty-Two

The searchlight sliced through the smoke like a blade. The helicopter hovered directly above, its rotors churning the air into a deafening roar.

Lang was unconscious, but still, somewhere deep in his mind, he felt the heat from the chopper's exhaust wash over him. For a moment, even in the haze of darkness, he thought it was over. That he'd bleed out beneath a dying sky.

One ran hard through the open field with the President slung over his shoulder, a dead weight.

Then came the shot.

A single, surgical blast from the tree line.

The black helicopter the mercenaries used lurched mid-air, pitching hard. Its tail rotor exploded in a burst of fire and shrapnel. It spun violently, clipped a tree, and went down in a cloud of flame and black smoke.

One grunted, feeling a sting in the back of his right calf.

Shrapnel. He stumbled but didn't stop. No time.

"Cat," he murmured into his comm.

A crackle, then a woman's voice: "Target neutralized."

"Thanks, bring the bird in," One ordered, breath ragged. "East clearing. I'm hit. The President's bleeding profusely."

As he reached the edge of the woods, he paused, bracing against a massive tree. Just for a second. He needed air, not for long, just long enough to stay upright.

Moments later, he heard it: a chopper swooping in from the west. No lights. Flying just above the trees. It skimmed the canopy and settled with barely a whisper in the East clearing behind the farmhouse.

One looped the President's arm across his shoulders like a fallen brother. Blood was still pouring from Lang's side, but he was breathing.

Two Green Berets emerged from the smoke, weapons raised. One saw the red star patch stitched onto each uniform's arms and on the chest. They were part of his original inner unit. Men he trusted. Men who would lose it all to save the President.

They rushed forward, helping to lift the President into the bird. One limped behind them, pain slicing through his leg.

But there was no time to feel it.

They were still alive.

The mercenaries were regrouping but disoriented, caught off guard by the massive counterstrike that One had planned out.

“Three minutes,” One shouted.

They moved fast, cutting through the haze. Lang’s breath was shallow. His thoughts swam, but a name kept flashing like static in his mind: Trutter.

Betrayal.

Inside the chopper, medics moved in. A tourniquet. Morphine. Bandages set tightly against the bleeding. Lang clenched his jaw as the pain receded into a dull hum.

“One,” he said, barely audible. “Was this the plan?”

One, strapped in beside him, answered, “Totally,”

The helicopter lifted off, banking sharply to avoid small-arms fire below. Lang could barely watch the burning farmhouse shrink beneath them. His temporary sanctuary, now reduced to ash.

“Cat, status?” One barked into his comm.

“We’re clear,” she responded. “Two friendlies down. Five hostiles neutralized. Two more slipped back across the southern ridge. They knew the terrain.”

The medicine quickly helped Lang, who soon leaned his head back onto a pillow. “This wasn’t an assault. It was an extraction.”

One nodded grimly. “They weren’t trying to kill you. They wanted to take you.”

Lang’s eyes hardened. “To make me disappear.”

One met his gaze. “Exactly. If they’d killed you, you’d become a martyr. A symbol. The country would’ve rallied behind your name.” He paused. “But if you vanish? No body. No truth. Just silence and chaos.”

The chopper cut south, low and fast. Below them, the country slept unaware.

Lang turned to One. “How many enemies do I have left?”

One didn’t answer. He looked out the window, the darkness rushing past. A doctor was working on his leg. “Too many. But now we know they’re scared.” One answered.

Lang’s jaw tightened. “Good.”

The helicopter rocked slightly, but held its course. Lang could feel the adrenaline fading, pain surging on his side. “What’s the next move?” he asked, gritting his teeth.

One tapped a secure tablet and turned it toward him.

“Max Whitney’s team is in. They’ve cracked part of the Council’s command network in Volgograd, Russia. Teams are en route.”

Lang stared at the map on the screen, his jaw tightening. “What next?”

One met his eyes. “We hunt them to the end of the world, and when we find them, we crush them.”

Lang reached out, grasping One’s massive hand, anchoring himself in the moment.

“Thank you,” he said quietly as he closed his eyes and instantly fell asleep.

### Chapter Forty-Three

Agent Steele had always been an exceptional student, precise, inquisitive, orderly, and balanced. Qualities she valued and adhered to, not just professionally but in every part of her life. Her home, her office, her attire, and every case she worked on mimicked her personality. Cleanliness wasn't just a preference; it was a principle.

She detested the filth and chaos of Manhattan's Lower East Side, Chinatown, and the Bowery. A colleague once arranged a meeting in Tompkins Square Park, an unforgivable location in her mind. She had arrived reluctantly, only to find rats darting along the pathways, rummaging through trash barrels, even lounging on benches as if they owned the place. And in a way, they did.

