





# POTUS

M. L. HAEN

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Fiction

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*for the patriot in you*



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No person except a natural-born citizen, or a citizen of the United States, at the time of the adoption of this Constitution, shall be eligible to the office of President...

Article 2, Section 1

Constitution of the United States of America

June 21, 1788

The Constitution does not, in words, say who shall be natural-born citizens. Resort must be had elsewhere to ascertain that. At common-law, with the nomenclature of which the framers of the Constitution were familiar, it was never doubted that all children born in a country of parents who were its citizens became themselves, upon their birth, citizens also. These were natives, or natural-born citizens...

*Minor v. Happersett*

Supreme Court of the United States of America

October Term, 1874



## ONE

Isaiah Renfro was not afraid. Not for his life, though he knew that tonight might be his last. The shadowy form tailing him had closed the gap to less than a city block, and it took every ounce of restraint Isaiah possessed not to bolt into the night. He was not afraid to die, but the story he carried must not die with him. If not for a bruised knee from a game of soccer, he had no doubt he could outrun the dark figure. But his best hope now was to make it to the subway station and into one of the high-speed elevators before his pursuer could catch him. Twenty stories down to DC Metro's deepest station in Forest Glen, Maryland, and Isaiah would have a moment to prepare for whatever the next elevator might deliver.

Slipping through the pale orb of a streetlight, he glanced at his watch. 2:36 a.m. Seven minutes until the last southbound train screamed into the underground station. In seven minutes, he would catch the Red Line back to D.C. with a story that could topple a presidency. Or in seven minutes, he would lay dead.

He zipped his sweatshirt then slipped the hood up over his

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Afro as the red muscle in his chest jerked and squeezed an urgent rhythm. His ears strained in the darkness for a rush of sound from the footfalls stalking him, but they kept a quick, even pace with his own. Licking his lips, he hopped off the curb and sprinted across the deserted roadway to the opposite sidewalk.

The shadowing footsteps quickened, slapping across the damp street behind him.

In spite of the bitter March air, sweat glistened on the strong, brown plane of Isaiah's forehead. Wiping his sweaty palms on his jogging pants, he resisted the urge to glance over his shoulder. He had known this night might come, and now that it had, he didn't regret a single blog post challenging the eligibility of President Louise Campbell to hold the highest office in the land. He would do it all again, would keep on doing it, if he lived through the night.

Shreds of breath fogged the air in front of his face. But though his breathing was ragged, he knew no fear. Only an urgent burning to live. To survive and tell the tale. A better place awaited him, of that he was sure. But if he died now, who would tell the world what he had just learned from his source inside the White House?

If only Harry hadn't chewed up his phone.

His strides quickened, and then he spotted the white spire of Montgomery Hills Baptist Church up ahead on the left.

In another minute, he passed the church then hurried across Georgia Avenue. He cut across the grass, and the entrance to Forest Glen subway station came into sight, a beckoning den of

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light in the darkness. Isaiah drew a deep breath, relief flooding his brown eyes.

“Help me,” he whispered. His prayer, a breath swallowed by the darkness, strengthened him.

Then Isaiah ran.

He bolted over the grass, across the concrete apron, and into the mouth of the station without looking back. Heart pounding, his arms blurred with motion as the sinewy strength of his hamstrings hurled him through the broad cement corridor.

Heavy footsteps pounded behind him.

With each jarring crash of his left heel, his injured knee screamed in protest. But Isaiah didn't slow. He flew over the burnt orange tiles like the track star he'd been in college. Fearless. Defying the pain. Each jolt of the pavement an electric prod in his injured knee. Still he raced. Fifteen feet. Twenty. Thirty. He widened the gap between himself and his pursuer. Then the bank of elevators jumped into sight.

The footsteps racing after him scraped to a stop.

*Click-click.*

Isaiah recognized the sound of a bullet being chambered. Adrenalin flooded his limbs. He sprinted forward, determined to live.

*Pop. Pop. Pop. Pop. Pop. Pop.*

Fragments of concrete sprayed from the wall beside him. The sound of the gunshots pierced his ears.

*Pop. Pop. Pop. Pop.*

The bullets went high. He weaved right then left.

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Ten more feet to the elevators.

*Pop, pop, pop.*

The first bullet ricocheted off the tile near his left foot, the second whistled past his right ear, and the last one pierced a trash barrel.

*Pop. Pop.*

*Click.*

Empty.

Isaiah lunged for the nearest elevator button. He spun around as the killer released the empty magazine from his Beretta M9 and slipped it into the pocket of his black trench coat. Isaiah noted the man's dark sunglasses, his high and tight military haircut, his black combat boots.

The door to the elevator dinged open. Leaping inside, Isaiah jabbed the button that would carry him one hundred and ninety-six feet underground to the last southbound train of the night.

Sprinting toward him, the killer drew a full magazine from his pocket.

"Come on, come on, come on!" Isaiah pounded the button to close the elevator door.

The killer slipped the clip into his semi automatic pistol.

The elevator door began to close.

*Click-click.* A 9mm hollow point bullet slid into the gun's chamber.

Isaiah threw himself to the other side of the elevator, taking cover behind the closing door.

Footsteps beat toward him.

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The door slid inch by inch, closing, closing...

“Come on, come on!” Isaiah raked his hood from his head.

Footsteps pounded closer.

The door was nearly closed now. Six inches. Five. Four.

He smelled the killer’s oily scent.

Three inches. Two. One...

Closed.

Slumping back against the wall, Isaiah sank to the floor. He sucked great pockets of air into his starving lungs. Then holding his large square hands out in front of him, he was surprised to see his fingers trembling. Clenching his hands into fists, Isaiah sprang to his feet. Twenty seconds to the bottom of the high-speed elevator.

*Then what?*

The killer lunged into an adjacent elevator and hit the button that would carry him to his prey. The door slid closed. The elevator descended, speeding through the dark carved earth. One story. Two. Three. The trench-coated demon smiled as the elevator hurled toward the subterranean station. In seconds, the kill would be his.

Pacing his elevator, Isaiah’s eyes darted over the ceiling, the walls, the floor. He glanced at his watch. 2:41 a.m. Less than two minutes until the train arrived. Dropping to his knees, he clenched his hands together and bowed his head. His heart beat a deafening roar on the drums in his ears.

“Help me get this story out... don’t let it die with me. But if I don’t make it, take care of Harry for me, and...” he swallowed,

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tears swirling behind his closed eyes, “and comfort Mom, and Joe and Amy, and the boys.”

The elevator jarred to a stop, and Isaiah sprang to his feet. Bolting from the box, he glanced left, then right. Concrete benches dotted the wall. A PIDS unit, displaying train arrival times, hung from the vaulted ceiling.

Then a muted *thud* whispered through the empty station as the next elevator touched down. Isaiah’s heart pounded in his eyes, and he flung himself flat against the wall beside the arriving elevator.

The stainless steel door slid open. Isaiah held his breath, the veins bulging down each side of his neck pulsing in rapid fire.

After a moment, the killer’s Beretta slipped through the open elevator door.

Isaiah lunged. Sinking his fingers into the killer’s wrists, he shoved the gun toward the waffle-patterned ceiling.

*Pop. Pop. Pop. Pop. Pop. Pop. Pop.*

Bullets sprayed above their heads. Chips of concrete rained down around them.

The killer’s knee sprang into Isaiah’s groin, and Isaiah doubled over. Tears pricked his eyes as he gulped for air. Then his right hand struck like a rattlesnake. Snaring the killer’s left ankle, he jerked his feet out from under him.

Isaiah spun sideways.

*Pop. Pop. Pop. Pop. Pop.*

Bullets shattered the burnt-orange tiles near his head.

*Pop. Pop. Pop.*



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*Click. Click.*

Empty.

Isaiah shot to his feet. Launching his body through the air, he planted his right shoulder three inches into the killer's stomach. The men crashed to the floor and slid toward the edge of the platform. Isaiah jerked up. Straddling the killer, he drew back his right fist.

The killer hooked a leg around Isaiah's chest. Flipped him to the floor.

Isaiah jerked onto his back just in time to see the empty Beretta smashing into his right temple. His head snapped to the left. His eyes rolled back in their sockets. Then his eyelids fluttered and closed.

Springing to his feet, the killer glanced around. He spotted the red light of a security camera blinking near the ceiling. Not a problem. The man who'd hired him could make that go away. Right now, he had a job to finish.

He holstered his Beretta then hooked his hands under Isaiah's armpits and dragged the unconscious man to the edge of the loading platform. The warning lights marking the edge of the platform pulsed their red warning. A screaming *whoosh* grew in the distance as the approaching train rammed the air in the tunnel ahead of it and the killer's trench coat rippled in the rush of air. Raising a boot, he kicked Isaiah's body onto the tracks.

Isaiah sprawled sideways across the rails, narrowly missing the third rail, which would have sent 750 volts of electricity arcing through his limbs.

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The train's headlights bounced off the walls of the tunnel as the rush of air and steel screamed a deafening crescendo in the underground cavern.

The killer turned and sprinted toward the stairs. The train would finish the job, leaving too many pieces of his victim to count. Slipping into the stairwell, the killer flew up the steps two at a time, his black coat flapping behind him like a dark wing of death.

Isaiah lay motionless.

The train's headlights burst from the tunnel into the station.

And then Isaiah stirred. He cracked open one eye. The cold iron rail pressed into his neck. Then horror crashed through him in an icy, breath-sucking wave.

*Move!*

But his body did not obey.

*Move! Move! Move!*

His limbs had been hollowed out and filled with wet cement.

*Move!*

The train screamed. Headlights blinded his eyes.

Five seconds, four, three...

*Move!*

Isaiah jerked sideways. His head hit the floor between the tracks. His legs slipped off the rails.

*Lie flat! Lie flat!*

Air buffeted his body like a tidal wave. The deafening clamor of the Rohr subway cars twisted his eardrums as the train raced an inch above his nose.

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*I'm alive!*

And then a loose bolt, hanging lower than the rest, snared his jacket. Like a fish on a hook, the train reeled him down the tracks, his head bouncing against concrete and metal. The force of the catch knocked his tennis shoes from his feet. The ground chiseled gouges in his back, buttocks, and legs. His right hand bounced onto one rail, and the front wheel of car 1132 sliced his pinkie, ring, and middle fingers from his hand.

And then it stopped.

The screaming crescendo of the train fell away. The red, pulsing lights of the platform faded behind the black haze stealing across his vision.

Stillness fell like a blanket.

He felt no pain.

He breathed in.

Breathed out.

Breathed in.

And in the muted cocoon of his ebbing consciousness, he wondered if his time had come. Tears poured into his sightless eyes. There was so much work yet to be done.

*Not yet, please, not yet.* His prayer floated heavenward as the voice of a long ago patriot lit his breast on fire...

*I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country.*



## TWO

One mile south of Topeka, Kansas, State Legislator Joe Renfro ducked behind his snow fort to escape the snowball torpedoing toward his chest. The projectile missed his torso, but nailed him in the right temple, flattening itself then breaking apart and dropping in soft clumps at his feet.

“Oh, you’ve had it now!” He laughed as his wife, Amy, and their thirteen-year-old son, Joey, high-fived each other and did a victory dance behind their snow fort twenty feet away.

“Come on boys,” Joe glanced down at five-year-old Moses and three-year-old Danny who were giggling and pointing at the pieces of snowball still stuck to his head, “grab the arsenal and let’s attack!”

“Yay Papa! Let’s attack!” The little boys whooped as they grabbed snowballs then charged after their father toward the enemy’s fort.

Amy shrieked and raced out from behind her snow fort toward the house. “I know my sweet little guys wouldn’t hit their mama

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with a snowball!”

Moses launched a snowball through the air, striking her in the arm. Danny’s snowball splattered against her leg. Amy stopped, scooped up handfuls of snow, and turned. “You boys better run!”

They squealed with delight, their sweet brown faces rosy in the cold. Then they turned and fled for the safety of their fort.

Joe advanced on Joey who hunkered down behind his fort, lobbing snowballs over the top as fast as he could. Dodging left and right and taking an occasional hit, Joe rounded the side of the fort.

“Surrender!” Joe drew back his arm and took aim.

“Not on your life!” Joey bolted from the ground, hurling a snowball at his father’s head as he fled. In seconds, Joey widened the gap between them. Then he stopped and scooped up a snowball. Then letting it fly, he took off again.

Joe gave chase, but it was no use. Joey ran like his Uncle Isaiah. Like the deer that raced through their market gardens. Swift and graceful. Powerful.

After ten minutes of zigzagging through the maze of gardens and greenhouses dotting their five acres, Joe was wheezing for air. “I give up! Come back, Joey, I give up.”

“I’m not fallin’ for it, Papa.” Joey stopped near the pond and grinned at his dad. “Let’s see your hands.”

Joe raised his left hand in the air, palm open.

“The other hand.”

“What other hand?”

“Uh-huh... what’s the matter? You can’t catch me so you’re

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gonna sucker me?”

“If you didn’t run like your Uncle Isaiah I’d have had you by now.”

Joey smiled. “Let’s see that other hand.”

Joe advanced on him. “What other hand, son? You know your Papa loves you.”

Joey dropped down and cupped a ball of snow in hands. “All right, Papa, if that’s how you want to play it. You know I love you, too.”

They charged each other, snowballs raised, laughing, taking aim. Then when they were ten feet apart, they let their snowballs fly. Joey’s snowball streaked through the air, hitting Joe square in the chest. Joe’s snowball clipped the side of his son’s head.

Then Joe hunched forward, clutching his knees as his breath fogged in front of his face. “You ready to surrender? I can’t run anymore.”

Joey laughed. “How ‘bout a truce?”

“All right then, truce before you give your old papa a heart attack. Anyway, I think your mom and the little guys went inside already.” Joe straightened and threw an arm around his son’s shoulders as they headed for the house, surprised again at how tall Joey had grown. The boy had sprouted up until his gangly form stood just a few inches shorter than Joe’s six-foot-three-inch frame. Joe noticed the coming-of-age ring, which he’d given Joey last summer, hanging on a chain around son’s neck.

As they ambled toward the house, “Home On the Range” began to play from Joe’s coat pocket.

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“Papa...” Joey rolled his eyes, “you gotta change that ringtone, please, I’m begging you. It’s embarrassing.”

Joe smiled at him as he slipped the phone from his pocket and glanced at the caller ID.

“It’s Grandma.” Pushing the green button, he raised the phone to his ear.

“Hey, mom.” A few more steps, and Joe stopped in his tracks. “Just slow down and tell me what’s wrong?”

Joey studied his dad.

“Mom, I can’t understand what you’re saying. Take a deep breath. Whatever it is, it’ll be okay.”

Joe smiled at his son, but his eyes betrayed him.

“Isaiah? When? Where is he?”

“Yes, of course. I’ll pick you up on the way to the airport.”

Joe lowered the phone then drew a deep breath.

“Is Uncle Isaiah okay?”

Resting a hand on his son’s shoulder, Joe gazed into his eyes until he was sure he could trust his voice. “There’s been an accident,” he said. “Your uncle was hit by a subway train.”

“A train!”

Joe tightened his grip. “He’s alive, but critical. But the doctors...” Joe cleared his voice and tried again, “the doctors don’t expect him to make it. Your Grandma and I are catching the next plane east.”

As hard as he fought it, a tear slipped onto Joey’s cheek. He scrubbed it away, embarrassed by the display in front of his father.



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“It’s okay, Joey.” Joe grabbed him in a fierce embrace, his voice cracking at the edges. “It’s okay,” he said.



### THREE

Operations Czar Alexander Karich cut the headlights as he guided his dark sedan into the deserted parking lot on the outskirts of D.C. He had been with President Campbell's administration since the beginning, and this wasn't the first time he'd found himself alone in the black of night, driving across cracked cement with dead grass shooting up between the crevices. His gaze swept left, then right before once again checking the rearview mirror.

Pressing a button on his armrest, Alexander lowered his electric-powered tinted window exactly one inch. Sickly weeds threaded the chain-link fence drooping along one side of the lot and weathered Styrofoam cups, stray sheets of newspaper, and wadded up fast food wrappers tangled in the growth. A door in the abandoned warehouse beside the parking lot banged in the wind, and the rusted sheet metal siding groaned like a man in pain. But Alexander had no qualms about where he was or about the thing he had come to do. For President Campbell, for Louise, there was nothing Alexander Karich would not do. The center

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would hold. He would see to it. No two-bit blogger or his assassin would bring down this administration. Not on his watch.

Alexander had first met the future president in college before he'd stormed Wall Street and before she had won her first election as U.S. Representative for Nevada's 2nd district. They'd soon discovered their shared passion for all things political and had spent hours, weekends, and the rest of their college years debating the ideas they discovered in *Rules for Radicals* and *The Coming Insurrection*, in the socialist dreams of Cloward and Piven, in the progressive policies of President Wilson, and in the unprecedented, explosive growth of federal might under President Lincoln.

And as one semester had rolled into the next, Alexander had fallen in love. The way Louise Campbell moved, the way she slept, the way her lips curved into a smile, the way she flipped her long blond hair over her shoulders bewitched him. He often watched her sleeping, gazing at her as if she were a marble goddess come to life. Soon his consuming desire became to win this woman who'd spent the first fifteen years of her life living with her American mother in Nevada before flying off to spend the next three years getting to know her British father in London. Then at age eighteen, she'd leaped back across the pond for an Ivy League education in the Northeast.

But his happily-ever-after dream with Louise wasn't to be. His goddess incarnate had long ago wed herself to her ambition to become the first female President of the United States by the time she was forty-five. She had envisioned everything from her

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ascendancy through the ranks to the dashing First Gentleman at her side, and Alexander didn't fit the mold.

At four-feet-seven-inches tall, Alexander Karich was desperately short for a man. But worse in the slippery-tongued world of politics than his diminutive stature was the painful fact that Alexander Karich was an introvert. He despised Washington's champagne-soaked parties, oiled with the banal banter of backstabbers, the obvious and obscene cosmetic surgeries, and the lurid affairs raging just below the surface.

And so Alexander had tried to make up for his lack of height and sociability with an attentiveness bordering on servitude, and for a brief while in their third year of school, it had seemed as if his serfdom might be enough. But then John Campbell had transferred in from a school out West, and Alexander's fantasies dashed themselves against the rocks of unrequited love. John was everything Alexander was not. He was not just the stereotypical tall, dark, and handsome stranger; he was also shallow enough to harbor no ambition of his own. The perfect docile First Gentleman. His jovial and gregarious manner coupled with the fact that he came from a rich family with deep political roots in Louise Campbell's home state made John the perfect fashion accessory for Louise's bare-knuckle scrabble to the top.

Alexander opened the glove compartment and withdrew his Beretta 3032 Tomcat pistol then reached back inside and drew out the silencer. This was his equalizer. The muscle mass or soaring height of his target made no difference to the Winchester Silvertip round chambered in his weapon. Raising the silencer to

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the end of the barrel, he screwed it into place. His original plan had not been to liquidate this asset, but to keep him on reserve. Unfortunately, the ex-military recruit had proven himself shockingly sloppy. To call him an amateur was kind.

Alexander had known better than to rush things with an untested operative, but President Campbell insisted on managing the minutest details of her operations czar's affairs. She had demanded that the blogger, Isaiah Renfro, whom they'd been surveilling for months, be "taken care of" immediately. So far nothing had appeared on his blog about their overtures to Supreme Court Justice Harold Jennings, but all too soon Renfro would have the evidence he needed. The blogger's subway "accident" had been a regrettable, but necessary, preemptive strike.

If the Supreme Court had kept its head buried in the sand and had refused to hear the ridiculous quo warranto assault launched by former Inspector General Anthony Perkins against the president, Alexander wouldn't be sitting in a deserted parking lot with a gun in his hands. Perkins had the unmitigated gall to claim that President Campbell was not eligible to hold the highest office in the land because her father was and always had been a British citizen, and therefore, President Campbell was not a natural-born citizen of the United States as required by the Constitution.

Heat flamed Alexander's face. The lies! If the misogynists thought they could take down the first female president of the United States with the hate-crazed, sexist filth spewing from their

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lips, they were mistaken.

Alexander had anticipated this day, and had spearheaded a plan that he, President Campbell, and Chief of Staff Robert Horning had been perfecting since before her election to the office of POTUS. A plan that could be set in motion with a phone call should they ever need it. The Perkins case never should have reached the Supreme Court, but now that it had, President Louise Campbell would stop at nothing to keep the reins of power clenched in her fists, and Alexander would help her. They would make her power absolute if that's what it took.

Shifting his gaze, Alexander spotted a red Lamborghini speeding into the parking lot. What kind of imbecile drove a Lamborghini when secrecy was paramount? But this wasn't the killer's first mistake. He had awakened Alexander the night before, demanding that the Metro's Forest Glen security footage covering 2:35 a.m. to 2:45 a.m. be erased. Alexander had seen to it, but no one made demands of Alexander and got away with it. No one but the president he served.

Sliding the gun into the pocket of his overcoat, Alexander picked up the manila envelope lying on the seat beside him and stepped from his car.

The Lamborghini screeched to a stop ten feet away, the door opened, and the killer's boots hit the ground. He shot to his feet then strode three steps to where Alexander stood. Planting himself in front of the shorter man, he let his thick, muscular arms hang at his sides.

The men locked eyes.

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Far in the distance, sirens sliced into the night.

Then without a word, Alexander extended the envelope containing a thick pad of one hundred dollar bills and surveillance photos of a purported new target.

The killer took the envelope, cracked it open, and peered inside. “Ahhhh...” a sick smile hooked one corner of his lips, “a woman.”

Alexander remained silent.

“This one will be good.” He winked at Alexander then spun and marched toward his waiting sports car.

With the speed of a serpent, Alexander whipped the pistol from his pocket, raised it in the air, and planted two hollow point rounds in the back of the killer’s head.

The man’s skull jerked forward with each impact. He staggered. Turned.

Alexander did not flinch at the sight of the killer’s missing face. No one jeopardized President Campbell’s administration.

The killer lunged one jolting, blinded step toward Alexander, a red mash of tissue where his face had been. Then he collapsed on the broken concrete. Spasmed. And died.

Glancing around, Alexander pulled the envelope from the dead man’s fist then climbed into his car and sped away.



## FOUR

Joe wrapped an arm around his mother's shoulders as a nurse in lavender scrubs led them over shiny gray tiles toward the Intensive Care Unit. His mother's small frame barely reached his chest, and he felt her hunched shoulders trembling beneath his arm. She had been forty-five when he was born and forty-nine when Isaiah came along. Her miracle boys. That's what she called them. Now she was eighty, and Joe feared that the sight of Isaiah lying in a hospital bed might be more than she could bear.

The call from the hospital had already taken a toll. Her brown face had turned chalky, her lips pinched into a thin wire, and half-moons blackened the skin beneath her eyes. And every so often, she shuddered as if an electrical current were passing through her body.