Her family often joked that she had a touch of germaphobia. Steele, however, wasn't laughing. She considered it less a flaw, and more a survival mechanism..

She hated Manhattan. The city was suffocating, its streets too dense with bodies, its air

thick with exhaust and rot. The transit system? A third-world catastrophe masquerading as modern infrastructure.

She had traveled the world and knew how bad it was. Italy had better roads, better trains, better everything. And yet here she was, back in this concrete jungle, chasing a man who shouldn't still be breathing.

Steele tightened her grip on the phone. "No matter what, Chief, I'm staying between East 59th and East 96th."

The Chief chuckled. "Sticking with the Upper East Side elite?"

Steele wasn't amused and ignored the comment. "I need competent agents. We're tracking Viktor Lukechenkov, not some two-bit street thug. I want to come back in one piece."

The Chief exhaled. "Alright, dear," He said mockingly. "I'll set it up for you. Just get on the plane."

It had been a grueling day. First, Sarasota from Washington, D.C., where she hunted down the Administrator's driver, James. Then, Montego Bay, where Mr. Churchill fell into their grasp.

And now, Manhattan.

Steele closed her eyes as the plane descended toward JFK, trying to shove down the unease curling in her gut.

Lukechenkov wasn't just a hitman; he was an executioner, a predator with an uncanny ability to sense when he was being hunted.

She and her team would have to be extremely careful.

The New York City FBI bureau wouldn't make things easier. They hated DC agents



barging into their territory.

And then there was the Russian mafia, who might, or might not be helping Lukechenkov.

This mission was a powder keg, and she was about to light the match.

For Viktor Lukechenkov, this was just another job;

Find the Administrator. Kill him.

Find Mr. Churchill. Kill him.

Find the driver, James. Kill him.

Whitney, Porter also needed to be killed.

The FBI did assume the Russian mafia would shelter Lukechenkov, but did not care.

Let them.

Miles to the north, Lukechenkov sat at the Hungarian Pastry Shop across from the Cathedral Church of Saint John the Divine. In the quiet upper westside neighborhood, he sat outside the bakery, sipping a strong black coffee and smoking a cigarette.

By all accounts, Lukechenkov appeared to be a respectable older man, the kind of presence that would go unnoticed in a crowd. In his late fifties, he carried himself with the stoicism typical of his Eastern European heritage. His face was weathered but not unkind, with high cheekbones and pale, deep-set eyes that missed nothing. His hair, once black, had streaks of gray, combed neatly back, as if every strand were under strict orders.

He dressed impeccably, though never extravagantly, favoring dark wool coats, well-pressed slacks, and thick-soled leather shoes that gave off the faintest click on marble floors. His shirts were always buttoned to the collar, no tie, and he often wore a charcoal vest under his coat, regardless of the weather. Practical, disciplined, and composed, these were the first impressions

he left behind.

But there was something off. Subtle, but there.

His right pinky was missing, cleanly gone at the knuckle, as though removed with surgical precision. He never explained it, never tried to hide it, and never hesitated to gesture with that hand. He seemed to deliberately draw attention to it. A silent message: he had endured something. And survived.

Lukechenkov's demeanor was controlled, nearly unreadable. He spoke rarely, and when he did, it was in measured tones, with an accent softened by decades of careful suppression. He never raised his voice, never betrayed emotion, yet there was an unmistakable gravity to him.

For this assignment, Lukechenkov had decided to work alone. No allies, no loose ends. Instead of hiding in Brighton Beach, he booked a luxury apartment on Amsterdam Avenue under a dead man's name. A foolish extravagance, but it was New York. Nobody questioned money. Especially the Council's money.

The place felt abandoned, the air heavy. He took one last sip of his coffee and returned to his apartment. Curtains were drawn tight. Lukechenkov pulled one panel aside and stared down at the city below. Neon signs bled into the wet pavement, distorting into ribbons of color.

He never noticed the two agents perched on the rooftop of the building across the street.

The Russian mafia had done their part. They'd fed the Maiden Killer an endless supply of weapons, drivers, and disposable support. Tonight, His driver was Mike Zaitsev, once a legendary underground boxer in Moscow, known for feats of raw, animal strength. Zaitsev's downfall was as brutal as his rise, beaten senseless by six men after a disgraced KGB officer lost a bet and ordered retribution. Zaitsev had washed ashore in America as a broken tool, a two-bit

enforcer with a criminal record full of fistfights and shattered jaws.

Lukechenkov decided to return to the Administrator's penthouse and stood at the window. Still. Watching the city move below. The neon glare painted his face in bright colors.

He remained unaware of the agents across the street.

One of them raised a hand to his comm, voice low and clipped.

"Steele, we got him."

The FBI had already swept through the penthouse. Every inch of it. Walls torn apart, Carpet ripped off the floor, and furniture flipped over. Had they found what they were looking for? It did not matter.

"Pick me up on Fifth," said Lukechenkov to Zaitsev, his driver. "Ten minutes."

By 3 a.m., Lukechenkov reached Mr. Churchill's residence. It was a rather derelict-looking building, located in a rougher, though quieter part of the city.

*Was it intentional?* Wondered Lukechenkov.

After instructing Zaitsev to wait a few blocks away, he exited the car and parked himself in a dark corner across the street from Churchill's home.

He moved with practiced silence, listening. The wind rattled a loose storefront sign, a distant siren wailed, and somewhere, a cat knocked over a trash can.

No suspicious cars. No waiting agents. He waited.

Something felt off.

He crossed the street and pulled out a set of master keys, found the right one, and inserted it into the lock. It turned smoothly. Lukechenkov was in.

Inside, the house was cold, sterile, and silent. The air held a stillness that suggested Mr.

Churchill hadn't been here in some time. Churchill had been careless. A cache of weapons remained, tucked away and waiting.

Lukechenkov grinned.

A Glock went into his waistband. A machine gun slung over his shoulder. Ammunition stuffed into a duffel bag.

He dialed his driver.

"I'll be out front in a minute. Come get me."

Then he hung up.

Mike Zaitsev was parked three blocks away, his fingers drumming against the steering wheel.

The street was too quiet. New York never slept, but tonight? The silence had weight, like the city itself was holding its breath. Something was wrong.

Mike had worked with Lukechenkov once before. The man was a ghost, always five steps ahead. But this time?

A cold knot twisted in Zaitsev's stomach.

Suddenly, he noticed movements in the black Chevy Suburban that had been parked across from him for the last thirty minutes.

Mike reached into the glove box, feeling for his pistol. The handle was cold, reassuring.

Then, more movement.

A group of men exited the car as others emerged from the shadows, moving with purpose, discipline. Every man wore a bulletproof jacket, and most held machine guns strapped across their chests.

Feds.

Mike swore under his breath.

This was a kill zone.

He slammed the car into gear and drove away.

Lukechenkov was on his own.

At 3:27 a.m., Lukechenkov stepped outside. His breath curled in the frigid air. Where was his driver?

Then, the darkness moved.

Eight FBI agents emerged, weapons raised.

Lukechenkov didn't hesitate. He bolted back inside, gun already firing.

The street erupted in gunfire, bullets slamming into brick and concrete.

Then, silence.

A second-floor window shattered.

Lukechenkov opened fire with the machine gun, sweeping rounds into the street, forcing the agents to take cover.

But he'd made a mistake. He hadn't noticed the agent tucked below the steps.

Steele was now inside.

Moving silently, she climbed the stairs, her Beretta raised.

Lukechenkov's sixth sense prickled. Something was wrong.

He turned. A shadow moved toward him.

He fired.

The bullet ripped through Steele's left bicep.

She groaned, pain lancing through her arm, but she didn't hesitate.

She took aim and shot.

Lukechenkov staggered. His breath came in ragged gasps.

He collapsed onto the floor.

As his last breath drew near, his vision blurred, faces swam before him, the ghosts of the maidens he had murdered.

One after another, they appeared and disappeared, their expressions a mixture of sorrow and vengeance.

Blood filled his mouth. He coughed, cursed.

Then he saw her, the first he had tortured and killed. The Maiden.

Her hands reached for him. Then, the others joined.

Their grip was unyielding, merciless. His flesh was being ripped from his bones as an unbearable agony consumed him.

His last breath came out as a gurgling choke.

His head slumped.

The Maiden Killer was no more.

## Chapter Forty-Four

The Asian traders agreed; something was wrong. In Sydney, just before dawn, the city's financial district sat frozen, eyes locked on monitors that refused to refresh. The Australian Securities Exchange, one of the most reliable markets in the Asia-Pacific region, had failed to open.

No bells.

No movement.

No explanation.

Phones rang in trading floors like fire alarms, but no one on the other end had answers.

Then the Tokyo Stock Exchange, a cornerstone of global finance, remained dark. Rumors swirled: cyberattack, electrical grid failure, even a possible internal sabotage. But the truth was simpler: the shutdown had been ordered.

It wasn't a glitch.

It wasn't a hack.

It was intentional.

Screens blinked with error codes instead of stock indices.