On the flight east, she'd clutched Joe's arm and repeated over and over that she didn't know how this could have happened. Neither of them did. It was hard to fathom how nimble, athletic Isaiah had managed to fall onto the subway tracks and get struck by a train.

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The lavender-clothed nurse pushed through a swinging door then moving to one side, she held the door open as she waited for them to follow her into the ICU.

But Helen Renfro stopped in her tracks, her fingers burrowing into Joe's arm.

"Mom?" Joe squeezed her shoulders.

A battle blazed in her brown, watery eyes, but only for a moment. Then she released Joe's arm and patted him on the chest.

"I'm all right now, Junior." No one called him Junior but her. His birth certificate read Joseph Edward Renfro II, but to his mother, he was Junior.

Helen fastened her gaze on the waiting nurse. "Take me to my baby," she said.

The woman nodded then turned and led them past the first three glass-walled rooms where human forms lay stretched on hospital beds, ensnared like hapless prey in a tangled nest of tubes, wires, and blinking monitors.

Sliding open the glass door of the fourth cubicle, the nurse stepped aside.

Helen pulled free of Joe's arm and rushed to Isaiah's side.

"Mama's here, baby, Mama's here." She lifted her hands to caress his face, searching for an inch of skin left undamaged. His eyes had swollen into grotesque eggs bulging under dark, purple skin, stitches dotted three sides of his nose as if it had been all but ripped from his face then sewn back on, bandages swathed his forehead, right cheek, and chin, and it looked as if the skin

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had been scoured from his lips with a piece of steel wool. Only his left cheek did she recognize, crisscrossed as it was with harmless scratches, the kind of boo-boos she'd kissed away a thousand times when he was small. Leaning over, she pressed her lips to that cheek as tears rolled from her eyes.

Stepping closer to the hospital bed, Joe was careful of the many lines running in and out of his baby brother. He reached down to squeeze Isaiah's hand, but stopped short at the sight of the bloody bandage where Isaiah's fingers had been. Joe clenched his jaw. Blinked back the tears. Then he rested a hand on his brother's chest.

"Hey, little brother..." His lips pulled tight into a smile as he fought the emotion pushing against his eyes. "Everything's gonna be all right now. We're gonna see you get whatever you need. Just you..." Joe blinked and tears dropped onto the sheet, "just you stay with us now, you hear me? This is your big brother talking to you, and you know it's my job to look after you." Joe drew a deep breath. "I love you, man. You're gonna be all right."

Gripping Isaiah's left hand, Helen reached out her other hand to Joe. Then together they bowed their heads to pray as the hands on Joe's wristwatch ticked 2 a.m.

"Dear Heavenly Father..." Helen began.

She prayed as the long minutes struggled by until finally they drew chairs up next to his bed. Then three o'clock came and went.

Still Isaiah lay as still as a corpse while the monitors and machinery keeping him alive beeped, hummed, whispered, and

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dripped. Every thirty minutes a soft-soled nurse slipped into the room, checked the patient, and then slipped back out again.

Four o'clock ticked by.

Joe and his mother continued to talk to Isaiah, to stroke his ruined body where they dared, to cry out to Heaven to spare his life.

Then five o'clock arrived. In an hour, the doctor would be by on rounds.

Leaning close, Helen whispered in his ear, "I love you, baby. Mama loves you."

Isaiah's pillow rustled, his head turning the slightest degree toward his mother.

She drew back, a smile breaking across her face. "Isaiah?"

She glanced at Joe. "Did you see that?"

Joe nodded as he scrambled to his feet.

"Isaiah?" He rested a hand on Isaiah's chest once more. "Isaiah, can you hear us? Mom and I are right here."

Helen gripped Isaiah's hand. "Honey, I love you, your Mama loves you."

They searched his broken face.

A minute ticked by.

"He moved his head, I know he did." Helen studied her younger son.

"I know, Mama, I saw it, too."

And then after another moment, Isaiah's lips began to move. They shifted sideways, pulled in, pushed out, working back and forth until as last, they parted. Beads of blood sprouted from the

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damaged tissue, and ever so gently, Helen wiped them away with her fingers.

“I’m right here, baby, Mama’s right here.”

“Rrrrrr...” a sound squeezed from Isaiah’s lips.

Joe leaned closer. “Don’t try to talk now, buddy, you need to rest.”

Isaiah moved his head left, then right, then left again.

“Rei...” the word scratched from his throat like nails on a chalkboard.

“Okay, that’s right,” Helen said, “that’s good, baby, now you rest. We’re going to stay right here with you, and the doctor will be coming soon.”

“Rei...ag.” Isaiah’s face twisted in pain. Tears squeezed from his swollen eyes.

“You’re gonna be all right,” Joe said, “just take it easy now.”

Isaiah’s chest heaved as he sucked the stale, hospital air deep into his bruised lungs. Then the breath flooded over his lips, bearing a word like a castaway thrown on the shore, his final offering to the world... “Reichstag.”

Isaiah did not draw another breath.

“Isaiah?” His mother clutched his chest. “Isaiah!”

*Aaaaaaaaaaaaaa...* a piercing alarm rang from a monitor beside his bed, and after a moment, the glass door to the room slammed open as doctors and nurses stormed his bedside. Joe pulled his mother away as the crash team bared Isaiah’s chest and shocked him again and again and again.

But in spite of his mother’s heart-piercing cries, in spite of the

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football lodged in Joe's throat, and in spite of the valiant efforts of the crash team, Isaiah's call to Glory Land had come.

## FIVE

**A**gainst his better judgment, Abdul Muntaqim leaned into his brother's embrace. He should not have made the hour drive from Kansas City to Topeka to have lunch with his brother. He knew that. Just as he knew Allah had said, "O ye who believe! Take not the Jews and the Christians for friends." There was no pass for wayward brothers. But his longing to see Fazal had overpowered his fear of judgment. Still, he knew that he would pay for this sin. Allah demanded complete obedience, and Fazal was an apostate who had long ago deserted the true path of the prophet, Muhammad, for the so-called savior, Jesus.

There was no question in Abdul Muntaqim's mind that Fazal deserved to die just as their mother had died, buried to her shoulders in the sand, stones gouging her head like dull blades of steel, blood streaming into her terror-stricken eyes. But that had all happened in a faraway land when Abdul Muntaqim was but thirteen years old and the brother in his arms had barely reached the tender age of seven. Now twenty years later, the brothers lived in America, in the heartland of the Great Satan, a country

reeking of decadence and decay. Abdul Muntaqim did not hate Fazal for his weakness, for his betrayal of Islam; rather he quaked in terror for his brother's soul. It was not Fazal's fault that he had fled Islam for the religion of their mother. It was their father's fault. It was their father who had pressed a stone into seven-year-old Fazal's hand, threatening to cut off that hand if the terrified Fazal did not cast his stone at the screaming, blood-soaked mother he adored.

Abdul Muntaqim pulled from Fazal's embrace. "I must go now," he said.

"Well, it was great seeing you." Smiling, Fazal gripped his brother's arms. "We should do this more often."

Gazing into Fazal's eyes, Abdul Muntaqim thought again that it was like looking into a mirror where a strong-jawed, dark-eyed man stood just an inch shorter than he. Abdul Muntaqim tried to return his brother's smile, but a growing sense of dread pinched his lungs and stirred the acid in his stomach. Allah would be angry that he had come. Pulling free of his brother, Abdul Muntaqim turned toward his waiting Honda.

"I must go now," he said again.

"I understand."

Abdul Muntaqim heard the sadness in his brother's voice. He hesitated. Then he turned back around, urgent and hopeful. "If you understand, Fazal, then you must prostrate yourself before Allah and beg his forgiveness. Right now. Right here. Before it is too late. Let us cast ourselves down and beg Allah to let you return to him."



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Fazal smiled sadly. "I cannot do that," he said.

"But why not? You said you understand."

"I understand the yoke you carry, my brother. The fear that in the end your bad deeds will outweigh your good deeds and that you will not be found worthy to enter Paradise. The fear that you will be tortured and tormented first in your grave and then in Hell."

"And you are worthy!" Abdul Muntaqim was angry now. The house church Fazal belonged to filled his brother's head with all manner of blasphemy.

"Of course not," Fazal said. "No mere mortal is worthy. Only Jesus is worthy, and He has me covered. Because of Him, I have life everlasting. Because of Him, I will see God."

"Blasphemy! Do not say that to me, brother, I am warning you!"

Fazal's eyes burned with longing and sorrow. He reached out a hand. "Brother..."

But Abdul Muntaqim spun away. "No, Fazal! No!" Then without another word, he slipped into his car and disappeared down the street where he merged onto the interstate.

Speeding along I-70, Abdul Muntaqim railed against the words his brother had lodged in his head, words now playing themselves in an endless loop, mocking him and the great Allah.

*Only Jesus is worthy, and He has me covered. Only Jesus is worthy, and He has me covered. Only Jesus is worthy, and He has me covered.*

"Liar!" Abdul Muntaqim slammed his fist into the steering wheel. Was Fazal trying to drag him down into Hell?

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*Beep-beep. Beep-beep. Beep-beep.*

The alarm on Abdul Muntaqim's wristwatch sounded, signaling that he had one minute until time for his afternoon prayer to Allah. Good. The salah was just what he needed to cleanse his mind of the blasphemous seeds his brother had planted there.

Jerking the steering wheel hard to the right, he screeched onto the shoulder of the interstate where he brought the Honda to a lurching stop. He grabbed a jug of water from behind his seat and climbed from the car. Then he washed himself before pulling his prayer rug from the passenger seat. Spreading the rug out on the asphalt, he faced Mecca and began by reciting *Iqama*, the private call to prayer, and then declared *Niyyat*, his intent.

Then he lifted his hands to his ears, palms forward.

"Allahu Akbar." *God is Most Great.* He spoke the words in Arabic as required, but the English translation played itself in his head as it had done for some years now.

Taking great care to stand upright and not invalidate his prayer by leaning, Abdul Muntaqim then folded his right hand over his left, below his navel. Then he recited the entire first chapter of the Qur'an, tacking on a couple suwar to the end to demonstrate his devotion.

And then again, "Allahu Akbar."

"Allahu Akbar." Leaning forward, he placed his palms on his knees. "Subhana rabbiyal adheem." *Glory be to my Lord Almighty.*

"Subhana rabbiyal adheem." *Glory be to my Lord Almighty.*

"Subhana rabbiyal adheem." *Glory be to my Lord Almighty.*

*Honnnkkkk!* Abdul Muntaqim ignored the passing scream of a

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car horn. Soon enough the infidels would tremble before the holy warriors of Allah.

Straightening once more, the ancient words poured from his lips like water.

“Sam’i Allahu Iman hamidah Rabbana wa lakal hamd.” *God bears those who call upon Him; Our Lord, praise be to You.*

“Allahu Akbar.” *God is Most Great.*

Then he pressed his forehead to the ground. “Subhana Rabbiyal A’ala.” *Glory be to my Lord, the Most High.* “Subhana Rabbiyal A’ala.” *Glory be to my Lord, the Most High.* “Subhana Rabbiyal A’ala.” *Glory be to my Lord, the Most High.*

The prayer continued as Abdul Muntaqim rose until he sat upright.

“Allahu Akbar.” *God is Most Great.*

Then he pressed his forehead to the ground again, the words still flowing.

Finally, he stood once more to his feet as the words he knew better than his own name fell from his lips.

“Allahu Akbar.” *God is Most Great.*

With that, his first *rak’a* was complete.

After completing a second *rak’a*, he remained sitting on the side of the interstate and began reciting the Tashahhud in Arabic. Then he turned to his right. “Assalamu alaikum wa rahmatullah.” *Peace be upon you and God’s blessings.* He turned to his left and repeated the words. “Assalamu alaikum wa rahmatullah.” *Peace be upon you and God’s blessings.* Then he stood to his feet, finished with the salah.

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Twenty minutes after Abdul Muntaqim first steered his Honda onto the shoulder of I-70, he eased back into traffic. His fear had ebbed under the soothing balm of ritual. He knew that many Muslims viewed the five-times-a-day prayer as a burden, and Allah forbid, even as an embarrassment. But not Abdul Muntaqim. He would be happy if the muezzins calling from the minarets dotting globe summoned the faithful to bow down ten times a day or even twenty. But the great Allah had determined the correct number to be five, and so five it was. Every morning, noon, mid-afternoon, evening, and night, Abdul Muntaqim stopped whatever he was doing, turned toward Mecca, and prostrated himself to the most powerful Allah.

But the quiet he found in the salah never lasted, and by the time he reached his apartment in downtown K.C., fear and dread had shredded his stomach. And so Abdul Muntaqim stretched himself out on the living room floor, begging Allah's forgiveness for sin after sin, no matter how miniscule. As he cried out for mercy, verses from the Qur'an flashed through his mind along with terrifying images of Hell... *as often as their skins are roasted through, We shall change them for fresh skins... ye shall drink like diseased camels raging with thirst... pour over his head the Penalty of Boiling Water...* Abdul Muntaqim knew he was being punished for his visit to Fazal, tormented with glimpses of what awaited him if he continued to disobey.

Squeezing his eyes tight against this waking nightmare, he prayed louder. Faster. Racing toward a trance-like frenzy until hours after he began his wrenching, desperate prayers, the images

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began to recede. They fled before his mind's eye as a great light grew in the distance. And in the light, Abdul Muntaqim glimpsed seventy-two of the most beautiful dark-eyed virgins he had ever seen. His destiny if he was faithful. His fate if he was willing to sacrifice everything on the altar of the most merciful Allah.

Abdul Muntaqim continued his prayers until long after dark, and then at 9:00 p.m., he rose from the floor. He fixed himself a peanut butter sandwich and sat down at the kitchen table with his journal, feeling both exhausted and cleansed from his long hours of supplication.

Tracing his fingers over the letters printed on the front cover of his notebook, a smile crept over his face.

*Abdul Muntaqim: Slave of him who punishes wrongdoings and seizes retribution.*

He would live up to his name. He was Allah's slave, and he would make the infidels pay. He would die a *shahid* in the great jihad. And very soon Islam would rule the world just as Allah willed it.

Picking up his sandwich, he flipped open his journal and began to read.

January 13th.

Al-hamdu lillahi rabbil 'alamin. Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds.

Today at the mosque, a strange man approached me after the final prayer. He praised the Imam's sermon...

Abdul Muntaqim took a bite of his sandwich, remembering that day. The middle-aged man who had approached him at the mosque on Brier Street had praised the *shuhada* of the jihad and the hard sayings of the Imam.

But Abdul Muntaqim was no fool. He had suspected the man from the beginning. Stories of undercover FBI agents working in mosques to ferret out what the Department of Homeland Security labeled “Islamic Extremists” had cautioned him against strangers voicing sympathies for jihad. But Abdul Muntaqim had played along. If the man proved to be an undercover agent, maybe he could use that to his advantage. And he could always walk away right up until the very deed. America had laws about entrapment. They would give him chance after chance to turn his back on whatever plan they were devising and simply walk away.

And so Abdul Muntaqim had worked the agent even as the agent worked him. He would slip out of his apartment and surveil the surveillance team zeroed in on his empty dwelling. When one shift of agents handed surveillance over to the next, Abdul Muntaqim stalked the departing agents back to their headquarters, to restaurants, to homes, and best of all, to clandestine meetings.

He took photographs and pasted them in his journal. He bought a long-range listening device and wrote their conversations down in his book. He recorded names, dates, and places. And then to his great astonishment, once in a back alley and once in an abandoned warehouse, he’d even snapped photos

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of President Campbell's operations czar, Alexander Karich, meeting with two of the agents who surveiled his apartment.

The FBI thought they played him for a fool, but they were the fools. Abdul Muntaqim was as wise as a serpent and as crafty as a fox, and he would not be ensnared by their evil tricks.

Leafing through the pages of his journal, he found his entry for the day he'd first spied Operations Czar Karich meeting the undercover agents.

March 15th

Al-hamdu lillahi rabbil 'alamin. Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds. Today, Agents Tom Crenshaw and Roger Jewell met in an abandoned warehouse on 4th Street with the president's operations czar, Alexander Karich. As I crouched behind the pile of leaking barrels, I could not imagine what had brought the president's czar all the way from Washington D.C. to Kansas City, Missouri, but as I listened it soon became clear. Al-hamdu lillahi rabbil 'alamin. Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds.

Abdul Muntaqim tore a bite from his sandwich then continued reading as the thrill of that blessed day rushed over him once more.

I have been persuaded for some time now that

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the agents intend to provide me with a live bomb, and not with a fake bomb, which the infidels have used to ensnare so many of Allah's great warriors who've come before me.

As I have written previously, the possibility that the agents would give me a live bomb first began to dawn on me with their repeated use of the words, "Operation Reichstag". Upon researching the word "Reichstag", I learned that many believe the National Socialists, the Nazis, had a hand in the 1933 fire at the Reichstag building which housed the German parliament and that the fire led to the rise of Hitler.

Perhaps President Campbell seeks to create a "Reichstag" of her own in order to suspend the Constitution and seize control of the fifty states. Perhaps I am her "patsy". It matters not. She is a harlot and a fool! The infidels do not realize that they are but pawns in the hands of most powerful Allah. Their blinded eyes cannot see the Day of Judgment sweeping down upon them.

The presence of Operations Czar Karich here in Kansas City convinces me even further that the bomb the agents will give me any day now will bear me straight into Paradise, to the presence of Allah and to the seventy-two virgins who await me. Al-hamdu lillahi rabbil 'alamin. Praise be to



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Allah, the Lord of the worlds.

For a long while, Abdul Muntaqim studied the photographs of Operations Czar Karich and the two federal agents, which he'd pasted beneath his handwritten entry sixteen days ago. Then finally, he closed his journal and leaned back in his chair. In the morning, he would see Special Agent Tom Crenshaw, a.k.a. Hassan Kaleel at the mosque on Brier Street. Until then, he could only hope that tomorrow was the day he became a *shahid*.

Closing his eyes, he let the meditation of his heart drone from his lips. "Al-hamdu lillahi rabbil 'alamin." *Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds.* "Al-hamdu lillahi rabbil 'alamin." *Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds.* "Al-hamdu lillahi rabbil 'alamin." *Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds...*



## SIX

“Come on, boy, out of the car.” Joe waited for the St. Bernard to move, but Harry only shifted his sad, brown eyes to stare at him.

Harry wanted Isaiah--that much was clear.

“Right now, Harry.” Joe tried his manly I-am-the-boss voice on the dog.

Harry whined.

“Sorry, boy.” And then it dawned on him that the dog would spend the rest of his life watching for Isaiah. There was no way to tell him that Isaiah was never coming back. With a sigh, he reached for Harry’s collar to coax him from the car.

It had been a long drive from D.C. to Topeka, but Joe knew that Isaiah would not have wanted a terrified Harry jostled halfway across the country in the crowded cargo bay of a 747. And so after he and his mother had left the hospital and made all the necessary arrangements, they’d rented a car. Then they’d stopped by Isaiah’s apartment to collect Harry and a suit for Isaiah to be buried in as well as some photos and things Helen

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wanted. After that, they'd driven twenty-one hours across seven states, reaching Topeka at eight o'clock on Monday evening. Now fatigue and grief threatened to overwhelm him.

"Harry, where's Isaiah?" The dog's ears perked forward. He thumped his tail. It was a cruel trick, Joe knew, but somehow he had to get the overgrown mammoth out of the car and into the house.

"Come on, Harry, where's Isaiah?" The St. Bernard leaped from the car and bounded up the front porch steps of the old two-story farmhouse.

Guilt swept through Joe. As soon as he opened the front door, Harry would charge into the house, wild to find his best friend. But Isaiah wouldn't be there.

Joe trudged up the porch steps after the dog.

"Hey Harry, how about a treat? You want a treat?"

*WOOF! WOOF!*

Why hadn't he thought of that sooner? In Harry's universe, not even Isaiah could compete with a dog biscuit. Not that they had any. Harry would have to settle for a hotdog.

Joe unlocked the door and they pushed into the living room.

"Honey, is that you?" Amy called from upstairs.

"It's me."

Harry romped at Joe's feet, salivating for his treat.

"Papa! Papa!" Moses and Danny's squeals raced down the staircase ahead of them.

*WOOF!* At the sight of the pajama-clad boys barreling down the stairs, Harry abandoned all thoughts of a treat and raced to

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greet them.

“Harry! Hi, Harry!”

*WOOF! WOOF!*

The boys showered the dog with affection before leaping into their Papa’s arms.

Joe kissed them and laughed as they chattered ever faster, trying to out-talk each other. Then glancing to the top of the staircase, his eyes fastened on Amy who smiled and blew him a kiss. With silver hoop earrings and close-cropped hair, his wife was still as beautiful as the day they’d met. Her eyes whispered a tender warmth, her generous lips were quick to smile, and her sculpted cheekbones lent her an exotic air.

Tears sneaked from the corners of his eyes before he knew they were coming.

“Papa, what’s wrong?”

“Papa, you’re crying.”

Joe blinked his eyes dry. “Nothing’s wrong, guys. Your papa’s just glad to be home.”

“Yay, Papa!” They squealed as he lowered them to the floor.

“Now you boys run upstairs, and I’ll come up in a minute and tuck you in.”

“Come on, Harry!” Moses and Danny ruffled the St. Bernard’s head then streaked up the stairs with Harry lumbering after them.

Amy passed them on the staircase then Joe met her at the bottom of the stairs. He slipped his arms around her shoulders as her arms slid around his waist. A perfect fit. Her lips pressed tenderly against his, and then he pulled her closer and rested his

cheek against hers.

“I missed you,” he whispered the words in her ear.

“I missed you, too.”

He held onto her, letting her presence center him once more.

“Honey, I’m so sorry,” she said, “I wish I’d been there with you.” She rubbed his back as if he were a child in need of comfort, and at that moment, he was.

Squeezing his eyes tight, Joe drew life and love from the woman in his arms. Then at last, he spoke, “Isaiah’s all right, now,” he said, “he’s all right.”

“I know, sweetheart, I know he is.”

Then Joe drew back and kissed her again. “Did I ever tell you how much I love you?”

“Once or twice,” she said.

Again they kissed then she placed a hand on his chest. “You better go tuck those boys in now, and I don’t want that hairy monster you brought home with you sleeping in their beds either.”

Joe smiled.

“I mean it, Joe. I won’t have that mongrel sleeping in my babies’ beds. That mountain of fur is lucky I even let him into my house.”

“Love you, sweetheart.” Joe started up the stairs.

“Don’t you sweetheart me.”

“Love you, pumpkin.”

“Joseph Edward Renfro.”

Joe laughed. When he reached the top of the stairs, the door to

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Joey's bedroom swung open and his oldest son slipped into the hallway. "Hey, Papa, I didn't know you were home."