In Singapore, the same silence. Markets weren't crashing, they were simply... gone. One by one, across time zones, the silence spread. Mumbai. Dubai. Frankfurt. Paris. London.

There was no public announcement, no press release, no coordinated media response. Just an eerie void, globally synchronized and enforced in absolute silence.

Governments had pulled the plug.

And still, no one really knew why.

By the time Wall Street stirred, the news had spread like wildfire. The New York Stock Exchange building loomed silent, frozen. Thirty police officers had been ordered to guard its entrance. NASDAQ, too, remained inaccessible.

A small banner appeared across the top of trading terminals: *“Temporarily Suspended – Await Further Instruction.”*

Behind the scenes, chaos erupted. Hedge fund managers screamed into dead phone lines. Investment banks scrambled to unwind positions that no longer existed on paper. Billionaires called in favors that suddenly meant nothing. The entire system had gone dark, and no one knew how long it would last.

The coordinated shutdown had no precedent. It was a kill switch, long theorized but never used, until now.

Across the world, a question lingered: Who had the power to make the entire financial system disappear?

And more importantly, why now?



The great machine had simply ceased to function.

Far from the trading floors, in penthouse offices overlooking Manhattan, Hong Kong, London, and Dubai, the world's financial elite sat frozen, gripping their phones in white-knuckled disbelief. Their billions: untouchable. Their power: locked behind an unsolvable void.

In the corridors of government, things were different.

President Lang lay in a hospital bed hastily set up in the Oval Office, an IV in his arm and a thin dressing wrapped tightly around his abdomen. The room had been transformed into a war room, sterile and tense, with monitors beeping softly.

Around the President stood a tight circle of advisors and intelligence officials, men and women he still trusted, or had no choice but to trust.

Despite the pain, Lang's mind was sharp. He had anticipated chaos and planned accordingly.

The media had been kindly directed to focus on weather reports, diplomatic flare-ups abroad, and human interest stories. The major networks complied and spoke about anything but the truth.

Not a single mention of the global market shutdown. Not a whisper about the financial collapse they had averted.

Was it a necessary deception? Lang believed it was.

There were enemies still lurking. Enemies without faces. And Lang intended to crush them before the public even knew they existed.

Lang turned to Secretary Holt. "Whitney?"

"It's a matter of hours now," Jane answered. She looked tired and anxious to return to her

townhouse, to her bed, to her small paradise, and sleep. A text appeared on her burner phone.

“The house has begun to fall.”

Jane rejoiced and shared the news from Max with President Lang.

#

The “New Jersey Triangle”, home to the largest financial data centers in the world, included the many centers in and around Secaucus, the ones that served dark pools and all the other “Alternative Trading Systems”, had gone silent.

Pat Simeon, CEO and largest shareholder of P9X, a powerhouse data center in Secaucus, New Jersey, stood in his sleek penthouse kitchen. His phone buzzed relentlessly, but it stopped momentarily. He breathed in, trying to relax.

The next call came from Alice Holbridge, P9X’s Night Shift Director.

“Soldiers are surrounding the center.” The voice on the line trembled. “Armed. They ordered us to back up all servers, then shut them down.” A pause. A shaky breath. “There was a man with them. I think I recognized him. Max Whitney, I believe.

He demanded access to the private servers.

They copied everything, sir.

Then the soldiers took it.

Simeon swayed. His chest tightened, and pain moved quickly down his left arm.

“Mr. Simeon?” Anna, his maid, asked, surprised to see him in the kitchen.

As she turned from the espresso machine, Simeon collapsed onto the black-and-white marble floor.

Within seconds, his pulse faded. Within a minute, he was dead.

By 4 AM, the financial titans of Wall Street, in silk robes and \$50 million Upper East Side apartments, paced empty rooms with phones glued to their ears.

Then the news broke.

At the same time and across the world, leaders appeared on television screens to announce the indefinite closure of all trading markets. The time and the message had been coordinated, rehearsed, and agreed upon behind locked doors.

*“A parasite has infiltrated a system once believed to be trustworthy, equitable, and fair. Until trust can be fully restored into the system, for retirees, municipal pension holders, and union funds alike, the global trading markets will remain closed.”*

The words had been carefully chosen, vague enough to avoid mass panic, sharp enough to signal that something had gone wrong.

The United States Government, along with allied nations, had ordered the immediate and indefinite shutdown of all financial exchanges, trading platforms, and data centers worldwide. This was not a shock to the financial system; this was the burial of an antiquated system rigged to serve the wealthiest, the 1% at the detriment of the rest, the 99%.

## Chapter Forty-Five

Back in Washington, Agent Steele sat quietly, her posture composed as the Zoom call prepared to launch. She skimmed the list of participating agencies one last time, but the roster was overwhelming. CIA, NSA, INTERPOL, MI6, Europol, DARPA... it read more like a geopolitical summit than a coordinated task force. With a quiet sigh, she closed the folder and stared at the screen.

Beside her, the Director of the FBI sat stone-faced, his silence charged with suppressed frustration. Once the lead authority on joint operations of this magnitude, he had now been sidelined, reduced to a spectator, while Steele, a rising but relatively untested agent, had been tapped to lead this unprecedented international effort.

Fury simmered beneath, but he remained outwardly composed.

Steele, sensing the tension and adjusted slightly in her seat. She spoke, her voice steady but deferential. "Director... if you'd prefer to lead the meeting,"

He cut her off, firm but not unkind. “You’ve been assigned to lead this operation by the President of the United States. That was not a suggestion; it was a mandate. You run this meeting.”

A pause.

Then his tone softened. He saw nervousness beneath her professionalism and respected her enough to say. “I’m here to support you. Whatever you need.”

She exhaled, nodding. “Well, sir... I’d appreciate it if you could start things off. Maybe introduce the agencies?”

His lips twitched with the ghost of a smile. “Of course, Agent Steele.”

It took the Director five full minutes to introduce everyone and outline, in broad strokes, the scale of the operation. The list was long. Officials from domestic intelligence, international partners, cybersecurity agencies, and financial watchdogs waited patiently. When he finally turned to Steele, his words were gracious, passing the microphone with a nod of respect.

She began.

“This coordinated effort may be the largest of its kind ever undertaken,” Steele said, her voice steady and clear. “While I’ve been assigned as lead agent, this is your operation. Its success will be your success. But let me be perfectly clear, we will not stop until every name on the list is in custody.”

She paused.

On the screen, a grid of faces stared back at her, determined, but anxious. She could see the weight of the moment pressing on each of them. No one in this virtual war room had ever faced something like this before.

She continued.

“The *Concilium Noctis*, or Council of the Night, is a clandestine banking cartel that has manipulated and controlled global finance from the shadows. This group has the means, and more importantly, the will, to crash entire markets. Their influence reaches into sovereign governments, regulatory agencies, and even law enforcement. And everyone on this list has a small private army to protect them.”

Her tone sharpened as she pressed on.

“Thanks to the work of elite cybersecurity teams, independent hackers, and a dedicated group of financial crime specialists, we have begun to unmask their network. The next 72 hours will determine whether we seize the moment... or lose control.”

She answered a few questions, succinctly, precisely, and ended the briefing within fifteen minutes.

As the screens blinked dark one by one, Steele felt a quiet rush of relief.

Beside her, the Director was on a call. He gave her a wink and a thumbs-up as he stood.

“You did good,” he said.

Then he turned and left the room without another word.

#

The *Concilium Noctis* had no time to react. In a perfectly coordinated strike, intelligence agencies across five continents closed their net, moving in simultaneous precision.

In an opulent fortress an hour outside London, the grandiose castle nestled among the rolling countryside, he had acquired just a few years prior, Alexander Kinskamov sipped tea in a cavernous, chandelier-lit dining hall. In an hour, he would jump on a private plane for a week on

his small private island off the coast of Greece with Natasha, his twenty-year-old mistress.

Then it came.

A sensor tripped. A piercing alarm echoed through the stone walls.

Through the window, he spotted a convoy of six black SUVs tearing up the gravel drive like a pack of wolves.

Without panic, Kinskamov stood, walked to an antique wooden trunk, and opened it. Inside: polished steel and cold intent. He calmly pulled out two machine guns, slung them over his shoulders, stepped out onto the castle's front steps, and began to fire.

Dorian Penato, in Miami, received a single encrypted message from a crooked senator on the Intelligence Committee:

“They're on to you.”

He didn't hesitate. Within minutes, he was behind the wheel of his custom *Rolls-Royce Spectre*, painted in Salamanca Blue, and roaring away from Fisher Island. He barely made it ten miles before the skies above him filled with thunder, three helicopters swooped in low, surrounding him like vultures. Penato pressed a button. The trunk clicked open. A hidden weapons rack rose.

If this were the end, he'd write it in gunfire.

In Bogotá, Enrique de la Deuce, legendary drug lord and one of the Council's founding architects, stood defiantly on the marble steps of his estate, surrounded by federal agents. He refused to surrender. Shouting about debt, power, and the ungrateful world that owed him everything, he hurled insults as he reached for a pistol tucked behind his belt.

Three pillars of the *Concilium Noctis*, each one powerful, protected, and merciless, met

the same violent ends.