Joe noticed the boy's tear-swollen eyes. Joe had practically worshipped his Uncle Isaiah. Every other word out of his mouth had been Uncle Isaiah this and Uncle Isaiah that.

Joe pulled him close. "You doin' okay?"

Joey nodded.

"We'll get through this," Joe said, "together."

"I know, Papa."

After a moment, Joe drew back and smiled at his son. "Want to help me tuck the boys in?"

Shrugging his shoulders, a grin lifted one corner of Joey's mouth. "Sure," he said.

In the little boys' room, Joe and his three sons knelt down beside one of the two twin beds covered with racecar comforters. Then they folded their hands in front of their faces, bowed their heads, and closed their eyes.

Harry cocked his head to one side and stared at them. Then he slapped his huge front paws to the floor, stuck his rump in the air, and wagged his massive tail.

*WOOF!*

Moses and Danny giggled.

*WOOF! WOOF!*

Danny cracked open one eye to peek at the dog.

Harry threw himself down on the floor then rolled on his back with his paws in the air and his tongue lolling out one side of his huge, floppy jaws.

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Danny cackled. “Harry looks like a funny alien!”

Opening his eyes, Joe frowned at the dog. “Harry, knock it off,” he said. Then reaching down, he rested a hand on his three-year-old’s shoulders. “Close your eyes now, Danny. It’s your turn to pray.”

“Okay, Papa.” Danny squeezed his eyes shut. “Harry is funny, though.”

“Yes, Harry is funny,” Joe said.

Then Danny charged into his prayer, “Dear Heavenly Papa...”

The words touched a place so deep in Joe that it brought tears to his eyes. It always did when he heard Danny pray, “Dear Heavenly Papa”. If only he could be that sure, that beloved, in his own prayers. He longed for the intimacy he heard in Danny’s words. Sure, Joe knew God loved him, Jesus died for him, and his soul was secure. But... was there more? Was it possible to call the God of the Universe, the Creator of galaxies and centipedes, “Papa”? To know the kind of intimate love with his Heavenly Father that he had known with his earthly one? Or was such a thought presumptive? Sacrilegious even?

“...and God bless Mama and Papa and Joey and Moses and the big funny alien Harry. And please make Mama let Harry sleep in my bed with me to keep me warm. And, and...” Danny sighed, “and I guess that’s all for now. Love you great big bunches,” he puckered his lips and made a kissing sound in the air before racing through his closing words, “In Jesus’ name, I pray. Amen.” Then Danny bounced to his feet and flew across the room to Harry.



## SEVEN

Operations Czar Alexander Karich kept pace with the others. His strides were not as long as President Campbell or Chief of Staff Robert Horning's strides, but Alexander was in better shape, and where these morning jogs left the president winded and the chief of staff gasping for air, they left Alexander ready to scale Mt. Everest.

The three of them curved left with the asphalt trail then headed down a steep slope as morning light streamed through the budding tree branches above them. The Secret Service agents jogging both in front of and behind them kept a discreet distance well out of earshot.

"I can't believe it's come to this." Chief of Staff Horning huffed for air, sweat glistening on his freckled forehead. "If I didn't know you so well, I'd swear this was an April Fools joke."

"It's no joke." President Louise Campbell's words were as brisk as her stride. "Alexander," she glanced at her operations czar, giving him the go ahead to bring the red-faced chief of staff up to speed.

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“Justice Jennings won’t budge. Not bribes. Not threats. Nothing. He’s even making noise about finding out who’s behind such efforts even if, and I quote, ‘even if it’s the Queen President herself.’”

Horning swiped the back of one hand across his dripping brow. “I told you Jennings was a waste of time. He’s got more scruples than Washington’s got lobbyists.”

“There’s more,” Alexander said. “I have reason to believe he intends to rule in favor of former Inspector General Perkins, and obviously, his vote would tip the scales. And I swear to you now, it will be over my dead body that the United States Supreme Court drags Louise... drags President Campbell in front of the American people and demands that she prove once and for all she’s a natural-born citizen!” Alexander glanced at the Secret Service agent nearest to him and was relieved to see the man’s earpiece planted like a bulb in his ear.

Horning stopped running, hunched over, and clutched his knees.

After a few paces, Karich and President Campbell turned and walked back to him.

The chief of staff straightened. “What,” he heaved for air, “what makes you think he’ll rule in favor of Perkins?”

“A clerk.” Alexander stared him in the eye. The man was weak. It wasn’t just the extra thirty pounds he lugged around. Chief of Staff Horning had never let himself believe this day would come. And now that it appeared inevitable, the man was becoming a liability.

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Horning pursed his lips then gulped a breath of fresh air. “One of Jennings’ clerks?”

Alexander nodded.

“But you’re not sure yet?”

“Not one hundred percent.”

Horning turned to the president. “We have to be sure, you know that. Absolutely sure. Operation Reichstag was really only an exercise, it was never meant to...” his words trailed off as his eyes scanned the horizon. “It would change everything, you do realize that? The world as we know it would be gone for good.”

The Secret Service clones with their flesh-colored earpieces and buzzed heads stood with their backs to the group, wagons circled, their black sunglasses in place to conceal their darting eyes.

“Relax, Robert.” President Campbell clamped a hand on his shoulder. “No one’s doing anything yet, all right?” She smiled at him. “But if that day should come, I need to know I can count on you.”

Horning bit his lip then released a flood of stale air from his lungs. “Of course,” he said, “it’s just that we have to be sure.”

“I agree.” President Campbell clapped him on the shoulder then turned and resumed her run as Karich and Horning fell into step beside her.



## EIGHT

Joe sat in the front of the room at Maurice-Gibbs Funeral Home, Amy's fingers clenched in one hand, his face a mask of pain. His swollen throat ached, and though the pastor's words of comfort dulled death's razor cut, Joe struggled to breathe.

Joey sat beside him, smashing away any tears that dared to touch his cheeks. Moses and Danny leaned into each side of their grandmother whose tear-bathed face shone with the sure hope and comfort of her faith.

Closing his worn Bible, Brother Hernandez gazed at the mourners gathered around Isaiah's casket.

"Let us pray," he said. Then the pastor of the small house church Joe attended bowed his head as his voice filled the packed room. "Oh Heavenly Father," he began, "our hearts are breaking today, Lord..."

When he finished his words of prayer, Cindy Murphy rose and led them in song.

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!

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Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine!  
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,  
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood...

Following the 11:00 funeral and graveside services, Joe and his family drove to Brother Hernandez's house where soon all the members of their house church arrived to share a meal. As they milled about the Hernandez home, one believer after another drew Joe close, speaking words of comfort to his heart. Tears filled his eyes as Sam and Betty Wong, Kent Huntzman, Mike and Lana Logan, Kevin and Cindy Murphy, Opal Rodriguez, Doug and Yvonne Robinson, Fazal Mohammad, and all the others reached out to him in his hour of deepest need.

Some years before, Brother Hernandez had left the pulpit of a mega church to start a house church modeled after the early Christians who'd gathered in each other's homes. With their heart's desire to learn more of their risen Messiah, Brother Hernandez and the house church had embraced the words of Jesus found in the book of Matthew, "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

Now the small band of believers, thirty adults and their children, met twice a week in each other's homes--on Friday night for share group filled with laughter, tears, singing, and refreshments and on Sunday mornings for a worship service followed by a potluck dinner. Since they owned no church building and Brother Hernandez refused a salary, all of the offerings they gathered were given to help the poor and the needy

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in their community and abroad and to support the work of missionaries and evangelists carrying the good news of Jesus to others.

Gazing out the picture window of the Hernandez home, Joe felt a hand slide across his back then an arm squeeze his shoulders as Fazal Mohammad slipped up beside him.

“I wish I knew the words...” Fazal said.

Joe nodded.

“If there’s anything I can do...”

“Thanks.” Joe turned to face the Middle Eastern immigrant who had first introduced him to Pastor Hernandez and the others five years ago. “I never thought Isaiah would go first, you know?”

“I know.”

Joe pinched his bottom lip between his teeth then pulled it free. “He was always so strong and fearless he seemed invincible.”

“That he did,” Fazal said. “I remember last winter when he was home for Christmas and he skated out onto your pond to retrieve Moses’ football even as the ice was cracking under him.”

Joe nodded, a smile stealing across his face. Then tears moistened his eyes once more.

“I’m gonna miss him,” he said.

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That night, Joey rode with father to take his grandmother home. When they reached her house fifteen miles north of Topeka, she asked them to come inside. Now the three of them sat at her kitchen table as her gray tabby cat, Feebee, rubbed against

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Helen's legs.

Helen squeezed Joe's fingers with her left hand while she rested her right hand on a laptop computer she'd placed on the table.

"I want you to do something, Junior."

Joe gazed at his mother, small and shrunken in the yellow glow of the overhead light. The day had stamped its toll across her face, and he worried about her spending the night alone as she had insisted. But she was fearless just like Isaiah. Joe had always been the cautious one.

It amazed him to think of the giant steps this tiny, frail woman had taken in her lifetime. Her trips to Selma in '65 to help pave a brighter future for her sons. Her march on Washington in '63, their papa at her side, threats of violence bouncing off them like stones. Stern stuff he came from. Backbones of steel.

"What, Mama? What is it?"

"Your brother worked for years on that blog of his, trying to get someone important to listen to what he and the others had to say. He was a little fish in a big pond, but that didn't slow him down one bit because he knew truth was on his side." She pursed her lips, tears gleaming in her rheumy eyes. "But now he's gone," she squeezed his hand, "and it's up to you to finish what he started."

Joe glanced at the laptop resting on the oak table. "To finish what, Mama? You know how much I loved Isaiah, but he was fighting a losing battle, you have to know that. Sure, I think the things he posted on his blog were dead on, and I even signed



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every petition he spearheaded demanding that President Campbell prove she is a natural-born citizen, but it was pointless, Mama. The president is just too powerful.”

Joey glanced from his father to his grandmother.

Helen clenched Joe’s hand, squeezing the blood from his fingers. “Now you listen to me, son. If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a hundred times--might does not make right.” Her gaze shifted to the laptop. “I picked this up when we went by Isaiah’s apartment. All his notes, all his research, all his investigations will be on here. Now I don’t know the first thing about using this, but you do. I want you to take it with you, and I want you to pray long and hard about this matter, and then you decide.”

“But, Mama...”

She held up a finger. “You pray first. Then you decide. You know that’s what your papa always said.”

It was true. Joe could hear his papa’s deep voice even now, could feel the weight of papa’s work-scarred hand resting on his shoulder... *You pray first. Then you decide.*

Joe reached for the laptop.

“All right, Mama,” he said.



## NINE

Abdul Muntaqim jerked awake with parched desert air trapped in his lungs and the stone clenched in his fist now a wadded, sweat-soaked sheet. The dream had returned. Flinging his sheet aside, he threw himself facedown on the cold tile floor of his apartment. He would not suffer the fate of his mother.

“Allahummagh firli thanbi kullahu...” the words poured from his terrified soul in Arabic, the English words trailing behind. “Oh Allah! Forgive me all my sins, great and small, the first and the last, those that are apparent and those that are hidden.” Over and over, he chanted the dua’a from the Hadith, his tongue racing to escape the dream... the stone in his hand, the whispering sand, the white, blistering sun.

After frantic minutes, the dua’a from the Hadith gave way to the Qur’an. “Rabbana thalamnaa anfusanaa wa illam...” the ancient words tumbled from his lips. Abdul Muntaqim wanted to scream the air from his lungs, but even in his terror, he was mindful of the neighbors. They must not suspect him. And so his strangled mantra rushed over his lips again and again in a frenzied

whisper. Allah would see his devotion and find him worthy.

“Our Lord! We have sinned against ourselves and unless You grant us forgiveness and bestow Your mercy upon us, we shall most certainly be lost.”

He squeezed his eyes closed, his plea louder now, faster, sweat soaking his back. “Rabbana thalamnaa anfusanaa wa illam...”

If the dream had snaked from his creative subconscious, he might have crushed its evil head. But it had shrieked like a demon from the black well of memory as terrible and glorious as the day it was born, and Abdul Muntaqim lay powerless before it.

*Sand whispers in his ears, shifts with Fazal's whimpers, fractures with the screams of their mother.*

*The men encircle the helpless creature, her legs, torso, hands, and arms buried beneath the sand, only the burqa covering her head and shoulders visible to the snarling mob. Abdul Muntaqim stands beside his father, his heart a thrashing camel in his chest while seven-year-old Fazal covers next to his older brother, his eyes glazed, shock blunting the horror.*

*Then Fazal closes his eyes. His lips tremble.*

*Their father's hand cuffs the back of his younger son's head, knocking the boy's chin to his chest.*

*“Onzor!” Look.*

Abdul Muntaqim clawed the cold, tile floor of his apartment, delirious to escape. “Allahummagh firli thanbi kullahu...” Tears squeezed from his eyes. “Oh Allah! Forgive me all my sins, great and small, the first and the...”

*“Onzor!” Look.*

His father's word dragged him back into the desert.

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*“Allahu Akbar!” The bearded men are screaming, frothing at the mouth.  
“Allahu Akbar!” Their fists pound the air, their faces grotesque with  
animal rage.*

*Leaning over, their father picks up a white stone the size of a walnut.*

*“Bismillahir rahmanir rahim!” the words erupt from his chest as his arm  
springs back and he hurls the rock at their mother’s head. In the name of  
Allah, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful.*

*Abdul Muntaqim sees his mother’s head snap back, sees the skin split  
like a grape above her right eye. His mother’s scream slices through him like  
a razor as Faqal’s bladder fails him and the stench of urine envelops them  
both.*

*Now rocks fly from the circle of men, shredding the burqa, tearing it from  
their mother’s face. Like granite fists, the stones tear gashes in her forehead,  
her neck, her cheeks, her ears... her eyes, one swollen shut, the other dislodged  
and hanging against her cheek.*

*“Isa!” Jesus. “Isa!” Jesus. His mother’s screams claws crimson gouges in  
his ears.*

*Infidel! Kafir! Calling out to Jesus as if He were Allah.*

*Abdul Muntaqim’s stomach kicks. His lungs curl. A merciful haze  
creeps over his vision, blinding him to the red, twitching fountain staining the  
sand. And then he feels his father’s fingers digging into his wrist as a stone is  
shoved into his hand.*

*Abdul Muntaqim knows better than to refuse. His mother should not  
have forsaken Allah for the Christian Savior. And now he must show Allah  
that his mother’s blood does not course through his veins. He must prove to  
Allah that he will never forsake the true path as his mother has done. His  
heart bucks. The stone clasped in his hand weighs as heavy as a mountain.*

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*He must do this thing. He must be a man.*

*With a sudden cry, he sends the rock streaking through the air, "Allahu Akbar!" Then he clenches his jaw and does not flinch as the stone strikes his mother's throat.*

*The men cheer. "Allahu Akbar!" Allah is the Greatest. "Alhumdulillah!" Praise be to God.*

*His mother gasps for air, her lips parting in the red mash of her face, gulping, fish-like.*

*"Allahu Akbar!" Abdul Muntaqim screams the words before the tears can reach his eyes. "Allahu Akbar!" He grabs another stone, crazed with grief and rage.*

*He hurls the stone then turns and watches as their father presses a rock into Faʒal's hand. The old man then shoves the small boy closer to the slumped figure sticking out of the sand. Faʒal looks back over his shoulder, tears welling in his dark eyes. Their father jabs a finger at their mother, threatening to cut off Faʒal's hand if he does not throw the stone. Quaking, Faʒal turns and tosses the stone. It falls short, a quiet plunk in the sand.*

*Their father seizes his arm, casts him aside like a rag doll, and then he joins his elder son and the other men in finishing the task Allah has required of them.*

*"Allahummagh firli thanbi kullahu..." Slowly the nightmare receded, slithering back into the depths from which it had escaped. "Oh Allah! Forgive me all my sins, great and small, the first and the last, those that are apparent and those that are hidden."*

*Abdul Muntaqim's breathing quieted. And then two hours after he fled from his bed, he stood up from the floor.*

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He washed his face then sat down at the kitchen table with his journal and a pen.

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The wretched dream returned tonight. A curse to haunt me though I know it was a great honor to partake in that blessing, to prove to Allah that I am worthy, that I love Islam, which brings death to apostates.

The punishment of my mother was the just and righteous will of Allah, and I am the slave of Allah. Abdul Muntaqim: Slave of him who punishes wrongdoings and seizes retribution.

Very soon if Allah wills it, I will punish the infidels here where I have found them. I will die a shahid and thus be assured a place in Paradise. It is the only way to be certain. It is the path Allah requires of me. Alhumdulillah. Praise be to God.





## TEN

Sitting down at his desk, Joe Renfro powered on his brother's laptop. Just as he'd promised his mother, he had prayed. But though he had sought God's will on the matter and had poured over Isaiah's old blog posts and computer files, he still hadn't made up his mind whether to pick up where Isaiah left off.

Did he think President Campbell was a usurper, ineligible to occupy the Oval Office? Of course, he did. President Campbell had never disputed the fact that her father was and always had been a British citizen. Joe knew that meant her birth was governed by the British Nationality Act of 1948, and as one commentator had put it, "How can a woman who owed allegiance to Great Britain at her birth be a natural-born citizen of the United States?" Obviously, she couldn't. A dual-born citizen, but not a natural-born citizen, as required by the Constitution for anyone seeking the office of president.

But the Constitution hadn't seemed to matter. Courts all over the land had swatted down hundreds of eligibility cases like so many circling flies, and the squashed cases had created an illusion

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of legitimacy for the president. Never mind that it had been a host of technicalities that had bounced the plaintiffs from the courtrooms and that not one single case had been thrown out based on merit.

The cause had seemed hopeless.

But then two Supreme Court justices had retired and another had died, and somehow in the turnover, Inspector General Perkins' quo warranto case had found its way onto the docket of the United States Supreme Court. Reading through the files on Isaiah's laptop, Joe had discovered his brother's hope that this case would be the one to remove President Louise Campbell from the Oval Office and to restore the Constitution as the law of the land.

But that had been before Isaiah's meeting with an unnamed source inside the White House last month. According to a file buried deep on his brother's laptop, Isaiah believed President Campbell had attempted to sway one of the nine justices hearing the Perkins case, but he was still digging for proof before blogging the story. And even more alarming than a president tampering with the Supreme Court were the shocking suspicions Joe had discovered in a file Isaiah had named "Reichstag".

He knew now why his brother had fought with his dying breath to utter that word. He'd tried to warn Joe of a plot so heinous that the faint of heart would not dare to imagine it.

Joe slid a finger across the laptop's touchpad then tapped his finger to open the file he had moved to the desktop.

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It is almost beyond comprehension what X is claiming—that the president’s administration is manipulating Islamic sleeper cells and lone wolves as part of a plan known as Operation Reichstag, obviously named after the 1933 Reichstag fire which led to the rise of Hitler and the National Socialists, the Nazis. It would be a classic false flag attack and just as the Nazis pointed the finger of blame at the Communists for the Reichstag fire in which they likely had a hand, X contends that Campbell’s administration intends to facilitate a number of attacks and then pin the blame on Muslim extremists.

While this seems too sinister to be plausible, I believe that Operation Reichstag is within the realm of possibility and not dissimilar to Operation Northwoods, a secret plan conceived but never implemented, during the Kennedy administration. Operation Northwoods, which was drafted by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and signed by Chairman Lemnitzer, called for the government to commit terrorist attacks against the American people, and then pin the blame on Cuba.

So not only is it plausible that our government could be willing to commit such an evil, but the ramifications of Operation Reichstag are too

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terrible to contemplate.

The day after the Reichstag fire, Hitler secured a decree from President Hindenberg “for the Protection of the People and State”. Unfortunately, it proved to be just the opposite as it enabled the Reich government to seize powers usually reserved for the states. The decree also suspended parts of the German Constitution including the right of *habeas corpus*, the freedom of expression, the freedom of the press, the freedom of assembly, and the right to private mail and telephone communications. And in the devastating wake of the decree, Hitler was able to wrestle power away from the German Parliament and position himself as dictator of Germany.

If Campbell expects to do the same in order to thwart the Supreme Court from ruling against her in the Perkins case... all I can say is over my cold, dead body. I must persuade X to provide me with proof... and fast.

Joe drew a deep breath and closed his eyes, holding his grief at bay. What had Isaiah stumbled into? Was his brother’s death an accident as he’d been told or was something more sinister involved? If so, what right did Joe have to drag his family into this fight? But what right did he have to sit it out? Freedom isn’t

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free. Isn't that what they say?

"Hey, Papa."

Opening his eyes, Joe gazed into the face of his oldest son.

"Is that Uncle Isaiah's laptop?" Joey crossed the room and leaned against the desk.

"It is."

"You gonna finish what he started like Grandma asked?"

Joe gazed up into the face of his son. A striking face. A granite jaw. Tender, intelligent eyes. Flawless skin the color of coffee beans. And a shadow on his upper lip where he had just begun to shave.

Tears pricked Joe's eyes. Joey was becoming a man. A straight arrow all the way. Brave. Gentle. Dutiful.

*Dutiful.*

And there was his answer.

*Duty is ours, results are God's.* Joe recalled the words of John Quincy Adams, the congressman and former president, who had risen to his feet time after time to present anti-slavery petitions in a world where ending slavery seemed an insurmountable task. But that hadn't stopped him.

Joe smiled at his son. "I'm gonna give it my best," he said, "the rest is up to God."



## ELEVEN

“We have to act now.” Operations Czar Alexander Karich seized President Campbell’s arm, and then immediately released her as the Secret Service agents flanking their evening run bristled.

*Overgrown buffoons.*

His and the president’s college romance was no secret in Washington, and Alexander knew that half of the president’s detail referred to him as her lapdog. Did they really think he’d harm the woman he loved? Lifting his hands in the air, he smiled at the agents, and they lowered their hackles.

Chief of Staff Robert Horning mopped a thick hand across his freckled brow, struggling to keep pace with the president and her czar. “I think we should wait,” he said.

“Wait!” Lowering his voice, Alexander peered around the president at the sweaty chief of staff. “Wait! Are you out of your mind? The court will rule this week.”

“That means...” Horning gulped for air, “that means we still have a few days to come up with something.”

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Alexander's face flamed and not from the run. "Come up with what! There's no time and Reichstag is already in place." He stared at Horning through narrowed eyes. "Do you have any idea what will happen if the Court rules in favor of Inspector General Perkins?"

President Campbell slowed then stopped. "Enough." She raised a hand in the air to squelch the argument before it turned ugly. "Now one at a time. Robert, you first."

"Well..." her chief of staff gulped for air, "well, Alexander is too eager to rush this thing. We need to go slowly. Be careful."

They stared at him, waiting for something more, but a red-faced Horning threw up his hands and gestured to Alexander.