The Italian, Lorenzo Sarducci, was lounging aboard his gleaming, hundred-foot yacht just off the sun-drenched Amalfi Coast. The vessel, named *Il Sovrano Oscuro*, *The Dark Sovereign*, was a floating palace with polished teak decks, chrome accents, and silk canopies billowing in the sea breeze. Laughter floated through the air, mingling with the soft splash of waves against the hull.

Sarducci, bloated from decades of indulgence and greed, reclined on a white leather lounge, shirt unbuttoned over his expansive belly. Around him, a dozen barely twenty-year-old women in microscopic bathing suits sipped champagne and posed for selfies, pretending not to notice the man's obscene wealth or lusty stares.

When the Italian Coast Guard approached, flanked by two unmarked military vessels, it took the guests a moment to understand the seriousness of what was happening.

Sarducci raised his hands slowly, the smugness fading from his face.

"What do you want from me? I am innocent," he muttered, sweat breaking across his brow.

But he didn't resist. He knew the game was over.

He was taken without incident as the Council's empire continued to crumble.

Natalia Kowalska, a Polish national and Council member, was arrested as she stepped out of Cartier in central Warsaw, her wrists cuffed before the doorman could even open the car door.

In Tokyo, Ryoichi Takeda, the Japanese arm of the Council, threatened to unleash the Yakuza on the agents sent to detain him. The Tokyo police chief, bound by both law and pride, offered him a final chance to surrender "for the sake of honor." Takeda narrowed his eyes,



inhaled slowly, and then made a run for it. The chief shot him in the leg. Takeda dropped, face-first, on the pavement and began to cry.

In Shanghai, Meilin Zhang was defiant until the end. Her bodyguards swore revenge, but it never came. The Council's global web was unraveling too fast.

Back in the United States, the two American members, Grant Sawyer and Miles Crawford, had disappeared.

It took Whitney's team less than an hour to locate them, hiding inside a reinforced underground bunker in upstate New York.

The hackers worked fast. Within minutes, Sparrow had pulled up a complete schematic of the facility: 6,000 square feet of subterranean living space. Steel-reinforced blast doors. Internal surveillance. A networked ventilation system.

Sparrow zoomed in on the ducts.

"Let's smoke them out," said the lead field agent.

Twenty minutes later, a non-lethal compound filled every corridor. Sawyer and Crawford emerged coughing and dazed, hands raised in surrender. Not a single shot fired.

In the South of France, Théodore de la Roche-Dumont was preparing to host 100 guests at the Villa Ephrussi de Rothschild for his new wife's twenty-eighth birthday. He was seventy-one. As the celebration began, just after sunset, Gendarmes stormed the estate.

Arrogant and indignant, Théodore protested all the way to the police van, demanding legal representation and screaming about human rights violations as he was dragged through his courtyard in front of stunned socialites.

Lord Winston Ashbourne, 92, the last of England's aristocratic titans, stood alone in his

ancient stone manor nestled deep in the northern countryside. The windows rattled as a convoy of black SUVs thundered up the long drive.

Without a word, he crossed the study and opened a mahogany display case. Inside, resting on deep red velvet, was an antique Webley revolver, once owned by King George VI.

Ashbourne lifted it with care, as though touching history itself.

He moved to the window, the revolver steady in his liver-spotted hand.

Outside, agents disembarked, swift and silent, weapons ready. He took one last look at the gray English sky.

A breath.

A whisper of finality.

Then, he pulled the trigger.

One by one, they fell.

A rapid forensic audit estimated the total assets controlled by the *Concilium Noctis* at nearly \$22

Trillion, a shadow empire rivaling the economies of nations.

But tonight, the Council of the Night was no more.

## Chapter Forty-Six

The Union Club of New York City stood in elegant defiance of the chaos outside, a fortress of mahogany and history on the corner of 69th Street and Fifth Avenue. The façade, limestone and granite, was quiet, dignified, and heavily guarded tonight.

A line of black SUVs was parked just outside, tinted windows gleaming beneath the amber city lights. Security men stood like statues, earpieces in, eyes scanning the crowdless sidewalk.

Inside, the club had been reserved, no press, no onlookers, just a single dining room repurposed for a private celebration that no one would ever read about. Thick Persian carpets. Oil paintings of long-dead industrialists. A massive chandelier dimmed to a diplomatic glow.

At the center of the room, a long table was set for eight. But only four seats were filled so far.

Max Whitney, international financier and phantom advisor to half the world's central

banks, was relaxed, a glass of Bordeaux in one hand, smiling at the man across from him.

His friend, Secretary of the Treasury Jan Holt, in a sharp suit, silk scarf, dry wit, was sipping her whiskey as if this were a poker night, not a national security debrief.