President Campbell cut her gaze to her operations czar. "Alexander."

"The justices have finished hearing oral arguments, they're through circulating draft opinions, and they are set to rule on Friday. There's not a thing we can do to budge Justice Jennings, and my sources tell me that the four justices we can count on are holding fast, the four we expected to rule against us will, and Jennings will join them. We'll lose. Now once we, that is once you, green light Operation Reichstag, it will take 48 hours to take effect, and that will be Wednesday night. Following that, we'll have approximately 36 hours to shut down the courts--if we act now."

President Campbell drew a deep breath and scanned the horizon. Then after a moment, she cut her gaze sideways at Alexander. "What sources? How do they know this?"



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“Trust me, Madam President, you do not want to know.”

“This is crazy!” Horning shook his head, looking as if he were about to melt. “This makes Watergate look like child’s play. Do you two have any idea what...”

President Campbell raised a hand to silence him as she locked her eyes on Alexander. “How certain are you?”

“The sources are very reliable.”

She spoke more slowly this time, “How certain are you?”

Alexander stared into her eyes. “I’d bet your life on it.”

He saw her blanch at the words, but it was true. He knew beyond all doubt that the Supreme Court was set to rule against them. The birthers would be vindicated, and Louise Campbell’s presidency would fall. But it would not be just a politician’s dream destroyed. It would also be the pride and joy of every woman and every girl in America who had witnessed the dawning of a new day when the country that had long denied them the right even to vote had overwhelmingly elected a woman to be President of the United States. And if President Campbell fell, there was no doubt that many of them would not see another woman sitting in the Oval Office in their lifetimes. Alexander would not let that happen.

President Campbell glanced from Alexander to Horning then back again. Her eyes hardened.

“Do it,” she said.



## TWELVE

Joe approached the white marble statue of Abraham Lincoln with ambivalence. He knew that the Great Emancipator was not the man many historians painted him to be. Like most men, Lincoln was a product of his time, and his time was infected with an epidemic of racism, both in the North and the South.

“Wow Papa, look!” Joey raced ahead of him up the steps of the memorial. “It’s so huge! He must be fifty feet tall.”

Joe smiled. “Nineteen feet,” he said, “twenty-nine counting the pedestal.”

The two of them had made the trip to Washington D.C. while Amy and the little guys had loaded Harry into their SUV and headed to Oklahoma to visit Amy’s parents. Joe had come to pack up Isaiah’s apartment and search for clues that might identify Isaiah’s source inside the White House, the mysterious “X” Isaiah referred to in the Reichstag file. Joey had begged to come along, and after a mountain of pleading on Joey’s part and an ocean of sweet talk from Joe, Amy had agreed to let her “baby” go with his Papa.

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But the apartment had been a disappointment. All of Isaiah's work had been on the laptop Joe already had. And a visit to the D.C. Metro Police had proved equally fruitless. The security tape from the night Isaiah had been struck by the train had gone missing.

Still the trip wasn't a total wash. It was Joey's first trip to D.C., and Joe was determined to make the most of it. They had been to the White House, the Capitol, the Supreme Court building, Frederick Douglass' home, the Vietnam, Korean, and WWII War Memorials, the Jefferson Memorial, the Washington Monument, and now they climbed the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

"Papa, look." Skidding to a stop on the platform eighteen steps below the towering statue, Joey pointed to words engraved at his feet. "This is where Dr. King gave his 'I Have a Dream' speech." Joey turned and let his eyes sweep over the grounds of the reflecting pool where more than 200,000 Americans had assembled on that sweltering August day in 1963.

"Imagine," he said, "just imagine it."

Joe caught up to his son and together they knelt down and traced their fingers over the words, "I HAVE A DREAM".

"I can't understand why things were so bad back then," Joey said, "the way people treated each other. It's just crazy to judge a person based on their color." He shook his head, his fingers tracing the words. "It's hard to believe people were gullible enough to think that skin color has anything to do with a person's worth... and some still think that way today. Don't they know we all came from Adam?"

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“Apparently not.” Joe smiled as Joey hopped to his feet and raced up the steps to the seated statue.

Craning his neck, Joey circled the ten-foot pedestal supporting Lincoln’s throne. “Lincoln’s my favorite president,” he said. “Who’s yours?”

“Hmmm... that’s a tough one.”

“Not Lincoln?”

“He used to be.”

“Not anymore?”

Joe shook his head.

“But why not? You know he freed the slaves with the Emancipation Proclamation.”

“Some of them.”

Joey turned and stared at his father. “I thought that freed all of them.”

“A lot of people think that, but at best, the Emancipation Proclamation freed only a handful of slaves when it was first issued. And tragically, it didn’t proclaim freedom for the nearly one million slaves owned in the Union states. And while it did proclaim the freedom of slaves in the Southern states, the proclamation was simply ignored by those in charge. It wasn’t until the Thirteenth Amendment that slavery was outlawed in all the states.”

“Are you sure?” Joey cocked his head to one side. “How do you know that?”

“I read it--you know how I love to read.”

Joey laughed. “That’s the truth.”

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Looking back at the statue, Joey studied the sightless eyes. “But Lincoln started the war to free the slaves, didn’t he? He believed that blacks and whites are equal just like Dr. King did.”

Joe rested a hand on his son’s shoulder. “Not exactly.”

“What do you mean not exactly?”

“Well, if you want an accurate picture of history, you have to dig a little. Read everything you can get your hands on. Read historical figures in their own words. Read their contemporaries. Read their supporters and their detractors. Read newspapers from their time.”

“But what about President Lincoln? Why isn’t he your favorite anymore?”

“A book I came across in college completely changed how I looked at Lincoln. I didn’t even believe it at first, but then I read another book and another and another, and I read Lincoln in his own words, and I was sick at what I found. I remember that first night with that first book reading words Lincoln spoke in a debate with Stephen Douglas and how betrayed I felt. I must have read the words a thousand times until I knew them by heart.”

“What words?”

“They aren’t pretty.” Joe leaned against the pedestal and stared out at the spring sky, the flowering tree branches and grass as green as emeralds.

“Tell me.”

“All right,” he said. “In the debate with Douglas, Lincoln said, ‘I will say then that I am not, nor ever have been in favor of

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bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races, that I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people; and I will say in addition to this that there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.”

“He said that?” Joey stared at his father as if Joe had just reached out and slapped him. Then he turned away, pain in his voice. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because you asked. And because it’s the truth.”

Joey’s voice was soft now, but determined. “Is that everything?”

“No, there’s more.”

“Tell me.”

“Are you sure?”

Joey walked over to the steps and sat down. “I’m sure.”

“Do you know who wrote the ‘The Star-Spangled Banner?’”  
Sitting down beside his son, Joe gazed out at the reflecting pool.

“Francis Scott Key.”

“Well, Lincoln threw Key’s grandson, a Baltimore newspaper man, into prison after he wrote an editorial criticizing the president. And he wasn’t Lincoln’s only political prisoner.

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Thousands of Northern citizens were imprisoned by Lincoln including publishers, editors, mayors, ex-governors, business owners, and many state legislators from Maryland.”

“State legislators! Like you?”

Joe nodded. “Lincoln also confiscated private property, interfered in Northern elections, confiscated firearms, suspended *habeas corpus* and then ignored Justice Taney when he ruled the act unconstitutional. He also favored deporting blacks and colonizing them elsewhere. And he supported the Fugitive Slave Act and the Black Codes in his home state of Illinois, and as a lawyer, he once helped defend a slave owner...”

Joey’s head dropped into his hands.

“You want me to stop?”

Joey shook his head.

“Arkansas, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia seceded only after Lincoln called for troops to invade their Southern neighbors--originally Virginia had voted to remain in the Union.

Many people today don’t believe states have the right to secede, but in the early days of our country, many believed secession was a right that belonged to the states and even Lincoln himself said that, ‘Any people, anywhere, being inclined and having the power, have the right to rise up and shake off the existing government and form a new one that suits them better.’ And in Iowa in 1860, just a year before the War Between the States began, an editorial in the Davenport Democrat and News said, ‘The leading and most influential papers of the union believe that any State of the Union has a right to secede.’”



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“Yeah, but...” Joey turned pleading eyes on his father, “but didn’t Lincoln invade the South to free the slaves.”

Joe sighed. “That’s another part of the Lincoln Myth,” he said, “but in a letter to Horace Greely, Lincoln wrote, ‘My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union.’ Now some will claim that Lincoln changed his mind about slavery during the course of the war, and maybe he did, but when he first invaded the southern states, in his mind it wasn’t to free the slaves.”

Joey gazed at his father, misery swimming in his eyes. “But what if he hadn’t done it, what if he hadn’t invaded the South?”

“I don’t know, Joey. But I do know that many countries ended slavery peacefully through compensated emancipation. Could we have done that here, I don’t know that either, but I do know the war cost the lives of more than 600,000 soldiers. In today’s population, that’s equivalent to six million dead Americans laid at the feet of the president.”

Joey’s eyes widened. “Same as the number of Jews killed in the Holocaust.”

Joe nodded.

Joey took a deep breath then released it, his eyes fastening on the reflecting pool. “But was he wrong, Papa? Was Lincoln

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wrong?”

Joe gazed at his son with knowledge like a knife between his shoulder blades--knowledge that little more than a hundred and fifty years ago, Joey would have been torn from his mother's arms and shoved onto an auction block to be sold like livestock to the highest bidder.

“A part of me...” Joe stopped, waited until he could trust his voice, “a part of me is glad that Lincoln in effect became a dictator and trampled the States and the Constitution--I won't deny it. I cannot imagine life without your mother and you boys, a life where I slaved from dawn to dusk yet never reaped the fruit of my labor. I cannot imagine being owned. But even so...” Joe pursed his lips, his eyes troubled, “even so there is another part of me that will always wish Lincoln had found a better way.”

## THIRTEEN

Abdul Muntaqim clutched the steering wheel of his Honda with both hands, his knuckles blanching from the strain. The vest he wore beneath his jacket bit into his flesh with its twelve-inch metal pipes circling his torso. Special Agent Tom Crenshaw, a.k.a. Hassan Kaleel had told him that the pipes contained explosives and that the many pockets covering the vest had been stuffed with nails, ball bearings, and screws to serve as projectiles, ensuring maximum carnage from the explosion. A wire ran from the vest through a hole in the lining of his jacket to the handgrip nestled in his right pocket. A red button protruded from the other end of the grip.

Glancing at the speedometer, he switched on the headlights as dusk closed in around him. Then after another mile, he pulled over to the side of the road in front of Fazal's mailbox. His brother's house was dark just as Abdul Muntaqim knew it would be. It was Wednesday evening and Fazal would be down the road sharing supper with Joe Renfro and his family. Fazal had once persuaded his brother to join him for supper at the Renfros, and

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Abdul Muntaqim had stared in wonder at the playful tenderness that flowed between the parents and their children as they worked together preparing a meal for their guests. And then they had sat down to eat and Joe had prayed in the name of Jesus, and Abdul Muntaqim had stood to his feet and walked out the door.

Cranking down his car window, he shoved the memory aside. He pulled open Fazal's mailbox then twisted against his seatbelt as he reached into the backseat and retrieved his journal. He traced his fingers over the words one last time... *Abdul Muntaqim: Slave of him who punishes wrongdoings and seizes retribution.*

"Allahu Akbar." *God is Most Great.* The words fell from his lips, a plea, a prayer that the brother he loved would see his sacrifice and return to Allah while there was still time.

Reaching through the car window, he shoved the journal into Fazal's mailbox then he turned the car around and headed back to Kansas City.

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At 7:02 p.m., Abdul Muntaqim parked his Honda in Lot A of Arrowhead Stadium located just off Interstate 435. He sat there a moment gripping the steering wheel with both hands as prayer tumbled from his lips. "Al-hamdu lillahi rabbil 'alamin--*Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds.* Al-hamdu lillahi rabbil 'alamin--*Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds.* Al-hamdu lillahi rabbil 'alamin--*Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds.*"

When the prayer had worked its wonder and his heart had eased, he climbed from his car and strode toward the modern day coliseum. Inside the arena, 78,431 of his fellow Americans joined

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televangelist Bobby Hargrove's worship leader in a soul-gripping chorus of "How Great Thou Art". Abdul Muntaqim could hear their voices soaring from the stadium in thunderous accord, like ten thousand angels encircling God's throne.

He marched through the darkness, his tennis shoes carrying him across the pavement.

*Left. Right. Left, Right. Left. Right.*

His heart began to thrash in his chest, and he was nearly swallowed by a feeling he had not known since the day in the desert when his father had pressed the hot stone into his hand. Fear, grief, and rage churned like lava in his chest. Stuffing the emotions down, he hurried past pickups and sedans, SUVs and minivans, all empty now.

The cool spring air washed over his face, and he fixed his eyes on the stadium glowing in the night like a giant spaceship waiting to transport him to Paradise.

At 7:08 p.m., he reached the nearest entrance to Arrowhead Stadium, an arena known to fans as The Sea of Red. Stuffing his hands in his pockets, he pushed inside. His right fingers closed around the handgrip. His thumb found the button.

He glanced around the ticket area, halfway expecting to see Special Agent Tom Crenshaw and a team of FBI agents swarming from the shadows. A sting, after all.

But no one appeared.

Shoving his way through the turnstile, he crossed the floor to the red-tiled tunnel leading to the arena. A woman standing at the tunnel entrance smiled and offered him a program.

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“I’m so glad you could join us tonight.” She leaned close so that he could hear her over the swell of singing pushing out through the tunnel. “God has great things in store for you.”

If only she knew. If only the kafir knew the torment that awaited her, she would cover her whorish display of skin and throw herself down before the great Allah, begging his forgiveness.

Reaching for the program with his left hand, Abdul Muntaqim smiled. “Thank you,” he said, “I’ve been looking forward to this night for a very long time.”

Her smile widened, and Abdul Muntaqim noticed her nametag: Joy, with a smiley face drawn in the “o”.

He moved past her into the tunnel leading to the arena and when he reached the end of the tunnel, he stopped. His gaze swept left then right, up then down, scanning row after row after row of featureless faces. Thousands. Tens of thousands.

*Al-hamdu lillabi rabbil ‘alamin--Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds!*

He glanced at his watch. 7:13 p.m. Swiping a hand across his upper lip, he drew a breath. He must quit sweating. He must not draw attention to himself. He scanned the faces on either side of him, but the standing crowd was oblivious to his presence. Many sang with eyes closed and open palms raised toward Heaven while others moved their lips with their eyes glued to one of the football-shaped jumbo screens located in either end zone.

Abdul Muntaqim moved down the aisle until he spotted an empty seat.

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“Excuse me, please,” he said. “Excuse me--so sorry.” Squeezing himself past a dozen people, he stopped in front of seat 15, row 4, section 228, in the club level. He stood with the singing throng as prayer crashed through his heart like ten thousand camels.

*Allahummagh firli thanbi kullahu... Oh Allah! Forgive me all my sins, great and small, the first and the last, those that are apparent and those that are hidden. Rabbana thalammaa anfusanaa wa illam... Our Lord! We have sinned against ourselves and unless You grant us forgiveness and bestow Your mercy upon us, we shall most certainly be lost.*

A woman with long, dark hair glanced over her shoulder and smiled at him, her lips singing, “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me...”

Abdul Muntaqim smiled back then shifted his gaze to the giant display screen in the end zone. But the woman’s brown eyes stayed with him. His mother’s eyes. *No!* He must focus. The infidels deserved to die. Allah had commanded him, “fight and slay the Pagans wherever ye find them”, and he was the slave of Allah. *Abdul Muntaqim: Slave of him who punishes wrongdoings and seizes retribution.* It was a hard thing, but Allah would reward him for his faithfulness of that he was certain. He squeezed the handgrip in his pocket, his fingers hot and slick with sweat. Any moment now...

But perhaps he should wait until the singing was finished. Then they would hear his voice ring out their day of judgment. Yes, he would wait. The infidels would see death coming for them.

And so he stood shoulder to shoulder with the unbelievers as

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they sang “Amazing Grace”, “Nearer My God To Thee”, “In the Sweet By and By”, and “I’ll Wish I Had Given Him More”.

And then the worship leader introduced televangelist Bobby Hargrove to the crowd. The TV preacher was met with eager applause until finally he raised his hands and the multitude was seated.

“Isn’t God just wonderful?” He drawled the words as a smile the size of Texas stretched across his face. “Don’t you just love God? Can I get an ‘amen?’”

The dark-haired woman sitting in front of Abdul Muntaqim shouted “Amen!” as did half of the stadium.

“All right now, let’s give God a great big round of applause, I think He deserves it, don’t you?” Pastor Hargrove lifted his slender, jeweled hands in the air, clapping for Heaven.

The crowd rose to their feet as shouts of “Thank you, Jesus” and “Praise you, Lord” flashed like lightning in the thunderous roar.

Then Pastor Hargrove lowered his hands to the lectern as the crowd quieted and took their seats once more. He adjusted his microphone. “I just want you to know what a pleasure it is to be with you all here in Kansas City tonight. I’m sure the Lord has great things in store for us as we turn now in our Bibles to the third chapter of the book of John and verse sixteen. That’s John 3:16.”

The ripple of paper whispered across the stadium as fingers leafed through 70,000 Bibles.

Abdul Muntaqim had seen enough. The infidels were a



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disgrace. God was not a celebrity desirous of their applause! He was not a fashion accessory to be pulled off a dusty shelf on Sunday mornings or a good luck charm to be rubbed like a rabbit's foot whenever a televangelist whirled through town.

Allah demanded complete devotion. Indeed, the very word "Islam" means submission. Could it be any clearer? Every word, every thought, every deed, every prayer, every waking moment belonged to Allah. Anything less would invite his wrath.

Abdul Muntaqim squeezed the handgrip in his pocket, pinching the blood from his fingers. His heart pounded his spine. Sweat slicked his forehead. He strained to draw air into his lungs. Releasing the grip, he pulled his right hand from his pocket and flexed his fingers then he wiped his hand on his jacket before finding the handgrip once more. Breathing filled his ears. Loud like a man panting.

*Breathe! Breathe!*

A bespectacled man at the end of the aisle was looking his way, but Abdul Muntaqim pretended not to see him.

He breathed in through his nose then let the air rush over his lips like water. Again. Again. He must prove to Allah that his mother's blood did not course through his veins.

The red button burned his thumb like a glowing ember.

He must do this thing. He must prove himself worthy.

*Only Jesus is worthy, and He has me covered.*

His brother's words seared through him.

*Blasphemy!*

His thumb trembled against the button. The muscles in his legs

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spasmed. And then with a great wrenching cry, Abdul Muntaqim shot to his feet.

“Allahu Akbar!” He screamed the air from his lungs. The televangelist broke off mid-sentence. A TV camera swung in Abdul Muntaqim’s direction, searching for him in the crowd.

“Allahu Akbar!” His face appeared on the football-shaped jumbo screens towering over the end zones.

“Allahu Akbar!”

The bespectacled man charged towards him as the dark-haired woman in front of him let loose a scream she would never finish.

At 7:28 p.m., Abdul Muntaqim pressed the red button.

The dark-haired woman, the bespectacled man, Abdul Muntaqim, and eighty-one others perished in the initial hailstorm of projectiles launched by the explosion. An additional forty-three people sustained injuries from which they would later expire. Twenty-two people would be struck and killed by automobiles in the parking lot as the panicked masses fled. But by far the greatest loss of life occurred in the stampede following the explosion as 78,000 terror-stricken people clawed their way toward the exits of The Sea of Red. Before it was over, total casualties would reach 1,539.

Three states southeast of Arrowhead Stadium in Purdy, Mississippi, Qadi Al-Habash entered Betty’s Country Kitchen and slid into the second booth from the door. Then just as he had done every night for the past two years, he ordered a hot roast beef sandwich and iced tea. While he waited for his food, he slipped his hand into the blue and gray backpack he’d been given

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and pressed the red button. Casualties: 7

Two minutes later and hundreds of miles northeast of Purdy in the nation's capital, DC Metro Police Officer, Robert Ellis, stopped Dhakir Bahamdan for a random bag search. As Officer Ellis unzipped Dhakir's bag, the jihadi slid his hand inside his coat pocket and pressed the red button. Casualties: 213

Across the continent in Boonchek, Oregon, Riyasat Bin Haji sat down on the edge of a crowded boat dock at Boonchek State Park, slipped his hand into his pocket, and pressed the red button. Casualties: 31

At 7:38 p.m. in Grove, Indiana, Waqas Amer entered Wharton's movie theater and pressed the red button. Casualties: 49

But it wasn't over yet.

The carnage continued for the next fifteen minutes as bombs were detonated in Dallas, Texas, Youall, Maryland, Las Vegas, Nevada, Tonganoxie, North Dakota, Fairbanks, Alaska, Jasper, Montana, Los Angeles, California, Jimney, Utah, Chicago, Illinois, Smileyberg, Indiana, and New York City, for a combined casualty count of 1,442.

And then it stopped.

Sixteen bombs in sixteen cities and towns across America. Local casualties ranging from 7 to 1,539. Total casualties: 3,281.

But it wasn't the number of dead that would strike fear into the heart of the Great Satan; it was the random and pervasive reach of the assault. From tiny Purdy, Mississippi to New York City to Jasper, Montana to Los Angeles, California, death had come to

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America.

There was nowhere to run.

Nowhere to hide.

Operation Reichstag had begun.

## FOURTEEN

Joe pried open one eye and squinted at the digital clock on the bedside table. 11:34 p.m.--he'd been asleep for less than an hour.

Reaching for his singing cell phone, the muscles in his shoulders groaned their protest. He'd spent all morning debating a firearms bill on the House floor then the rest of the day working in the greenhouses and market gardens with Amy and the boys. By the time he'd eaten supper and tucked Moses and Danny into bed, he'd been so tired that he'd skipped the 11:00 news and turned in for the night.

Pressing the green button on his cell phone, he raised it to his ear.

"Hello."

Amy's hand slid across his shoulders as Brother Hernandez's voice came through the phone.

Joe listened for a moment then bolted up in bed.

"No, I haven't. When?"

He opened the drawer of the nightstand then fished the remote

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control from among the papers he'd brought home from work. Amy drew her hand from his shoulders and switched on the lamp.

"Yes, yes, that's fine," he said, "tomorrow night instead of Friday."

Aiming the control at the television, he pressed the power button. "All right then, I'll see you here." With that, he turned off the call.

Amy rested a hand on his arm. "What's happened?"

Joe gestured toward the TV where the display had been divided into four video feeds, three of them spilling images of carnage into the bedroom.

"It has now been just over four hours since the first attack, and the death toll continues to rise as the injured are being rushed into surgery." Bob Silvey, FOX newsman, stared into the camera from the feed in the upper left-hand corner of the screen. "What we're seeing here are images from Arrowhead Stadium in Kansas City, Missouri. It is believed that the first attack of the night occurred here, but we are still waiting for confirmation on that. What we know right now is there have been sixteen confirmed attacks in sixteen different states from New York to California with close to 3,000 casualties at this point." Silvey swallowed, then pressed forward. "A group calling itself 'Sharia Now' is claiming responsibility for the attacks. No one is sure at this point where this group originated, but it is believed to have direct ties to al-Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood."

"More likely..." Joe's voice fell off, his lungs emptying like a

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popped balloon. His stomach lodged in his esophagus. He took a deep breath. “More likely ties to President Campbell,” he said.

Amy stared at him. “You think Isaiah was right? You think this is Operation Reichstag?”

Pursing his lips, he stared at the screen. “I don’t know. But this is one heck of a coincidence if it’s not.”

Silvey continued his narrative, “We are still in the very early stages of this crisis, but two of the suicide bombers have been positively identified at this point. We now know that the attack on Youall Baptist Church in Youall Maryland in which 38 people were killed was carried out by twenty-two-year old American citizen Fatik Hijaz. The terrorist at Arrowhead Stadium in Kansas City, Missouri where it is believed that over 1,000 people have perished has also been identified. Thirty-three-year old Abdul Muntaqim Mohammad, a naturalized citizen who had resided in the Kansas City metro area for the past two decades, has been positively identified as the suicide bomber in that attack. As of now, we have no information on...”

“Joe!” Amy grabbed his arm. “Fazal’s brother?”

Joe’s heart clogged his ears. Nausea sapped his limbs.

*Please God, no.*

Joe had met Fazal’s brother just once, an intense man with dark, pain-scarred eyes.

“A mistake...” Joe said.

But just then photos of the suspected Youall and Kansas City bombers flashed onto the screen, and despair punched him in the gut.

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“It’s him,” Amy said. She started to cry, and Joe wrapped an arm around her as she buried her face in his shoulder. “Those poor people, and Fazal, I can’t imagine what he’s going through.”

Neither could Joe. He picked up his cell phone and speed-dialed Fazal’s number. The phone on the other end rang seven times before sending him to Fazal’s voicemail.

“Fazal, it’s Joe,” he paused, words failing him, “I don’t know what to say except I’m here for you. I want you to know that.” He paused again. “Call me,” he said.

Joe switched off the call and drew Amy closer, resting his cheek against her head. Silvey’s voice droned from the TV as images of emergency vehicles, burned and bleeding people, gutted buildings, and somber-eyed commentators filled the screen.

“Pastor Hernandez wants everyone to meet here tomorrow night instead of Friday,” Joe said. “I told him that was fine.”

Amy nodded. Then she pulled back from his shoulder and searched his face.

“If Isaiah was right and this is...” tears rolled from her eyes.

Joe brushed a hand over her cheek. “If Isaiah’s suspicions were right, then God will see us through this. We have to believe that.”

Amy nodded.

“We have to remember your verse,” Joe said.

When Joey was little, Amy had fought her way through a harrowing battle with anxiety and had claimed Deuteronomy 31:6 as her own.

Remembering the verse now, she blinked back her tears.



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“Be strong and of a good courage,” she spoke the words with boldness, with a faith tested by fire, “fear not, nor be afraid of them.” Joe blended his voice with hers as together they drew strength from the words, “for the LORD thy God, he it is that doth go with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee.”

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At 9:00 the following morning, President Louise Campbell addressed the nation from the Oval Office. Joe, Amy, and Joey sat together on the edge of the divan, riveted to the TV while Moses and Danny played fetch with Harry outside their window.

“Good Morning.” President Campbell sat tall behind the Resolute desk in the West Wing of the White House, the U.S. flag planted behind her right shoulder, the Presidential flag behind her left shoulder. A flag pin adorned the lapel of her tailored suit and every blond hair lay perfectly in place.

“As I’m sure you know by now, our nation suffered a series of devastating attacks last night, and I want to say that our hearts go out to the people of the sixteen states who found themselves on the front line in our War on Terror. Our prayers are with you all.”

She paused, gazed sympathetically into the camera, and then after a moment continued.

“Now this is not the first time America has been attacked on her own soil, but let us here resolve that it will be the last time. Let us resolve to take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that this kind of terror can never again invade the streets of our small towns and our big cities.

“It won’t easy. It will require sacrifice on our part. But I’m sure

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the parents of seven-year-old Julie Brown who was killed in last night's attack would tell us that those sacrifices are a small price to pay to be able to hold our children in our arms as so many of us are doing even now. As the Browns are unable to do on this dark morning in America.

"A little while ago, I spoke with the parents of Julie Brown who was killed in the attack on Wharton's Movie Theatre in Grove, Indiana, and I expressed condolences on behalf of us all for their tragic loss. Julie's mother told me that Julie had gone to the theatre with her seventy-nine-year old grandmother, Della, to see the new Animal Life movie. Julie loved animals and dreamed of one day becoming a veterinarian so that she could help sick animals get well. Tragically, Julie did not survive this vicious attack. Neither did her grandmother."

President Campbell lifted a hand in the air, pinching forefinger to thumb. The camera zoomed closer.

"Make no mistake," she said, "such cowardice acts of terror will not touch our streets again. I am meeting with members of my cabinet and other officials later this morning to determine what immediate and long range steps are necessary to ensure that American blood will never again be spilled on American soil.

"In the days and weeks ahead, we will do whatever is necessary to hunt down and bring to justice every individual who had a role in these attacks no matter how small. We will not rest until justice has been served for Julie Brown and for the thousands of other Americans who perished at the hands of our enemies last night."

President Campbell gazed into the camera, jaw firm, eyes set.

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“Let me be perfectly clear,” she said, “we will do whatever is necessary on the home front and abroad to ensure the protection of the people and the preservation of the United States. Whatever changes need to be made, we will embrace them knowing that these changes are necessary for the safety and happiness of all. We will embrace them so that a new generation can live free from the fear of extremists who would do us harm, and we will embrace them so that government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth.”

She paused once more.

“Thank you and God bless America.”

The president and the Oval Office disappeared, replaced by Bob Silvey and the FOX newsroom. “We have just been listening to President Louise Campbell addressing the nation from the Oval Office in what must surely be the most...”

Aiming the remote control at the TV, Joe lowered the volume then turned to Amy. Her stricken eyes met his own. She had heard it, too. The message between the lines. Change was coming. Sacrifice. But sacrifice of what? Freedom would be his guess.

“What is it?” Joey glanced from one to the other. “What’s wrong?”

They reached for him at the same time, Joe resting a hand on his son’s shoulder, Amy gripping his hand.

“We’ll just have to wait and see,” Amy said.

“But you guys are worried, aren’t you? Is it because of what Uncle Isaiah was working on? Do you think President Campbell’s

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going to try to set herself up as a dictator or something?”

“It’s too early to tell,” Joe said. He glanced at the TV screen playing an image of a little redheaded girl with china-glass skin. Julie Brown. “All we can do now is pray,” Joe said, “pray like we’ve never prayed before.”

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That night, the house church gathered early--an instinct to close ranks, to band together and ride out the storm. Betty and Sam Wong were the first to ring the Renfro doorbell shortly after 6:00 p.m. Normally the group didn’t gather until 7:30, but the Wongs were soon followed by Opal Rodriquez, the Murphys, Sacketts, Huntzmans, Piedmonts, and the rest until everyone except Fazal Mohammad and Brother Hernandez had arrived well before the scheduled time. Brother Hernandez’s wife, Phyllis, had bustled in with their six children, saying that her husband would be along shortly and that he had asked that they begin without him.

And so they gathered in the living room of the Renfro home with the children overflowing into the dining room and den. They opened their Bibles and began to sing from the psalms of David as Bob Sackett and Opal Rodriquez strummed their guitars.

I will say of the LORD, He is my refuge and my fortress:  
my God; in him will I trust.

Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler,  
and from the noisome pestilence.

He shall cover thee with his feathers,

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and under his wings shalt thou trust:  
his truth shall be thy shield and buckler.  
Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night;  
nor for the arrow that flieth by day;  
Nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness;  
nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday.

Joe sang the words with his whole heart. God would see them through whatever lay ahead, and he would face it without fear. He would rest in the Lord. His fortress. His refuge.

As the song trailed to an end, the front door opened and Brother Hernandez stepped into the crowded living room followed by Fazal.

Immediately, Joe was on his feet and moving across the room. He had tried since last night to telephone Fazal and had driven to his house earlier in the day but had been unable to reach him. Joe knew the pain of losing a brother. But he could only imagine the agony of losing one the way Fazal had lost his.

Joe patted Brother Hernandez on the arm then reached past him for Fazal. He drew him close as others stood to their feet and gathered around them, offering comfort to their brother in Christ whose anguish manifested itself in every fiber of his being.

Their love overwhelmed Fazal, and a sob tore from his throat followed by another and another until there was not a single dry eye in the room.

As the evening flew by, the small band of believers sang psalms and hymns, shared their burdens, lifted their voices in prayer, and

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listened as Brother Hernandez read from the book of Isaiah...  
“Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.”

Then after a final prayer from the pastor, the children dove into the refreshments.

Taking a bite of a chocolate chip cookie, Joe switched on his phone to check for messages. He had missed a call from Brian Spencer, Speaker of the Kansas House of Representatives. Slipping into a bedroom away from the noise, Joe returned the call then two minutes later, he made his way through the milling crowd to find Amy sitting at the kitchen table with Phyllis and Cindy.

“What wrong?” His wife could read his face no matter how he tried to hide it.

“I just returned a missed call to Brian.”

“Spencer?”

Joe nodded. “The governor’s called an emergency session of the legislature, and he wants everyone there by midnight tonight.”

“Tonight!” Amy glanced at her watch. “That’s a little over an hour from now. Joe, what’s happened?”

“Beats me, and if Brian knows anything, he wasn’t willing to say it over the phone.”

## FIFTEEN

Operations Czar Alexander Karich stared out the south window of the Oval Office. Green grass sparkled in the morning dew and a spring sky the color of robin eggs yawned above an unfurling earth. Alexander had not caught a wink of sleep in the past forty-three hours but his short limbs crackled with energy. Wired. Pumped. Stoked. A history maker poised on the brink of something better. A more perfect Union. Unshackled from the restraints of Congress and the Court.

Behind him, people scurried in hushed preparation. Staffers slipped in and out of the Oval Office, the camerawoman adjusted her lens, an aide tested the teleprompter, and a makeup artist dusted a soft brush over President Campbell's face as the hairstylist cocked his head to one side and studied the president's golden mane. Chief of Staff Robert Horning fretted on one of the sofas like a caged sparrow plucking out its feathers while the First Gentleman lounged on the opposite sofa, smiling and regaling the aides with one of his yarns.

Alexander glanced at his watch. Three minutes and counting.

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President Louise Campbell's second address to the nation in two days would change everything. Models of government came and went, and truth be told, the United States hadn't been a true constitutional republic since the early days of Lincoln. Not the way the founders envisioned. But never mind that. Anyone with half a brain could see that a constitutional republic simply was not workable in today's America and that the Constitution itself was hopelessly antiquated. The ideological divides separating Americans had grown far too vast for the fragile parchment to span. The legislature was too corrupt and mired, and the courts were legislating from the bench. The people needed a leader who could usher in a new form of government bringing with it the long-awaited dawn of social justice. No more of the haves and have-nots, but equality in all things for all people. Jobs, housing, healthcare, nutrition, transportation, child rearing, these were all things best left to the state.

"Mr. Karich?"

Glancing over his shoulder, Alexander saw the camerawoman tapping her watch. He turned from the window and gazed down at President Campbell seated behind the Resolute desk. She smiled at him, her eyes fiery with the knowledge that they were about to revolutionize the country. As Alexander gazed at her, he was seized by a sudden desire to sweep the president into his arms. No matter how deeply he buried it, the old flame still burned. He stuffed the feeling back down, nodded at her then strode across the room and joined Horning on one of the sofas.

The camerawoman lifted a hand in the air, counting down the



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seconds until they went live on all national and many international broadcasting systems, five, four, three, two, one... she pointed at the president as meticulously crafted words began to roll across the teleprompter.

“Good Morning.” President Campbell stared into the camera, her poise and command filling television screens around the globe. Her chin jutted high in the air so that she looked ever so slightly down at her audience. It was a posture she had cultivated early in her career, just the right tilt of the head designed to exude confidence and authority.

“I come to you this morning at a time of unprecedented peril in our country, and I will be brief so that we may turn our attention back to the danger at hand.

“The brave men and women of the Department of Homeland Security, the National Security Administration, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and many other agencies have been working tirelessly to ferret out those behind Wednesday’s attacks and to make certain that no additional attacks are underway.

“Unfortunately, the intelligence we have gathered in the last thirty-six hours has not been what we hoped to find. It has been discovered that many other terrorist cells are even now moving within our borders and that subsequent attacks are imminent.

“Let me be clear, Wednesday’s attacks were only the beginning.”

President Campbell paused, giving her words time to infect each heart with panic, giving the panic time to draw all eyes to Washington for answers.

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“And so in light of this new information and in order to ensure the safety of the people and the United States government, I am declaring a national state of emergency and invoking the special powers granted to me for such a time as this. Due to the gravity of this situation, drastic action must be undertaken. We must rise to the occasion like the patriots of old and embrace the sacrifices history demands of us.

“Effective immediately and pursuant to Executive Order 13693, I am declaring martial law for the whole of the United States as well as suspending Congress and the Supreme Court for a period of six months at which time Congress will review such actions. Additionally, I am suspending *habeas corpus* as well as the 1st, 2nd, 4th, 6th, 7th, and 10th Amendments to the Constitution.

“I want you to know that I do not embark upon this course lightly. I do realize these measures seem drastic, un-American even, but let me assure you there is precedent for actions such as these, and they would not be undertaken unless it was absolutely necessary for the safety of us all.

“During the dark days of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln, arguably the greatest president this country has ever known, found it necessary to declare martial law, deny the freedom of the press, seize personal property, censor mail and telegraph communications, suspend *habeas corpus*, and embark upon war without first gaining the consent of Congress. Now as difficult as this loss of freedom was for all Americans of that day, it was a sacrifice that was necessary in order to preserve the union.

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“Thankfully, we know that the suspension of liberty during the war did not last. So as we take up the task before us, we may be assured that just as the dark days of the Civil War came to an end and liberty was restored, this crisis too shall pass.

“But for now, we must all pull together and sacrifice a measure of our liberty for a short while in order to secure the complete and enduring liberty for generations to come. Just as our ancestors sacrificed in the days of Lincoln for the greater good, so too, shall all who love liberty willingly make that sacrifice today.”

President Campbell paused, and the camera zoomed closer.

“Make no mistake,” she said, “as your rightfully elected leader, I will do whatever is necessary to preserve the greatest union the world has ever known. It is my solemnly sworn duty, and I will honor my oath. And together we will do the hard work that history demands of us as we pave the way to a better tomorrow for all.

“Thank you. And God Bless America.”

President Campbell continued to gaze into the lens until the camerawoman signaled the end of the broadcast, and then she pushed back in her seat.

Standing to his feet, Alexander hurried to the Resolute desk where he locked eyes with the woman he loved. “Perfect,” he said, “absolutely perfect.”



## SIXTEEN

State Representative Joe Renfro continued to stare at the television for a full minute after the president had disappeared from the screen. The TV had been rolled onto the floor of the Kansas House Chamber for the broadcast, and as soon as the president had finished speaking, House Speaker Brian Spencer had switched it off. But Joe sat frozen on the razor's edge of time, his eyes clinging to the black box at the front of the room. As soon as he moved, or blinked, or uttered a word, there would be no going back to the hours and days before the President of the United States stripped the American people of their freedom. Tears bit his eyes.

*Please God...*

When he'd arrived at the Capitol at midnight, eight short hours ago, the House Chamber had crackled with rumors from Washington that President Campbell's next move would be to invoke Executive Order 13693, but Joe hadn't believed it.

As the moon had sailed high over the Capitol dome, one legislator after another had risen to speak, and Joe had been

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nearly overcome with grief at the path that was unfolding before them. In anguish, he'd listened as his colleagues debated whether to repeal the Sovereign State Act they had passed the year before.

Impaled on the teeth of a power-ravenous federal government, the Kansas governor, like the governors of thirty-eight other states, had signed a bill into law that would invoke an ordinance of secession in the event that the president or any federal entity ever declared martial law, suspended the Constitution, or suspended the legislative or judicial branches of the federal government. The only difference between the Kansas law and the laws of the other states was the Kansas law did not require the governor's signature for its Ordinance of Secession to take effect.

Joe had championed the bill, and even now when it looked as if the worst might happen, he did not regret his actions. He knew that Loyola College professor, Thomas DiLorenzo, was right when he'd written, "There is no check at all on the federal government unless state sovereignty exists, and state sovereignty is itself meaningless without the right of secession."

Still the thought of secession left Joe drowning in traitorous guilt, and he wondered if Jefferson, Franklin, and Hancock had wrestled with such demons in 1776. How had they found strength to sever ties with their own country no matter how grievous the offense?

Back and forth, the argument ping-ponged in the house chamber until Joe rose in the black hour before dawn to speak on behalf of the citizens of his district.

He began with the words of Samuel Adams, his voice

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thunderous in the packed chamber, “If ye love wealth better than liberty, the tranquility of servitude than the animating contest of freedom--go from us in peace. We ask not your counsels or arms. Crouch down and lick the hands which feed you! May your chains sit lightly upon you, and may posterity forget that ye were our countrymen!”

Cries rose from the assembly, some in outrage, many in affirmation. Then House Speaker Spencer pounded his gavel, and Joe continued.

“I submit to you, my fellow legislators, that there is nothing more American than secession. Indeed, secession gave birth to this country we so love for if the thirteen colonies had not seceded from the Crown of England in 1776, we would all be Englishmen today. And twelve short years later in 1788, if nine of the thirteen sovereign and independent states recognized by the British Crown in the Treaty of Paris had not seceded from the Articles of Confederation and embraced our Constitution, then our governing document would not begin with those cherished words, ‘We the People.’”

Joe gazed at the faces crowding the House Chamber. Kansans all. Men and women who battled each other in the chambers of the state Capitol year after year, seeking only the best for the people they served.

“Now a number of my distinguished colleagues have been calling for the immediate repeal of the Sovereign State Act, and I have listened to your words with a heart made heavy by your rush to retreat.

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“I ask you now, is there no line that cannot be crossed?”

He searched their faces, his words hanging in the air. Angry. Sorrowful.

“The Sovereign State Act is by no means a trivial law. It is designed to protect our state only from the most grievous of offenses by the federal government. We are willing to endure, and in fact, for many years have endured numerous encroachments and demands upon our freedom and our sovereignty with scant complaint.

“But I say to you now,” his hand shot into the air, “there is a line we dare not cross!

“I appeal to you whose hearts grow faint at the specter unfolding before us... look back! Look back through the pages of history to The Declaration of Independence and there draw strength and guidance for the road ahead.”

Joe’s voice deepened as the beloved words roared from his heart like a raging river.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundations on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most



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likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.’

“Now it is not enough to pay homage to these noble words. We must clothe them with our flesh and our blood. And if the day should come when government is no longer of the people, we must, like the patriots of old, step forth into country unknown. With a firm reliance on Providence, we must answer liberty’s call.

“Ask yourselves if Washington stood before you now, would that great general of Valley Forge counsel you to cast down your arms? Would Jefferson encourage you to submit to unlawful searches and seizures in the name of the greater good? Would Madison suggest that the suspension of the legislative or judicial branches is but a small thing?

“They would not!”

Sweat glistened on his brow. His face drew tight. He searched their faces, his eyes pleading. Demanding.

“This is the moment history will judge.

“Will it find us wanting? Short on courage? Will we live in infamy as the enablers who lost liberty and shackled a continent in tyranny’s chains?

“Heaven forbid!”

His chest heaved. He blinked back tears.

“We hold the lives of future generations in our hands...” he reached open hands toward his colleagues, moisture glinting in his eyes, his voice unsteady beneath the weight of the moment, “these hands.” Then he curled his fingers into fists as words tore like thorns from his throat. “I entreat you, my fellow Kansans, let

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the Sovereign State Act stand! Pray to God that we never have need of it, but if that day should come..." he swallowed, his voice a rising timbre torn with grief and resolve, "if that day should come when a federal government grown malignant with power would steal our God-given right to liberty, then let the Sovereign State Act loose the political bonds which have thus far held us that we, the People, may once again form a new government, laying its foundations on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to us shall seem most likely to effect our Safety and our Happiness."

A tear slipped onto his cheek. His fist shot into the air.

"It is our right!"

His whole body shook as he pummeled the air once more.

"It is our duty!"

And then Joe peered at his fellow statesmen for a long, heart-rending moment before taking his seat.

In the pre-dawn vote, the effort to repeal the Sovereign State Act failed in the House, the final vote 97-28. And so when President Louise Campbell declared martial law and suspended Congress, the Court, and parts of the Constitution at 8:03 a.m. Friday morning, the state of Kansas automatically seceded from the union in accordance with the Sovereign State Act passed by a unanimous vote of the legislature the year before.

Joe sat staring at the black television screen. A minute ticked past. Five minutes. He knew that a delegation would soon be on its way to Washington to notify President Louise Campbell that the sovereign state of Kansas had rescinded its ratification of the

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United States Constitution and had resumed all rights it had entrusted to the federal government.

Effective immediately.

Joe was overcome with a grief so profound that it sucked the breath from his lungs and stripped his limbs of sinew and bone. A feeling of death settled over him. The flag he cherished was no longer his. The words he loved to sing, “O! say can you see by the dawn’s early light...” were forever lost to him. He wanted to cast himself down and weep for what they had done. But there had been no choice. He knew that. And he would do it all again.

After long minutes, he summoned his strength and stood to his feet. Then he strode from the House Chamber not knowing that the pain he carried would stay with him for all his days.

Kansas was the first to secede and for an agonizing two hours and thirty-three minutes on that Friday morning in April, Kansas stood alone. The thirty-eight other states that had passed sovereignty laws fought desperate battles to retain those laws and to obtain their governors’ signatures on their Ordinances of Secession. Then at 10:36 a.m., the state of Texas seceded. Five minutes later, Arizona joined Kansas and Texas. And soon other states followed... Vermont, Wyoming, Oklahoma, Missouri, Arkansas, Hawaii, Alaska, Utah, Kentucky, Montana, North Dakota, Idaho, South Dakota, Mississippi, Georgia, South Carolina, Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, and Tennessee.

Thirteen of the thirty-nine states with sovereignty laws either revoked those laws or failed to obtain their governors’ signatures

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on their Ordinances of Secession. And so when the passion and rhetoric settled, twenty-four states remained in the union while twenty-six states once again stretched their wings.