They spoke in low voices. Not of conspiracies. Just about their lives, the weather, the markets, a mutual acquaintance in Geneva who had somehow not yet been assassinated.

Then Max turned and gestured. "Sloan. Come over here, would you?"

Martin Sloane had been standing off to the side, alert, eyes on the room even in this supposed sanctuary. He wore a charcoal suit, well-fitted, no tie. He walked over quietly.

Max stood and clapped a hand on his shoulder.

"You've met Secretary Jane Holt?"

"We've spoken on the phone, briefly," Martin said.

"Mr. Sloane," Holt said warmly, extending her hand. "You've been a trusted asset. Please, sit down."

Martin hesitated.

"Sit," Holt said again, more gently this time. "This isn't an interrogation. This is gratitude."

He sat.

Max poured a glass of wine and pushed it across the table. "Sloane," he said. "You saved me. You protected Victoria. You helped expose the Concilium Noctis. And you kept me breathing long enough for Jane here to flip the last domino. We want to show our gratitude. We owe you a debt."

Martin shifted uncomfortably. "I was just doing my job."

“Exactly,” Holt said. “And that’s what we want to talk about. The President asked me personally to meet with you. Off the record, of course. No medals. No photographs. But I have the full authority to grant you and fulfill a single request.”

Martin blinked.

“Ask for anything,” Max said. “Within reason, and reach.”

Martin was silent.

He looked at the portraits against the wall before him. He thought of Victoria, on her way to meet them now, flanked by two bodyguards he had personally vetted. He thought of the townhouse they had recently visited. The white-painted brick. The second floor, where they might one day raise a child.

He looked down at his hands. “I don’t need much,” he said softly. “I don’t want a title. I want to go back to where I was before this spiraled. I want peace. I want... a life.”

Jane Holt nodded. “Be specific.”

Martin cleared his throat. “Victoria and I may be getting married. We haven’t talked about it exactly, but I want to build that life with her. A few days ago, we saw a townhouse. White brick. Fully restored. A block or two from Max’s place. We fell in love with it. It’s pricy, but I could make it...”

He paused, suddenly self-conscious. “So, if there’s anything you could do,” he said. “Help me purchase that place, maybe getting a loan approved.”

Jane Holt smiled, satisfied.

“You’ve got it,” she said. “We’ll purchase and settle the deal tomorrow morning. The deed will be in your name by the end of the week. No one will know. Not even the brokers.”

Martin swallowed. "Thank you."

Max raised his glass. "To peace. And the people who keep it."

Martin lifted his glass slowly, still unsure if this was real.

"As for work," Holt said, "a quiet security post at a UN satellite office just opened. No field work. No weapons. Nine to five. Padded salary. Full clearance."

Martin blinked again. "You're serious?"

"You saved this guy's life many times; without him, this conversation would not be happening," Jane said. "The least we can do."

The doors opened.

Victoria stepped into the room, radiant in a navy coat, her eyes scanning the room until they landed on Martin. She smiled, tentative, questioning.

Martin stood, his heart thudding.

She walked to him, took his hand.

And for the first time in a very long time, he allowed himself to breathe.

## Chapter Forty-Seven

President Lang stood tall at the podium beneath a flawless blue sky. He wore a sharply tailored black suit, crisp and ceremonial, the American flag pin glinting faintly on his lapel. His posture was strong but not untouched by pain. He moved with the careful deliberation of a man still healing, yet unshaken in resolve. His presence radiated authority. His eyes, shadowed by fatigue and time, held a quiet fire, the look of a man who had faced the abyss and stepped back from it, carrying the weight of a nation on his shoulders.

The air was sharp with the scent of spring, heavy with the gravity of what had been won, and what had nearly been lost.

The ceremony was taking place on the steps of the Capitol. A banner hung above the gathered crowd: *“Democracy, Dignity, and Defense: The Republic Endures.”*

Today was not just about medals, it was about memory. It was about closing one of the darkest chapters in the nation’s history and opening something better, something worthy.

The President's voice carried clearly over the crowd: "We have seized back our sovereignty from a shadow cartel of thugs in thousand-dollar suits."

The applause that followed came from the hearts of a tired nation. It had taken years for the pillage to be recognized and its creators to be so brazen as to believe they could threaten the American government.

It cost the lives of many, a few soldiers protecting the president, and spies doing their job to ensure America remains the power it is.

Had the president decided to surrender to these nefarious and unseen forces, it would have destroyed America's democratic framework.

But the enemy, the Concilium Noctis, had been unmasked and dismantled.