## SEVENTEEN

Fazal's F-150 pickup seemed to drive itself. His hands gripped the steering wheel as he wound his way towards home on Friday afternoon, but his eyes were oblivious to the Kansas meadows rolling by outside his windows. Instead, long-ago scenes filled his vision, images of a happy little boy and the big brother he worshipped playing in the desert sand.

"Abdul Muntaqim, Fazal, come inside now. It is time to eat." Their mother appeared in the doorway of their house, motioning for them to come in out of the ravaging sun.

Laughing, they raced past her into the dark room, the folds of her burqa rustling in their breeze. And then the smaller boy stopped and rushed back to the woman in the doorway, her body covered from head to toe in the black garments, only her eyes visible. Throwing his arms around her legs, he squeezed with all his might then gazed up into the beautiful dark eyes, welling with tears.

"I love you, mother," he said.

Her robed arm swept forward, her hand appearing as she

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brushed the dark bangs from his forehead.

“And I love you, my sweet little boy.”

For a sublime moment, Fazal basked in the warmth of her gaze, and then his older brother swept him off his feet, tickling Fazal as he carried him across the room.

*HOOONNK!*

Fazal jerked the steering wheel hard to the right. His heart sprang against his breastbone as a motorist in an SUV flashed by outside his window. He sucked fresh air into his lungs. Exhaled. Grief drowning the adrenalin surging through his body.

His brother lay dead. His flesh torn and scattered. The blood of a thousand souls and more on his hands.

*Oh, God... please, life is too painful... let me die...*

Tears fell from his eyes, and he pulled one hand from the steering wheel to smash them away.

*Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows...*

A voice, small and still, whispered through him.

Fazal choked back his tears. His lips parted, a torn whisper surfacing, “Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows...” He squeezed his eyes against the pain, the words a healing salt to his anguished soul. Then after a moment, he opened his eyes, repeated the words, “Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows...”

He breathed in.

Breathed out.

A quarter mile down the road, he pulled up to his mailbox and lowered his window. Pulling open the small silver door, he peered

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inside. A spiral notebook bowed inside the mailbox, black lettering scrawled across its front.

With a shaking hand, Fazal grabbed the red notebook and drew it close to read the words scribbled in black marker...

*Abdul Muntaqim: Slave of him who punishes wrongdoings and seizes retribution.*

Fingers curled around Fazal's chest, crushing the air from his lungs. Tears fell once more from his eyes.

*Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows...*

Fazal traced his fingers over the notebook.

*Where are you? My brother, where are you? I cannot bear this...*

*Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows...*

Fazal scrubbed away his tears. More fell in their place. An anvil lodged in his throat.

“Surely he hath...” his voice broke, and he started over, “Surely he hath borne my griefs, and carried my sorrows.” He laid the notebook beside him on the truck seat, his voice ravaged with pain as he repeated the words, “Surely he hath borne my griefs, and carried my sorrows.” Then he pulled away from the mailbox and into his driveway where he parked.

Gazing out across the fields, he let one hand rest on the notebook beside him. Torturous minutes ticked by. The sun dropped in the western sky, robing the earth in golden light. And then at last, Fazal picked up the notebook and began to read.

January 13th

Al-hamdu lillahi rabbil ‘alamin. Praise be to

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Allah, the Lord of the worlds.

Today at the mosque, a strange man approached me after the final prayer. He praised the Imam's sermon, saying that it reminded him of the al-Awlaki tape where the great servant of Allah had said, "To the Muslims in America, I have this to say: How can your conscience allow you to live in peaceful coexistence with a nation that is responsible for the tyranny and crimes committed against your own brothers and sisters?" In my heart, I agreed with this and also with al-Awlaki's words, "...I eventually came to the conclusion that jihad against America is binding upon myself just as it is binding upon every other able Muslim." But I did not tell the man at the mosque my thoughts.

The man told me his name was Hassan Kaleel, but I do not believe he is who he claims to be. Something is not right about him.

Perhaps he is an FBI agent undercover.

I will watch and see.

Fazal flipped the page. The next entry was dated January 20th. More about the man calling himself Hassan Kaleel. Page after page, Fazal read until the sun dropped behind the horizon and the lingering light faded away. Reaching for the dash, he switched on the dome light unable to tear himself away from his brother's



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words long enough to go inside.

He could scarce believe the secrets his brother's notebook contained. Fazal was not surprised by Abdul Muntaqim's obsession with jihad and his fear of not being good enough to make it to Paradise. After all, what could be more terrifying than the thought of Hell? No, it was not that which he found too terrible to be true. It was the rest.

The notebook contained evidence that the U.S. government was involved in Wednesday's attack on Arrowhead Stadium. Fazal stared at the photographs pasted throughout the notebook, searching for some hint that the photos had been cut and pasted to look like something they were not. But he could find nothing to indicate they had been altered. The most shocking photographs featured President Campbell's operations czar, Alexander Karich, meeting in two different locations on two different occasions with a man tagged in the notebook as Special Agent Tom Crenshaw a.k.a. Hassan Kaleel and with another unidentified man in suit and tie. Fazal followed politics enough to know that no official was closer to the president than Alexander Karich, not even her chief of staff.

"Of course!" Fazal hit the steering wheel as he remembered what Joe had told him about the computer file Isaiah had named Reichstag.

This was Campbell's Reichstag. Manufacture a crisis. Present the solution. Seize control.

Fazal released a long whistle as he realized what he held in his hands. Blood drained from his limbs. Beads of sweat popped out

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on his brow.

Then tossing the notebook on the seat beside him, he cranked the engine, threw his truck into reverse, and peeled out of the driveway.

## EIGHTEEN

The west wing of the White House basement was as still as a tomb as the officials gathered there in the Situation Room tried to keep the shock of the president's words from showing on their faces. The six flat screen video displays embedded in the walls carried muted footage of skirmishes and uprisings from across the nation. Night had fallen, but the unrest continued as the curfew was ignored. Looting in Los Angeles. Food riots in Tennessee. Molotov Cocktails in Montana. Marches in New York.

But all eyes in the Sit Room focused on President Campbell seated at the head of the long conference table. Operations Czar Alexander Karich, Homeland Security Secretary Roberta Duling, FBI Director Forest Smith, and Defense Secretary Vincent Bonicello sat on her right while on her left Chief of Staff Robert Horning, National Security Advisor Sun Ying, Four-Star General Henry "Hank" Grout, and Civilian Security Force Director Karen Simson rounded out her council.

President Campbell cut her eyes to the display looming at the

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far end of the fifteen foot mahogany table. A young, female reporter stood in front of the Kansas Statehouse in Topeka, its towering dome larger than the dome of the U.S. Capitol. Laughing, weeping, and shouting Kansans packed the statehouse lawn, many holding candles and signs in the darkness.

President Campbell's eyes pulled into smoldering slits. A hatred so pure it knew no depth roiled inside her.

Kansas would pay.

She would sacrifice the flyover people in order to restore the union. She would cut out the heart of the rebellion. A clean, surgical strike on the first state that had dared to secede. And with Topeka leveled, the other states would realize they were no match for the United States military, and they would come whimpering back to her, tails tucked between their legs. The first female president of the United States would prove she could play ball with the big boys. She would preserve the union no matter the cost. When planning Operation Reichstag, they had underestimated the will of the states to secede, but once they'd brought the states back into the fold, it would be so much the better. Her power would be absolute.

"Madam President?"

She cut her gaze to General Hank Grout.

"With all due respect, ma'am, Operation Jayhawk is unthinkable. We have no authority to unleash the military on the American people. And apart from the unmitigated atrocity of the plan, carpet-bombing Topeka would backfire politically. Operation Jayhawk would not bring the rogue states running

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back--it would turn the loyal states against you.”

The general clamped his lips together and stared at her. Red heat scaled his rubbery face and darkened the scalp beneath his gray bristles of hair.

President Campbell gazed at him as if he were an impudent child in need of a spanking.

“Alexander,” without breaking her stare at the general, she spoke her operations czar’s name.

Clearing his throat, Alexander gazed across and down the table at the general.

“Actually General, the Safe and Secure Homeland Act passed by Congress last year nullifies the Posse Comitatus Act and enables us to use whatever military force is necessary against the American people. So you see...”

“Wrong!” the general cut him off. “It allows Congress to authorize use of the military against the American people and only under very specific circumstances.”

“So you see,” Alexander continued as if the general hadn’t spoken, “there is no legal impediment to the plan.”

The general opened his mouth to speak, but this time Alexander cut him off. “Ah yes, the little matter of Congress. Well, since Congress has been suspended for six months under Executive Order 13693 and a number of congressmen have fled back to their seceded states, it falls to the president to make the call.”

“I won’t stand for this!” The general shot to his feet.

“Sit down!” It was the first time most in the room had heard

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President Campbell raise her voice. Horning mopped his freckled brow while Duling, Smith, and Ying dropped their eyes to the conference table.

The general grabbed his briefing papers off the table.

“Sit down or I will have you arrested.”

The general’s hands trembled with rage. His chest heaved.

“General, that is an order.”

Looking as if he might collapse on the floor at any moment in coronary arrest, four-star General Hank Grout dropped back into his chair under the authority of his Commander in Chief.

“Now,” President Campbell leaned back in her chair, her voice as sharp as a scalpel, “I am ordering the immediate arrest of all governors in the seceded states as well as all legislators who supported the secession. They are to be taken prisoner using whatever force is necessary and are to be confined at the nearest military bases until further notice.

“Additionally, within the next forty-eight hours, I will be making an emergency address to members of Congress that will be closed to the public and the press. Though Congress has been suspended pursuant to Executive Order 13693 and a number of congressmen from the seceded states have fled, there is a movement underway to override the executive order, and I will be making it perfectly clear to the remaining congressmen that I am in charge. When they are assembled, I will give McConnell Air Force Base in Wichita the order to commence Operation Jayhawk, then I will announce to Congress that a squadron of B-52H Stratofortress bombers has left McConnell and will be

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releasing full payloads on the city of Topeka, Kansas and a radius of two miles in a matter of minutes. There will be no time for dissent.

“When the time is right, I will obliterate the heart of the rebellion and bring an immediate return of the seceded states to the union. Make no mistake, I am Commander in Chief of the United States Armed Forces, and very soon the nation will understand what that means.

“Another thing,” she locked eyes on General Grout, “the courts-martial of all Oath Keepers refusing to obey orders will be given top priority. There will be no quarter given to traitors in the ranks.”

Earlier in the day, Homeland Security Secretary Roberta Duling had briefed the president on a group of military, reserves, National Guard, veterans, peace officers, and firefighters calling themselves the Oath Keepers. According to information on file at Homeland Security, the Oath Keepers had been started in Massachusetts by a Yale Law School graduate and former U.S. Army paratrooper. There were ten orders these men and women were determined to defy that were now causing scores of troops from Bangor to Seattle to Atlanta to disobey their commanding officers. Rage had nearly blinded the president’s eyes as she’d read the list of orders that unknown numbers of her armed forces had committed themselves to disregard:

1. We will NOT obey any order to disarm the American people.

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2. We will NOT obey any order to conduct warrantless searches of the American people, their homes, vehicles, papers, or effects--such as warrantless house-to-house searches for weapons or persons.
3. We will NOT obey any order to detain American citizens as “unlawful enemy combatants” or to subject them to trial by military tribunal.
4. We will NOT obey orders to impose martial law or a “state of emergency” on a state, or to enter with force into a state, without the express consent and invitation of the state’s legislature and governor.
5. We will NOT obey orders to invade and subjugate any state that asserts its sovereignty and declares the national government to be in violation of the compact by which that state entered the Union.
6. We will NOT obey any order to blockade American cities, thus turning them into giant concentration camps.
7. We will NOT obey any order to force American citizens into any form of detention camps under any pretext.
8. We will NOT obey orders to assist or support the use of any foreign troops on U.S. soil against the American people to “keep the peace” or to “maintain control” during any emergency, or under any other pretext. We will consider such use of foreign troops against our people to be an invasion and an act of war.
9. We will NOT obey any orders to confiscate the property of the American people, including food and other essential supplies, under any emergency pretext whatsoever.
10. We will NOT obey any orders which infringe on the right of the people to free speech, to peaceably assemble,



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and to petition their government for a redress of grievances.

By the time she'd finished reading the list, her fingers were crushing the paper into a ball, which she had hurled across the room. How dare they! How dare they claim their allegiance was to the Constitution and it was their duty to disobey any unconstitutional order! She, and she alone, was their Commander in Chief. She had wanted them lined up and executed wherever they might be, but Alexander had cautioned her against it. And he was right. Seeing their fellow soldiers executed without trial could compromise the allegiance of the remaining troops. So let them have their trials and then be shot.

President Campbell stared at General Grout who looked as if he'd just bitten down on a shard of glass and driven it into the roof of his mouth. After a moment, she cut her eyes to the others.

“As some of you know, for months now our private contractors have employed persona management software whereby they have inundated social media sites with fake personas in order to friend real individuals and convince the public that our administration enjoys majority support among the people. But in spite of the success of this campaign, it has now become necessary to suspend the internet completely and indefinitely. Additionally, I am ordering all media outlets placed under the direct supervision and control of the Department of Homeland Security and all domestic communications will be censored effective immediately.”

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President Campbell's eyes flashed to the video screens embedded in the walls. "Make no mistake," she said, "this is war, and I will do whatever is necessary to win."

## NINETEEN

Joe left the Capitol at 9:00 p.m. on Friday, soul-weary and ready to fall into Amy's arms. Little more than twelve hours had passed since Kansas had asserted its sovereignty and had resumed the powers it had entrusted to the federal government, but to Joe it felt like decades had washed over him. Now he was hoping to catch a couple hours of sleep at home and then be back at the statehouse before dawn.

Pressing his way through the throng assembled on the Capitol grounds, his eyes swept across the assembly. A man wearing flip-flops and strumming a guitar led a group of people near the front steps in a rousing song. Another group ten feet away stood in a circle holding hands, heads bowed. An old man dressed in dark trousers and a white button-up shirt perched on the Lincoln statue as he called to the crowd over a bullhorn. Still others wept and others rejoiced and a few shouted their anger. Seniors and toddlers, teenagers, young adults, and the middle-aged all joined together as their state stretched and kicked and stumbled its way through the first hours of reclaimed independence like a newborn

colt finding its legs.

“Joe!”

He turned and peered through the darkness then smiled as he recognized Bob and Rachel Whitley pushing toward him through the crowd. Bob was tall and lean with a shock of white hair while Rachel, who was half Pottawatomie Indian and barely reached her husband’s shoulders, had pulled her hair into a black braid, which hung to her waist. Bob grabbed Joe’s hand as Rachel leaned in and hugged him.

“It’s a mighty fine thing,” Bob said, “a mighty fine thing.”

Joe had first met Bob and Rachel two years ago at a town hall meeting. The couple had been running an organic food coop where they grew fresh produce and raised free-range poultry, which they sold on shares to local residents. They’d been worried by a bill, The 21st Century Food Safety Act, making its way through the U.S. Congress, which would have outlawed their small farm. In addition to petitioning their congressmen in Washington, they’d come to Joe to see if there was anything he could do on a state level.

“What’s going to happen now?” Rachel shouted to be heard above the crowd and a rumble growing in the distance. “What’s Washington saying?”

“We’re still waiting to hear,” Joe said. “We just have to take it one step at a time while everything gets sorted out.”

Bob laughed. “Kind of like a divorce, I guess.”

Rachel elbowed her husband.

“That’s one way to look at it.” Joe smiled then glanced at the

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night sky as a *thwump, thwump, thwump* grew above them. Seeing nothing but stars, he lowered his gaze. “There’ll be a lot of negotiating with D.C. over things like federal debt and land, and of course there will be a movement to form a new union with the other seceded states.”

“Well, I hope it ends up better than the old one,” Rachel said, “and don’t you all give away the store, either. Make sure the new government remembers we’re the ones created them and not the other way around.”

Joe nodded. “Count on it.”

*Thwump, thwump, thwump, THWUMP, THWUMP, THWUMP...*

Four AH-6J Little Bird helicopters appeared in the night sky above them then great bolts of light hit the ground as the aircrafts’ searchlights switched on and began sweeping back and forth over the crowd. Wind from the rotors whipped up hair and clothing along with bits of paper and dirt from the ground. The crowd peered heavenward, blanched and tiny in the blinding light as they squinted and shielded their eyes with their hands.

For a moment, an eerie quiet draped over the throng. Then children began to cry. A woman screamed.

“Remain calm! Everyone remain calm!” the man perched on the Lincoln statue boomed over his bullhorn as a train of army vehicles from Fort Riley thundered up 10th Avenue into sight.

“Don’t run! Don’t run!” The man with the bullhorn called to the crowd. “Don’t run! Everyone remain calm!”

People clutched the hands and arms of those next to them, faces stoic and terror-filled, tear-streaked and serene.

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The camouflage vehicles ground to a stop and soldiers wearing combat gear and brandishing M-16 rifles poured from canvas-covered trucks. The crowd flinched but did not flee as soldiers charged in a line, two men abreast, cutting through the crowd to the steps of the Capitol. Then the line of soldiers separated, one man moving left while the other moved right, as they pushed the crowd apart to clear a pathway from the street to the building. The soldiers on either side of the cleared ground turned and stood shoulder-to-shoulder facing the crowd, M-16s at the ready.

*Thwump. Thwump. Thwump.* The helicopters' searchlights swept north, south, east, and west over the crowd.

"You don't belong here!" a woman screamed over the roar. "Go home!"

Another voice shouted, "Go home!"

Then another, "Go home!"

And soon the unarmed crowd of housewives and children, businessmen and store clerks, factory workers and farmers screamed at the soldiers with fists pounding the air, "Go home! Go home! Go home!"

A second wave of soldiers tore over the pathway the first wave had cut through the crowd. When they reached the building, half the troops stormed up the steps and disappeared inside the Capitol while the other half flanked the building.

Joe's heart buckled. The governor was inside the Capitol as were House Speaker Brian Spencer, Senate Leader Mike Jergens, and dozens of other legislators. He started for the building, but Bob grabbed hold of his shoulders.

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“You have to get out of here!”

“No!” Joe tried to wrench himself from the older man’s grip.

“I have to get in there!”

Bob curled his fingers into Joe’s shoulders and shook him.

“Think, man, think!”

Then the crowd surged, knocking the two men sideways. Bob’s fingers dug into Joe’s shoulders then pulled away. The lines of soldiers holding back the throng stretched and bowed like rubber bands but did not break.

An M-16 sprayed the sky.

People screamed. Some fled. Many dropped to the ground, and then sprang back to their feet as soon as the gunfire stopped.

“Go home! Go home! Go home!” The roar of the crowd grew to an animal thing.

Joe glanced toward the Capitol where a searchlight cut across soldiers hustling handcuffed lawmakers down the steps of the building. His heart beat like a war drum in his ears as two-thirds of his fellow lawmakers were hauled past him, arms handcuffed behind their backs, a soldier on either side dragging each one through the night.

And then a searchlight swept over Kansas Governor Lawrence Flint being hauled through the crowd. The seventh-generation Kansan marched with his jaw set and his chin held high, defiance blazing in every step.

Joe trembled with rage. Tears stabbed his eyes. Washington had no right to storm their Capitol and imprison their duly elected leaders. Kansas was a sovereign state, which had granted

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Washington very specific and limited powers to act on its behalf, and Washington had betrayed that trust time and again. The states had created a Frankenstein, and now the monster would not let them go without a fight. Like a jealous lover, like an abuser obsessed with controlling every detail of their lives, Washington had mutated into a grotesque caricature of its once noble self. Now Joe feared their abuser would sooner see them dead than set them free.

Rage churned like molten lava in his chest. He wanted to charge roaring through the crowd and fling the soldiers from Governor Flint's arms. But Bob was right. There was nothing he could do here. His work lay elsewhere. He must find a way to drive out the monster before the monster destroyed them all.

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Heaving for air from his run, Joe slowed to a walk and glanced at his watch. 9:37 p.m. Twenty minutes since he'd left the scene unfolding at the Capitol. The images of soldiers dragging handcuffed lawmakers through the raging crowd still played in his mind as impossible and surreal as it had been short minutes ago.

He pushed himself forward, his heart a fist pounding on his breastbone.

*Left. Right. Left. Right. Left. Right.*

The prairie darkened beneath his feet, and he glanced at the sky as a cloud drifted across a giant, buttery moon. A coyote howled in the distance. A breeze fanned the sweat on his neck.

When the soldiers had seized the Capitol, Joe had headed for his pickup only to find it surrounded by more of the troops



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wielding their M-16s. Unable to drive himself home, he'd hitched a ride with Bob and Rachel, but they had been forced to turn back as they'd spotted one roadblock after another barring every street and highway leading out of Topeka. In the end, Joe had taken off on foot, slipping through alleys, parking lots, and side yards until he'd reached the southern edge of Topeka. From there, it was a mile's trek across open prairie and he would be home.

Now as he walked, his breathing slowed and his heart fell into rhythm with his footfalls. But his mind scrambled for direction. Fury clogged his thoughts. And shock. Had the president of the United States ordered the arrest of Governor Flint and the Kansas Legislature? If so, identical scenes must be playing out in every other seceded state.

What would become of Kansas without her governor? And who would rescue Governor Flint from the soldiers that had dragged him into the night? Most of the state's National Guard units had been deployed overseas or stationed on the southern border. Would citizens arm themselves and storm Fort Riley to free their governor? Would Kansas bleed again?

"Oh God..." Joe reached toward Heaven, but his words dropped like stones to the ground and rolled away. "God?" The prairie snuffed his voice. Never had he felt so alone. If only he could run leaping into the arms of his Creator the way Danny did when he prayed, "Dear Heavenly Papa."

Joe tried again. "Dear Heavenly..." but his words trailed off. He could not bring himself to call the God of the Universe

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“Papa”.

“Dear Heavenly Father,” he settled for the formal address, “I need you now. Guide me. Show me what to do. I stood up for what I believed was right and now... now I’m lost. Help me, please, help me. I don’t know what to do...”

Joe waited for an answer.

A lightning bolt.

An angel.

A sign.

But instead the mournful wail of a coyote whispered up his spine, and then the only sound Joe heard was the grass crunching beneath his shoes.

And there was his answer.

*Walk... by faith.*

## TWENTY

Joe shot up the steps and burst through the front door of his house. He'd spotted Fazal's pickup in the driveway as he'd raced toward the farmhouse and so he was not surprised to find his neighbor sitting at the kitchen table with his wife and son.

"Joe!" Amy jumped to her feet and rushed across the room to meet him. "Fazal's found something you have to see."

He drew her close and the nearness of her brought all the emotion of the day welling up within him, but he squeezed his eyes closed against the storm. "Something's happened," he said, "I have to keep moving."

Pulling back, she searched his face. "What do you mean something's happened?"

Joe pursed his lips then took her hand and moved toward the table. "Let's sit."

"Hey, Papa," Joey glanced up at him.

He squeezed his son's shoulder then pulled out a chair and sat down.

Joe glanced across the table at Fazal. "I'm glad you're here."

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Fazal nodded, his hands resting on his brother's journal. "I have something you need to see," he said. "When I didn't find you here, I was going to bring it to you in Topeka, but Amy said you'd left your office at nine."

Resting a hand on her husband's arm, Amy searched his face. "What's happened?"

Joe curled his bottom lip into his mouth, pinching it between his teeth. Then he pulled his lip free and spat out the words, "The governor's been arrested."

"What!" Amy's mouth dropped open.

"And Brian and Mike and a bunch of the others, too. I was already outside in the crowd when the soldiers came."

"Soldiers!" Grabbing the remote control from the countertop, Amy switched on the TV mounted on the wall.

*Please standby.* The words stared at them from the TV screen. She switched channels. *Please standby.* Another channel. *Please standby.* Another. *Please standby.*

"Papa?" Joey glanced from the TV to his father. "What's happening?"

"My guess is President Campbell has taken control of the media and ordered the arrest of the governors and legislators in the seceded states, which is why I have to get out of here and try to find the other legislators who escaped tonight's sweep."

"You must see this first, it is important." Fazal pushed a red, spiral notebook across the table to him. "I had hoped you could give it to the governor."

Joe flipped open the notebook and scanned the pages as Fazal

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and Amy pointed out the entries and photographs he needed to see. When he finished he leaned back in his chair and stared at the book.

*Operation Reichstag.*

After a moment, Amy spoke, “Honey?”

Joe’s vocal cords twisted in his throat. His eyes locked open, burning as they dried. He tried to breathe, but his lungs had been packed with gauze.

“Papa, what do we do?”

And then the logjam broke, and Joe sucked a heaving breath of air into his lungs. “We take this to D.C.,” he said. “We find Senator Murray and give it to her. She’s the only senator who’s been brave enough to question the president’s eligibility--she’ll have the courage to make this public.”

Fazal nodded. “It might work,” he said, “I think it would work.”

Joe picked up the journal as the plan solidified in his mind. “And once the public finds out that President Campbell orchestrated the terrorist attacks and an investigation reveals that she did it to keep the Supreme Court from ruling against her, the governors will have to be released.”

“I’ll take it,” Fazal said, “I’ll get it to the senator.”

“Did you see the news today?” Amy looked at him, the horror of the day’s stories fresh in her eyes. After the terrorist attacks on Wednesday, violence against Middle Eastern immigrants had exploded across the states. “It wouldn’t be safe for you to go.”

“She’s right,” Joe said. “There are too many vigilantes out for

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revenge who would kill you just for the way you look.”

“I’m not afraid,” Fazal said.

“I know you’re not, but what would happen to the journal if you didn’t make it?”

Fazal sighed. “You’re right, of course.”

“Besides,” Joe said, “I’ve met with Senator Murray a few times in the past. If her staff remembers me, maybe they’ll let me in to see her.”

“Won’t work,” Amy said, “not if you’re a wanted man. If her staff remembers you as a legislator from Kansas, you’ll be arrested.”

“I’ll do it,” Joey said.

All eyes swung to him.

“Over my dead body!” Amy stared at her son as if he’d just declared his intent to swim across the ocean.

“Joey, son, you’re...” Joe caught himself before he said the words... *just a boy*. At thirteen, almost fourteen, Joey was more than a boy. He was a man emerging. Joe rested a hand on his shoulder. “You’re brave for wanting to,” he said, “but I can’t allow it.”

Joey gazed into his father’s eyes, not pleading, not defiant, but with determined rational. “Jesus was twelve when he remained behind at the temple in Jerusalem without his parents. I’m nearly fourteen. I can do this, Papa.”

Joe gazed at his son with emotion he couldn’t name. It was just last August that Joey had turned thirteen and Joe, Isaiah, Fazal, Brother Hernandez, and Amy’s father had taken Joey to

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Colorado where the six of them had climbed Spirit Mountain as part of a coming-of-age ceremony Joe had planned for his son. They had stopped at various points along the climb, and at each stop, Joe had presented Joey with a large gemstone engraved with a trait of manhood he desired for his son... wisdom, bravery, generosity, patience, faith, honesty, self-control, humor, fortitude, leadership, humility, and love. As Joey had received each stone, one of the men had shared with him a story of what that trait had meant in his own life. There had been twelve stones in all, which Joey had loaded into his pack and hauled up the mountain until finally after five torturous hours of climbing, they'd reached the base of the summit. Thirty feet of loose rocks stood between them and the peak.

It was there that Joe had told his son he could empty the stones from his pack, saying that they could be hard to carry. Joey had gladly shed his burden and started the final ascent, but Joe had called him back. Joe gathered twelve more stones, heavy and jagged, and to each one he tied a piece of paper on which he had written the antithesis of each word engraved on the gemstones Joey had discarded. For love, he wrote hate. For bravery, cowardice. For honesty, deceit. For fortitude, quitting, and so on. Then he instructed Joey to load the heavier stones into his pack, telling him that when you forsake that which is right, something else will take its place. Joey had groaned as he'd stuffed the jagged rocks into his bag and had actually staggered as he hefted it onto his back. Then Joe had produced a blindfold, which he tied over Joey's eyes since he was now blinded by the things he carried.

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It had taken Joey nearly an hour to climb the last thirty feet to the peak as he'd groped for handholds with the crushing weight on his back and the loose rocks beneath his feet sliding him down time and again. But Joe had called to his son from the summit. "You can do it, come on Joey, you can do it, you're almost here." And when he was within reach, Joe had grabbed his hand and drawn him to the top. Then the men had gathered around as Joey had torn the papers from the rocks he carried--hate, cowardice, deceit, pride... and had set them on fire. Finally, Joe had presented his son with a ring set with twelve stones. A sapphire for love, an amethyst for generosity, a ruby for honesty, an emerald for bravery...

Joe stared at that ring now, hanging from the chain around his son's neck.

"Let me do this, Papa."

*Let me be a man.*

Joe drew a deep breath then released it. He wanted Joey to stay home with Amy and the little boys. He wanted him safe. But it wasn't safety Joey needed. He needed to know he belonged in the world of men. He needed his papa to respect that. To respect him.

Joe pursed his lips, and then after a moment, released the word his son longed to hear. "Okay," he said.

"Okay?" A smile hooked one corner of Joey's mouth.

Joe nodded. "We'll travel together and when we get to D.C., you will take the journal to Senator Murray's office."

"Joe!" Amy's voice found its mark.



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Reaching over, he squeezed her fingers. “He needs to do this,” Joe spoke softly to the woman he loved, the pain in her eyes a reflection of his own heart. “God created him to be a man, and we need to let him grow.”

Amy searched her husband’s face then gazed across the table at their son. Tears swam into her eyes and her lips drew tight, but after a long moment, she nodded her okay.



## TWENTY-ONE

The iron was glowing and President Campbell was poised to strike. She sat in the basement Sit Room at 1:23 a.m. Sunday morning, surrounded by her council. Forty-one hours had passed since Kansas had led the revolt, and in that time, the country had descended into chaos.

Twenty-four of the twenty-six rebelling governors had been imprisoned as well as three-fourths of the defiant legislators. The army now controlled all twenty-six statehouses in the seceded states but not without casualties on the civilian front. In addition to the civilian loss of life, nearly a fourth of the National Guard troops not stationed abroad had been imprisoned or killed as they'd attempted to defend their home states against the army.

Without their leaders, the rogue states were spiraling into anarchy, disintegrating and in need of rescue. The masses were playing into her hands, and in a few short hours, she would ride to their aid. She would restore civilization by sacrificing Topeka just as Truman had sacrificed Hiroshima and Nagasaki in order to end the bloodshed.

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President Campbell shifted her attention to Homeland Security Secretary Roberta Duling, briefing the council on the latest developments.

“There is widespread looting in all seceded states as many law enforcement officers have either been killed or detained as a result of confrontations with the troops and the military is under continuing orders not to interfere with domestic strife.

Earlier tonight on the White House grounds, Secret Service apprehended a William Preston of Padwick, South Dakota who was carrying multiple concealed weapons along with a suicide note listing his reasons for assassinating the president.

So far our greatest casualties have come from Montana where armed residents were able to seize Malmstrom Air Force Base at 7:03 p.m. local time. Reinforcements were ordered, and the uprising was neutralized. The base is once again under our control.

On the southern border, drug cartels from Mexico have invaded California, advancing as far north as Fresno. More troops will arrive there within the hour. These same Mexican gangs have been held off by local residents in Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas.

In the Midwestern states...”

Holding up a hand, President Campbell signaled her Homeland Security Secretary to stop. It was the same everywhere. Riots. Death. Bloodstained sidewalks.

It was time to act.

President Campbell glanced at the faces lining either side of the

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conference table. Chief of Staff Horning perched on the edge of his seat, sweaty and red. General Hank Grout's rubbery face had hardened into a mask of contempt. The others remained devoted to their cause, and sitting at her right hand, Operations Czar Alexander Karich remained devoted to her no matter the cause.

President Campbell cut her eyes to the images pouring from the display screens. Though all signals had been blocked to the rest of the nation, media outlets continued to report the carnage as if at any moment their signals would be restored.

"Reinstate the broadcasts," she said. "Let the people see the breakdown of order. Let them see images of gangs roaming their streets with machetes and guns. Let them see the fires and mayhem. But under no circumstances are images of soldiers firing on the populace or any reports of the imprisoned governors and lawmakers to be aired."

President Campbell leaned back in her chair, her elbows on the armrests, her fingers steepled in front of her face. Her eyes stared at a vision only she could see.

And then after a long moment of silence she spoke, "The nation is now ripe for the picking." Her voice chilled the basement air, and Horning scooted back in his seat, distancing himself from her.

The president continued, "At 7:55 a.m., I will order Operation Jawhawk to commence. At 8:00 a.m., I will begin my address to a closed meeting of Congress. And at 8:10 a.m., the bombers will release their payloads. Topeka will be annihilated."

And then the president's eyes focused once more. She glanced

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at the officials seated at the table. "Make no mistake," she said, "order will be restored. And in the end," a smile touched her lips, "in the end, the people will thank us for it."

She cut her eyes to General Grout. "And when I have regained control, I will remember the loyalty of those in this room to their President and Commander in Chief."

General Grout met her stare with eyes as hard and unyielding as stones.

President Campbell noted the continued defiance. When this was over, the general would be replaced as would Chief of Staff Robert Horning. In the meantime, nothing must jeopardize her plan.

She smiled at the general then shifted her gaze to the others. "I expect to see all of you in the House Chamber in..." she glanced at her watch, "in exactly five hours and twenty-nine minutes."

## TWENTY-TWO

Joe and Joey slipped through the heart of D.C. like shadows, silent and unnoticed. The city lay under curfew, and they'd found the streets deserted except for rumbling military patrols and convoys and an occasional dark sedan with tinted windows.

With senses wound like tightly-tuned guitar strings, father and son advanced on foot up Independence Avenue toward the Capitol and the Russell Senate Office Building. They'd left Kansas more than twenty-four hours ago and now the milky moon sank in the sky as dawn approached on Sunday morning. Joe only hoped the Kentucky Oath Keeper who'd given them a lift when their truck had thrown a rod was right. He'd claimed there was an underground network of citizens providing intelligence from Washington to resistance forces growing in the seceded states, and according to the latest report, members of Congress would be gathering at the Capitol for an 8:00 a.m. address from the president. If he was right, just maybe Joey would find Senator Murray at the Russell Senate Office building preparing to ride the subway over to the House Chamber.

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“Papa!” Joey’s whisper drew him up short.

And then Joe heard it too. Humvees growling in the distance. As they’d threaded their way through the darkened streets, Joe had come to recognize the insect-like hum of the army vehicles.

Scrambling off the roadway, they dropped flat on the ground as headlights swung around a curve in the distance. Joe hugged the earth, hoping the night would conceal them once more.

But the sky wasn’t as dark as it had been an hour ago. Or ten minutes ago.

The roar of the 4WD vehicles grew louder as their turbocharged engines propelled them up the avenue.

Joe pressed his cheek into the grass, his eyes focusing on Joey five feet away.

“Joey?”

“Yeah?”

He wanted to say he was sorry he’d dragged Joey into this, but he wasn’t. He was proud of his son. Of his strength and his courage.

“Yeah?” Joey said again.

“Stay down.”

“Okay.”

Joe turned his thoughts to the mission at hand. The red notebook he’d slipped under his shirt and tucked into his waistband pressed against his stomach. All they had to do was get that notebook to the Russell Senate Office Building and into the hands of Senator Murray. One thousand three hundred eighty-one miles down. One mile to go.



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Joe shifted his gaze to the avenue as a Humvee thundered past in the darkness. The stench of burning diesel fuel rolled in its wake. Then Joe heard a second Humvee on the road beside them, felt the rumble in his spine.

*Please, God.*

The second Humvee sped past, the final hour before dawn cloaking them where they lay.

*One more.*

As it neared, the roar of the third Humvee's engine dropped a dozen decibels. Joe watched as the squat, metal box on wheels slowed on the road beside them.

*Run!* Adrenalin screamed through him, but he lay still, hoping the soldiers couldn't see them.

Then red brake lights sliced the night. Doors swung open. Boots hit the asphalt. Soldiers charged.

Joe and Joey sprang to their feet, but it was too late.

"Don't move! Don't move! Don't move!" Soldiers surrounded them, M-4 rifles raised, lips curled and teeth gnashing as they barked their orders.

Father and son raised their hands in the air as the soldiers' headlights swung the length of their bodies.

The first two Humvees cut u-turns on the avenue and thundered back to join the action.

"Down on the ground! Get down on the ground! Do it now! Face down on the ground!"

Joe's heart crumbled. He should have tossed the journal into the darkness when he'd heard the vehicles approaching. Now it

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would fall into the army's hands. And President Campbell was the Commander in Chief of that army.

“Get down on the ground! Now! Get down on the ground!”

Joe dropped to ground, and Joey followed.

A knee skewered his neck. Another pinioned his back as hands like steel jaws wrenched his arms behind his waist and cinched his wrists together. Fire tore through his shoulders. Tears bit his eyes. But it wasn't the pain that ripped his heart from its moorings. It was the sight of his son lying prostrate on the ground as soldiers pinned and tied him.

“Joey!”

“Shut up! No talking! You shut up!”

But it had been enough. Joey focused on him, and Joe saw that his son's eyes burned in the darkness. There was no fear. Only grim determination.

Joe's heart dropped back into place. Kicked against his chest then began to beat once more.

Hands groped the length of each of his legs, patted his sides, shoulders, and pockets. Fingers dug against his hip and pulled his wallet free. He started to raise his head, but the knee on his neck drove his cheek into the ground. A blade of grass poked inside his nose, and he sneezed.

“Stay down! Stay down!”

Joe felt spittle spray his face as the soldier on his neck screamed the order.

The sound of adrenalin-charged breathing clogged the air. Then he heard cards being flipped from his wallet.

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After a moment, a lieutenant dropped down in front of his face, resting on his haunches. “Kansas, huh?” He held Joe’s driver’s license out for him to see.

Joe said nothing.

“Kansas has been very naughty, and I have to wonder what a couple of guys from Kansas are doing sneaking around the capital in the middle of the night. You may do things a little different out there in the Wild West, but around here, we have a curfew.” Grabbing a fistful of hair, he yanked Joe’s head off the ground.

Joe met his stare.

Like a couple of pit bulls, they glared at one another until finally the soldier’s face flashed into a grin. “Tough guy, huh?” Releasing Joe’s hair with a shove, he stood to his feet then shouted to the others. “Load ‘em up!”

The ride to Ft McNair Army Base took little more than five minutes. The trio of Humvees passed through the checkpoint at the front gate then carried their prisoners to a concrete block building located at the tip end of the Greenleaf Point peninsula on which the base had been built in 1791. The soldiers dragged them from the vehicle and into the building where they turned them over to a balding sergeant and a handful of privates.

As the soldiers from the Humvee left, the sergeant and four of the privates hustled Joe and Joey down an unpainted, concrete hallway into an interrogation room.

“Hands against the wall! Feet apart!”

Joey did as he was ordered, but Joe curled his bottom lip into his mouth, pinching it between his teeth. The soldiers would find

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the journal. Had they come this close only to fail?

*God, please...*

“Hands against the wall! Feet apart!” the sergeant shouted in his ear.

*God?*

“Hands against the wall, feet apart!” This time the sergeant’s lips brushed against his ear, and Joe’s eardrum rang as if a firecracker had detonated next to it. Pursing his lips, he leaned forward and placed his palms against the wall then spread his feet.

The sergeant stepped back and a private moved in behind Joe. Hands dove into his hair, circled the rims of his ears, throttled his neck, groped the length of each arm, patted his chest, moved lower, and then stopped. The private yanked Joe’s shirt from his pants then pulled the journal from his waistband and handed it to the sergeant.

“Well, well, well,” the sergeant said, “what have we here?” He held the notebook in front of him, scowling as he read the words emblazoned on the cover, “Abdul Muntaqim: Slave of him who punishes wrongdoings and seizes retribution.” Then flipping open the notebook, his eyes fell on Arabic words... *Al-hamdu lillahi rabbil ‘alamin.*

“Well I’ll be,” he said, “looks like we caught ourselves a couple of terrorists.”

“No!” Joe pulled his hands from the wall, and the private slammed him into the concrete blocks. “It’s not mine! It belonged to my friend’s brother, and if...”

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“Shut up!” the sergeant lunged closer, screaming an explosion against the fragile bones in Joe’s ear. “Was I talking to you, you terrorist heap of camel dung! Was I talking to you!”

Turning to one of the privates guarding the door, the sergeant held out the notebook. “Take this to Major Grout,” he said. “And I don’t care if he’s sleeping, wake him up and see that he gets this now!”



## TWENTY-THREE

Joe paced six feet to the cell door then turned and paced back to the wall. Turning again, he paced to the door. Then back to the wall.

*Now what?*

He gazed up at the barred window where daylight grew as the sun peeked over a cloud-choked horizon. It must be 7:00 already. Or later. If they had any hope of catching Senator Murray before the president's address, they had to get out of here. He turned and marched back toward the door.

*Think! Think! Think!*

“Papa?”

Stopping in the middle of his six-foot lap, Joe gazed at his son perched on a stainless steel bunk bolted to the wall. A second bunk jutted from the wall, barely clearing his head. For the first time, Joe noticed a bruise swelling the skin under Joey's left eye. And then he saw the nasty abrasion clawed across his son's chin. Yet not once had he heard Joey cry out.

“Yeah?”

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Joey's face drew tight, but his chin did not waver. "Are we traitors?" he said. "Will we be shot?"

"No, Joey, no." Sitting down beside him, Joe squeezed his son's shoulder. "We're not traitors. Loyalty to any government no matter how noble its birth must never supersede loyalty to liberty. God created us to be free. It's our right and our duty as men of God to fight for that freedom."

"But..." Joey said, "will we be shot if the army thinks we're traitors?"

Joe felt the blood drain from his limbs. "I don't know," he said. "I don't think so, but I don't know."

Joey nodded, his face a stoic mask. Then he slipped off the bunk to his knees where he bowed his head and closed his eyes. "Dear Heavenly..." he stopped then opened his eyes as Joe knelt down beside him.

"I've been wondering," Joey said, "is it okay to pray 'Dear Heavenly Papa' the way Danny does? He always seems so sure of God when he says that. Or is that wrong?"

The air fled Joe's lungs. His body tingled. Had his son been grappling with the same question he had? But he shouldn't be surprised. How many nights had Joey helped his parents tuck Moses and Danny into bed? And a child's prayer was a powerful thing.

"Well..." Joe gazed at his son as he flailed for an answer. "You see, Joey..." And then a verse from the book of Mark slipped into his mind.

*Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as*



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*a little child, he shall not enter therein.*

Joe stared in wonder. Wasn't that how he had first come to God and entered his kingdom, as a little child running into the arms of the only One who could save him? And didn't he now carry that child's faith within him, the rock solid assurance that he was forever safe in God's arms? So why should he not shower the One he loved with a child's word of endearment? He was God's beloved, and God was his Creator, his Savior, his Lord, and his Father... his Papa.

Joe gazed into his son's brown eyes. How would he feel if Joey were to call him only 'Father', but never 'Papa'? His heart swelled and ached at the thought. One of the sweetest joys of his life was the sound of a single word leaving his boys' lips... *Papa*. A universe of love wrapped in single word. Not a show of disrespect, but an expression of a trust so great, a belonging so sure, and a love so true that it took Joe's breath away.

He smiled at his son as tears swam into his eyes. "I think it would be fine," he said.

And so they bowed their heads and when Joey finished and Joe's turn came to pray, his lips gave utterance to the words his heart had longed to set free... "Dear Heavenly Papa," he prayed. A sound tore from his chest, a cry of desire given wings. And then he spoke the words again, "Dear Heavenly Papa," and the words drew the love of Yahweh, of El Shaddai, of the great I AM into the core of his being like nothing else ever had. "Dear Heavenly Papa," he spoke the words a third time as laughter bubbled in his soul and the words became the whole of his

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prayer, an ode of love and joy, a song of praise and adoration for the omnipotent lover of his soul, his Heavenly Papa.

After a long moment, Joe opened his eyes. Reaching an arm around his son's shoulders, he drew him close and kissed him.

"I love you, Joey."

"Love you, too, Papa."

Then Joe sat back on the floor and leaned against the bunk. "Shall we sing?"

Joey peered sideways at his father as if the night had been too much and his mind had left him.

"Sing?"

"Like Paul and Silas," Joe said.

"Oh yeah." Joey smiled, his eye now swollen half shut. "Sure," he said, "let's sing."

And so father and son sat in cell 4D at Ft. McNair Air Force Base, singing praises to their God as the sun broke from the horizon at 7:34 a.m. Sunday morning.

## TWENTY-FOUR

The scowl on Major George Grout's face deepened as he flipped a page in Abdul Muntaqim's journal and continued reading.

March 15th

Al-hamdu lillahi rabbil 'alamin. Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds. Today, Agents Tom Crenshaw and Roger Jewell met in an abandoned warehouse on 4th Street with the president's operations czar, Alexander Karich. As I crouched behind the pile of leaking barrels, I could not imagine what had brought the president's czar all the way from Washington D.C. to Kansas City, Missouri, but as I listened it soon became clear. Al-hamdu lillahi rabbil 'alamin. Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds.

I have been persuaded for some time now that

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the agents intend to provide me with a live bomb, and not with a fake bomb, which the infidels have used to ensnare so many of Allah's great warriors who've come before me.