Eight of the most powerful and secretive figures in the financial underworld now sat behind reinforced steel and unbreakable glass, stripped of their wealth, stripped of their secrets. Four others had chosen death over capture. They had threatened blackmail. They had promised devastation. But at long last, justice spoke louder.

President Lang's team had captured the Administrator, the ghostlike tactician who ran the Concilium's vast web of shell companies and dark pools, and dragged him out of the shadows. After years of evading satellite surveillance, digital forensics, and human intelligence, he had finally been cornered in a luxurious Manhattan penthouse.

Now, like the eight members of the Concilium Noctis captured, he sat in solitary confinement at a maximum-security black site, sentenced to life without parole. No visitors. No communication. No exit.

The Concilium's data empire had been hidden beneath a former Soviet



telecommunications bunker outside Volgograd, buried under forty feet of reinforced concrete and ice-cold steel. It was a labyrinth of servers, climate-controlled, off-grid, and accessible only by a biometric vault designed to outlast a war. It had taken a joint task force of U.S. Delta Force operatives, French DGSE cyber agents, and local Russian intelligence defectors to breach the facility. They came at dawn. The entire operation lasted under seven minutes.

What they found inside shocked even the most seasoned intelligence officers: vast black ledgers, untold terabytes of financial manipulation, classified communications, and the infrastructure of a parallel economy that had spanned continents. It was not just corruption. It was governance in the shadows.

The entire financial scaffolding had been built to serve a single ruthless idea: that the ultra-rich alone should rule.

Now that the scaffolding was gone.

And in its place, a new economic order had begun, one that served the people, not the predators.

President Lang turned to the line of soldiers standing with calm pride behind him, the Green Berets, his personal security team, those who had stood beside him through the longest nights.

The highest honor was reserved for one man, whose name, Walter Smith, had only just been declassified. He stepped forward to receive the Presidential Medal of Honor, tears quietly streaming down his face.

Secretary Jane Holt stood quietly beside the President, her expression marked by quiet resolve and pride in all they had accomplished.

Then came Max Whitney, escorted to the stage with quiet humility, though the full weight of what he had done would never be known to the public.

Absent were the two unnamed hackers, young, brilliant, rebellious minds who had breached walls no one believed could fall. They were honored in absentia with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Hackers rarely stood in the limelight.

A special moment followed. A name spoken with reverence: Phil Esposito.

Posthumously awarded for bravery and sacrifice beyond measure, his medal was placed gently into the hands of his mother, who stood straight, composed, and weeping silently.

Off to the side stood Victoria Porter.

She had declined any recognition, not out of resentment, but out of principle. “I did what needed to be done,” she had told the President. “That should be enough.” Yet she was here. In an elegant dress, hand in hand with the man who had once been her bodyguard, and who, soon, would be her husband. Martin Sloane had surprised her just a few weeks earlier. On a lunch date, he rushed through the meal and insisted she come with him to meet someone.

The trick worked. He led her to the townhouse. The one they had both fallen in love with.

Jane Holt had sent a team to the older lady, the real agent whom Sloane had helped with her sign.

Two accountants, a high-ranking treasury staff, and two real estate lawyers. The owners accepted the offer immediately, and the paperwork had been prepared while the team went to lunch. By 3 p.m., the funds for the purchase had been transferred to the owner’s account, and the real estate agent’s fee had been paid.

One of the lawyers was sent to file all the records at the city’s office, meeting directly

with the department head. The matter was solved in 30 minutes.

Sloane received a text to present himself immediately to the Townhouse on Astor Row. Upon arrival, the lawyers reviewed the documents, handed him a large three-ring binder that included all pertinent information about the townhouse: security codes, a list of contractors, and the keys.

A few steps away, in Max Whitney's place on Astor Row, Victoria waited.

"Let's take a walk." Said Max. Three minutes later, they entered the massive townhouse Martin now owned.

They had survived the storm, and now they would start their new life in this beautiful home.

#

Behind the ceremony, behind the speeches and applause, the world itself was changing.

A month had passed since the Council's takedown. The stock markets had reopened, but they were no longer jungles of manipulation and silent algorithms racing in the dark. The markets had returned to what they were meant to be: fair grounds, regulated, transparent, and human.

No more dark pools.

No more secret trades at midnight between men who wore no name.

The market now reflected people.

It had rules. It had watchers..

President Lang had ended his speech with a single, powerful line:

"From today onward, let us build a future that doesn't need heroes to survive."

And with that, the ceremony had come to a close, not with fanfare, but with the sound of a nation quietly exhaling.

It wasn't perfect. It never would be.

But for the first time in decades, it was real.

And that was enough.

\* \* \*