As I have written previously, the possibility that the agents would give me a live bomb first began to dawn on me with their repeated use of the words, "Operation Reichstag". Upon researching the word "Reichstag", I learned that many believe the National Socialists, the Nazis, had a hand in the 1933 fire at the Reichstag building which housed the German parliament and that the fire led to the rise of Hitler.

Perhaps President Campbell seeks to create a "Reichstag" of her own in order to suspend the Constitution and seize control of the fifty states. Perhaps I am her "patsy". It matters not. She is a harlot and a fool! The infidels do not realize that they are but pawns in the hands of most powerful Allah. Their blinded eyes cannot see the Day of Judgment sweeping down upon them.

The presence of Operations Czar Karich here in Kansas City convinces me even further that the bomb the agents will give me any day now will bear me straight into Paradise, to the presence of Allah and to the seventy-two virgins

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who await me. Al-hamdu lillahi rabbil 'alamin.

Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds.

The major read page after page, an incredulous fury squeezing his skull, threatening to crush it like an egg. The two Kansans who had been captured with the journal claimed it belonged to the brother of a friend and that they were trying to get it to Senator Murray so she could expose its contents. They'd run a background check on the pair and had found nothing unusual except that the man, Joseph Renfro II, was a Kansas state legislator who was wanted for supporting his state's secession.

Major Grout pulled a magnifying glass from his desk drawer and examined the photographs pasted in the notebook. They looked genuine, but he was no expert. After a moment, he leaned back in his chair and drummed his fingers on his desk as his mind strategized his next move. If he pushed this through the proper channels, it could take days or weeks to see the light provided it didn't disappear altogether. Or he could pick up the telephone and call his older brother, General Hank Grout, on his personal cell phone. Hank would tear him up one side and down the other for circumventing the chain of command, but these were not ordinary times. The nation had torn itself in two and was hemorrhaging lives.

And this was no ordinary document. If it proved to be authentic, the ramifications were too terrible to contemplate.

Major Grout glanced at his watch. 7:46 a.m. He knew President Campbell was addressing Congress along with certain others,

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including his brother, at 8:00 a.m. in the House Chamber, but he didn't know why. Whatever it was, it had his brother in such a fit of rage that his wife had left town for a few days to escape the general's wrath. If he was going to call, he had to do it now before the president took the floor.

His fingers drummed the desk.

Sweat slicked his brow.

Then he grabbed his phone and jabbed in General Hank Grout's private number.

After the fourth ring, his brother's voice thundered through the handset.

"Yes, I know you're busy General, but this is important."

"No it can't wait."

"No, you listen to me, Hank! I have in my possession a notebook that implicates..." In under a minute, Major Grout briefed General Grout on the contents of Abdul Muntaqim's journal.

When he finished, he held the handset away from his ear and waited for the tirade. But his brother's voice came through the line a fierce whisper. Major Grout pulled the handset close, his face paling and his hands growing slack as General Hank Grout broke his oath of confidentiality and divulged Operation Jayhawk to his subordinate.

Major Grout glanced at his watch. 7:50 a.m. According to his brother, a squadron of B-52 Bombers would be screaming off the runways at McConnell Air Force Base in Wichita, Kansas in five minutes.

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His breakfast roiled in his stomach.

His heart beat out of step.

“Yes General, I’m still here.”

“Yes.” His fingers drummed the desk.

“Yes sir!” Major Grout slammed down the phone. Then grabbing the journal off his desk, he raced out the door.





## TWENTY-FIVE

“Let’s go! Let’s go! Let’s go!” Standing beside the open door of a Humvee, Major Grout barked the orders.

The soldiers hustling Joe and Joey down the sidewalk jerked them forward and threw them into the back of the vehicle. Then one of the soldiers slammed the door closed from the outside as Major Grout sprang into the front passenger seat.

“Go! Go! Go!” The major pounded his fist on the dash.

Gripping the steering wheel, the sergeant sitting beside him stomped the accelerator to the floor.

Joe and Joey slammed backwards against their seats. Thirty seconds ago, soldiers had stormed their cell and dragged them from the building not taking time to handcuff them. Now they tore across the army base in the back of a Humvee. Joe righted himself then glanced at Joey to see if he’d been hurt in the shuffle. His son met his gaze, his eyes steady, and Joe wished he felt as calm as Joey looked.

Leaning forward, Joe peered through the windshield as the three-ton vehicle ripped its way over the pavement, rocketing

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toward the front gate. Squat, army buildings blurred past their windows. The sky darkened as storm clouds swept in from the east. Sprinkles splattered the windshield.

“Where are you taking us!” Joe shouted above the roar of the engine.

The major twisted in his seat, and Joe spotted Abdul Muntaqim’s notebook clenched in his hand. For a moment, the men locked eyes.

Then Major Grout bared his teeth, “I need your cooperation and I need it now! What I’m about to say is highly classified and is not to be repeated, is that understood?” He glanced at the driver. “You too, sergeant!”

“Yes, sir!” The soldier behind the wheel, a Latino built like a tank, shouted over the din.

Joe drew his lower lip between his teeth.

Major Grout’s face darkened. “Is that understood!”

Joe hesitated. Could the man be on their side? Seeing no better choice, he nodded, “Understood!”

The major glanced at Joey. “Son?”

“Yes, sir!”

Cutting to the left, the driver shot toward the gate house fifty feet away.

Major Grout grabbed the dash to keep from being slammed against the door. Then he locked eyes on Joe once more. “Unless we get you and this notebook to the Capitol in the next...” he glanced at his watch, “in the next sixteen minutes, Topeka and a two-mile radius around the city will be destroyed.”

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Joe stared at major. Clearly the man was insane. It was some kind of trick. A trap for him and Joey. Majors in the United States army don't go around blabbing classified information about military operations to civilians.

"Really?" Joe said.

"Blasted man, I don't have time for this! President Campbell will order a squadron of B-52 bombers to leave McConnell Air Force Base in less than a minute. Fifteen minutes later, they'll be over Topeka."

A chill climbed Joe's back. Would the president go that far?

*Amy... Moses and Danny...*

The major shouted over the roar, "Right now the president and Congress are assembling in the Capitol, and we have to get there and force her to call off the strike! I need you to tell Congress and Vice President Wells where this notebook came from and what's in it!"

Joe fell back against the seat. He glanced at Joey, and for the first time since they'd left home, he saw tears glinting in the boy's eyes.

Then the Humvee lurched to a stop as a soldier shouldering an M-16 rifle stepped in front of the red and white gate blocking the exit. A second soldier approached the major's window.

"Open the gate!" The major waved his hand for the gate to be raised. "Open the gate!"

Stopping three feet back from the vehicle, the soldier leaned over and peered inside. "Major Grout?"

"Open the gate, soldier! That's an order!"

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The private straightened. "Sorry sir, I can't do that. The base is on lockdown until zero-nine hundred hours. Colonel's orders."

The major slammed his fist on the dash. "Drive!"

"Sir!" The soldiers on the ground reached for their weapons. "Back away from the gate!"

The major lunged at the driver. Jamming his hands down on the soldier's knee, he drove his foot into the accelerator.

"Drive!"

The Humvee shot forward. The soldier standing in front of them dove to one side as the vehicle crashed through the gate, snapping it like a toothpick.

*Pop! Pop! Pop!*

Joe grabbed hold of his son as the sound of gunfire exploded like firecrackers around them. A hole snapped open in the back glass as a bullet streaked through the Humvee. Then a second hole ripped a side window.

"Stay down!" Leaning over, he shielded Joey as best he could.

The major jerked his hands from the soldier's knee. Then grabbing his sidearm, he aimed it at the man's head. "Drive!"

A round pierced Joe's door, planting itself at his feet.

The Humvee tore over P Street. Hooked left on Capital. Then the engine screamed as they shot north onto I-395. The sky ripped open and a hard rain pelted the vehicle like stones.

Joe bolted up in his seat. Grabbing Joey by the shoulders, he searched his face. "Are you hit?"

Joey stretched out his arms and checked for damage. "I'm think I'm okay!" And then he flinched. His eyes squeezed closed.

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Pain twisted his face.

Joe's eyes darted over his body. Nothing. He yanked Joey forward, and there it was.

A red, malignant bloom.



## TWENTY-SIX

**A**t 7:59 a.m., President Campbell paraded down the aisle toward the rostrum in the House Chamber like Queen Mary of England. Though many congressmen in the room chafed under the constraints of Executive Order 13693, which had suspended their stately bodies for a period of six months, all in attendance, including Vice President Wells, rose in applause when House Speaker Gerald Barnes introduced the President of the United States.

She was power personified, and she knew it. And for Louise Campbell, there was nothing better. Not money. Not love. Not sex. She fed on power the way fire feeds on oxygen. And the order she had given four minutes ago, which had sent B-52 Bombers screaming into the skies, had unleashed in her a ravenous hunger to exercise that power. She could flip a coin, roll the dice, or draw straws to decide who lived and who died, and there was no one to stop her. She was Commander in Chief of the United States Armed Forces, the most powerful military machine that had ever stormed the face of the earth or ruled the

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heavens. Of all her roles as president, this was the most delicious. And like a drug, her growing use of military might caused her to crave more.

*This must be how God feels.*

She smiled at the thought as she reached the lectern then turned to face the assembly. Her eyes swept over her council sitting in the front row, and she let her gaze linger a moment longer on Alexander Karich than on the others. Her useful idiot. Then the slightest frown creased her brow though she continued to smile as she raised her palms in the air with feigned humility at the sustained applause.

General Hank Grout was missing. But if the old boy thought he could derail Operation Jayhawk, he was mistaken. President Campbell had insisted on personally giving the green light to Colonel Adams at McConnell just minutes ago, and now that the mission had begun, it could be aborted only by her direct order to him. She was a hands-on commander. Absolute control, that was her motto.

“Thank you...” she nodded at the assembly, motioning for the applause to end, “thank you,” she said, “thank you.”

After a moment, the applause dwindled then died as Vice President Wells and Speaker Barnes, who stood on the rostrum above and behind the president, took their seats and then those in the assembly followed. Representative Lola Peters from Pennsylvania’s third district coughed, and the sound echoed through the chamber.

Resting her hands on the lectern, President Campbell smiled at



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the gathering. Her blond hair swept to her shoulders and her tailored black suit stood in smart contrast to her white blouse as she raised her chin ever so slightly in the air and gazed down on those gathered.

“Thank you,” she said. “Mr. Speaker, Mr. Vice President, members of Congress, and distinguished guests: First, I want to thank you all for coming on such short notice and in such perilous times. As I’m sure you are aware from the broadcasts of the last few hours, the nation is facing great challenges, and I want to express my appreciation for your support in these difficult times.”

Applause rippled across the assembly, and then after a moment, President Campbell continued.

“There have been reports of widespread looting, breaches on the southern border, and numerous casualties as citizens continue to turn on one another in the absence of a strong, central government to guide them.

“Therefore, it is incumbent upon me as the leader of this nation to take whatever steps are necessary to restore the peace. Under my close supervision, the armed forces have taken control of the twenty-six statehouses in the seceded states until such time as order can be restored. Additionally, the seceded states remain under martial law, as does the rest of the nation.

“Intelligence reports I have received from my commanders in the field indicate that they are doing everything within their power to aid and contain the civilian population, but still the lawlessness continues. In spite of our best efforts, these measures

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have proven inadequate, and regrettably, stronger action must now be taken.”

Glancing down at the lectern, she noted the time on her watch. 8:03 a.m. Perfect. She was not yet halfway through her speech, and by the time she finished and Congress learned of the bombers streaking unseen through the sky, only a minute, maybe two, would remain until the heart of the rebellion writhed in flames on that God-forsaken prairie.

## TWENTY-SEVEN

“Do it now!” Veins snaked across Joe’s temples. His eyes flamed. “Take us to the hospital now!”

“No, sir!” The major kept his sidearm trained on the sergeant as he cut his eyes to Joe. “If I take you to the hospital, 130,000 people die!”

“Papa?” Joey lay slumped against him, his forehead pressed against Joe’s neck.

Major Grout cut his eyes back to the sergeant. “D Street exit, sergeant!”

“Sir, may I...”

“That’s an order!”

“Yes, sir!” Clenching his jaw, Sergeant Lopez cut the wheel to the right, and the Humvee flew onto the exit toward the Capitol.

“Papa?”

“Joey, don’t... don’t try to talk.” Joe stretched his eyes wide then blinked. His face twitched. He had never seen so much blood. The back of his son’s shirt was drenched in red and his jeans were now turning dark from the flood.

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A pint? A quart? Two quarts?

Joe's stomach twisted.

Pulling his hands tighter against the hole in Joey's back, he drew his son against him. Warm blood pushed out between his fingers with each beat of the boy's heart.

*Thump, thump, thump...*

"Take us to the hospital!" Joe screamed at the soldiers in the front of the Humvee. "You take us to the hospital now!"

"Papa?"

Joe squeezed his eyes closed. Pain swelled his throat, strangling him. Then he laid his cheek against his son's head as tears pushed from his eyes.

The Humvee hooked left on Washington then swung left again on Independence.

"Joey..." the word fell from his lips, a gasp.

"It's okay, Papa." Joey rolled his head back on his neck and gazed into his father's eyes. His face spasmed with pain. "I'm not afraid," he said, "Mom and the little guys, and all those other people... it's okay."

Blinking his eyes against the swell, Joe managed a smile. "You just hang in there, and you'll be all right," he said, "you'll be all right."

Tears swam into Joey's eyes, and he gazed at his father with tender knowing. "I love you, Papa."

The words slid like a hook into Joe's heart. "I love you too," he said. Then he leaned close and kissed his son as memories flooded through him. Joey as a three-year-old, pinching his

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mama's cheeks and giggling as he called her "my wittle cutie". A nine-year-old Joey mowing the grass, his dark face and limbs strong and glistening beneath the summer sun.

"I'm so proud of you," Joe choked out the words.

A tear slid onto Joey's cheek, his papa's words completing him in a way nothing else could. And then his head lolled back on his neck and his body fell slack.

Joe cried aloud as the hook twisted in his heart, severing hope, killing dreams.

"Joey?" Pulling a hand from his son's back, he lifted the boy's head.

"Joey! Don't you leave me! Joey!"

But Joey's eyes stared without seeing, his soul set free.



## TWENTY-EIGHT

“**A** plan is already underway to return the rogue states to the Union, and to restore the rule of law. At 7:55 this morning, a squadron of B-52 Bombers left McConnell Air Force Base in Wichita, Kansas under my command, and in...” President Campbell glanced at her watch, “in less than four minutes, the bombers will arrive over Topeka where they will release their payloads.”

Vice President Wells shot to the edge of his seat. Beside him, Speaker Barnes paled. A murmur swept through the gathering as congressmen gasped, whispered, glanced at their watches, and shifted in their seats. But no one dared stand to their feet against the President of the United States. In the front row, Alexander Karich arched an eyebrow, a smile twitching his lips.

Lifting a hand in the air, President Campbell quieted the assembly.

“Thirteen months ago, the American people elected me to lead this nation, and lead it I will. Many live under the misguided notion that the United States of America is a voluntary union of

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fifty states. It is not.

“In the early days of our history, it is true that the states retained their power as sovereign entities, but that model of government was doomed to fail. And now we are no longer these united States, but rather we are The United States, and the difference between the two is profound.

“We, the federal government, are now greater and more powerful than the people or the states. But we are not ruthless tyrants. On the contrary, we have used that power for the good of the people. We have harnessed it and built an Empire unparalleled in the tomes of history. Now that Empire is in peril, and it is up to us to save it. The air strike on Topeka is how we fulfill our destiny and preserve the Empire for future generations of Americans to enjoy.”

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Outside the Capitol, a Humvee streaked through the rain. It hooked right on Third. Then right on Maryland, tires screaming on the rain-slicked streets. In the back of the Humvee, Joe's tears fell without sound, his face a twisted mask of pain.

Then one of the roundabouts in front of the Capitol sprang into sight. Without slowing down, Lopez yanked the steering wheel hard to the right, and the Humvee jumped the curb. Aiming the vehicle at the concrete railing protecting the Capitol grounds, he smashed the accelerator to the floor.

“Hang on!”

They hit the balustrade hard, tossing in their seats like sailors in a storm.



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The railing cracked.

Lopez slammed the vehicle into reverse then rammed the balustrade a second time.

The third time they hit the railing, Lopez pinned the accelerator to the floor. The engine screamed. Tires dug into the earth. Then the cement railing bowed.

Crumbled.

The Humvee chewed its way over broken chunks of concrete as Joe held his son close, cradling his head as the vehicle lurched and dipped and climbed.

Then the tires hit the ground, and the Humvee shot toward the sidewalk, spitting bits of grass into the air. They spun onto the sidewalk and streaked east toward the Capitol. Trees blurred past the windows. Lightning streaked the sky.

Resting his cheek against his son's head, Joe peered through the windshield. The wipers slapped the rain left then right, and he spotted a dark figure standing at the top of the Capitol steps.

Then twenty seconds later, Sergeant Lopez stomped the brake pedal to the floor, and the Humvee skidded to a stop at the base of the steps.

Major Grout jumped from the vehicle.

"Let's go! Let's go! Let's go!" He jerked open Joe's door.

But Joe didn't move.

Couldn't move.

"Let's go!"

He felt the major's fingers digging into his arm. Tearing him away. Leaving Joey behind.

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Joe wrenched himself free as a cry tore from his throat, "I'm not leaving him!" He crushed Joey to his chest. "I'm not leaving him!"

"Major!" Sergeant Lopez motioned to the Humvee and then the Capitol steps. Major Grout jumped back inside the vehicle.

The engine growled. The tires hit the first step hard, bit the concrete, and climbed. In the back, Joe clung to his son as the Humvee shifted and lurched, tearing its way up the Capitol steps. Ten feet. Twenty. Thirty. Then the front tires hooked the top platform. The back tires kicked over the remaining ground, and the Humvee lurched to a stop at the top of the Capitol steps.

Doors sprang open. Major Grout and Sergeant Lopez hit the ground as General Grout rushed to meet them. Tearing open Joe's door, Major Grout aimed his sidearm at Joe's head.

"Move!"

The sound reached Joe's ears, a muffled nothing. Then he felt Sergeant Lopez's breath on his cheek. "Sir, we have to go now. I'll bring the boy."

Joe fastened desperate eyes on the soldier. Then he pushed words past the hole in his throat. "Be gentle," he said.

Lopez nodded. "Yes, sir."

Pain tore through him as he rested Joey's head against the seat then climbed from the Humvee into the storm. Raindrops pelted him, washing the blood from his hands and masking his tears as he watched Lopez gather Joey into his arms. The soldier would not leave his son behind.

Then a chill passed through Joe.

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*Amy and the boys.*

Snatching the red notebook from the major's hand, he bolted toward the door.

Inside the Capitol, he raced through the hallway into the Rotunda with Major Grout on his left, General Grout on his right, and Sergeant Lopez trailing behind with Joey in his arms.

*Don't let it be too late, Dear God, don't let it be too late.*

He hooked right. Raced down the corridor into Statuary Hall.

Then General Grout sprinted ahead, barking orders at the aides loitering in the Hall, "Out of the way! Out of the way!"

Joe tore through Statuary Hall into another passageway. His lungs screamed for air. Pain stabbed his side. Then his heart leaped as the doors to the House Chamber came into sight.

Skidding to a stop, General Grout lugged open one door. Then together, the group raced down the blue-carpeted aisle toward the rostrum. Secret Service agents snapped erect, hands springing for their weapons. General Grout grabbed Joe's arm, and the group stopped fifteen feet from the rostrum. Water dripped from their clothing and hair. They heaved for air.

The assembly gasped, some half-rising from their seats as the clock above the rostrum ticked 8:08 a.m.

"General Grout!" President Campbell stared from behind the lectern, her voice a razor blade, her lips twitching in rage. "You will be seated!"

"No, Madam President, I will not!"

Senator Boyd, a doctor from Wyoming, rushed to Joey as the general turned to Joe, motioning for him to speak.

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Joe faced the assembly and drew a deep breath. Then his voice thundered across the room. “My name is Joseph Renfro, and I am state legislator from Kansas.” Clutching the journal, his hand shot into the air. “This notebook belonged to Abdul Muntaqim Mohammad, the stadium bomber, and was given to me by his brother, Fazal Mohammad. In it...”

“Stop!” President Campbell slammed a hand down on the lectern. “Stop!”

The Secret Service agents bristled.

Vice President Wells shot to his feet. “Let him speak!”

“Sit down!” President Campbell jabbed her finger at Wells, but he remained standing.

Then Homeland Security Secretary Roberta Duling stood to her feet. “Let him speak!”

Joe shoved the journal higher into the air. “In this notebook are photographs and conversations showing that the president’s czar, Alexander Karich, was personally involved in the stadium bombing. And it is my belief...”

“Liar!” Karich shot to his feet. “You’re a liar!”

The assembly rumbled.

Joe raised his voice above the din. “It is my belief that President Campbell facilitated the stadium attack as well as the other attacks on April 23rd in order to prevent the Supreme Court from ruling against her in the Perkins case!”

Cries of disbelief stabbed the air as Alexander Karich retched his breakfast onto the floor.

General Grout pulled out his cell phone and speed-dialed

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Colonel Adams' direct line at McConnell Air Force Base. Pressing the phone against one ear, he stuck a finger in the opposite ear.

"Colonel Adams," he said, "this is General Grout. Please hold for the president." He started toward the front of the room, but Secret Service agents sprang forward to block his path.

Joe glanced at the clock above the rostrum. 8:09 a.m.

*Amy!*

Yanking the nearest congressman to his feet, Joe jumped onto his seat and shouted over the roar.

"Quiet!"

Then he spun on the seat, eyes flashing at President Campbell.

"Call off the strike!"

President Campbell lifted her chin in the air.

Fury clogged Joe's veins. His body trembled.

"Call off the strike!"

The chamber fell silent.

"My son..." Joe's voice broke as he pointed to the lifeless form cradled in Lopez's arms. He pulled his lip between his teeth. His heart pounded in his eyes. Then he cried the words once more, loss screaming through him like a hurricane.

"Call off the strike!"

One of the Secret Service agents stepped aside. Then another stepped back, and General Grout sprinted forward. Shooting onto the rostrum, he laid the phone on the lectern in front of President Louise Campbell.

"Colonel Adams is on the line," he said. Then he stepped back and waited.

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The second hand ticked around the clock. 8:09 and thirty seconds.

Thirty-five seconds.

Forty.

Joe's vision blurred. He swayed on the seat.

Forty-five seconds.

Fifty.

And then President Campbell picked up the phone and pressed it to her ear. Her eyes locked on Joe. Her face contorted in rage.

"Abort," she said. "Abort Jayhawk." She waited a moment then lowered the phone.

A second ticked by. Then another.

President Campbell ground her teeth. Her nostrils flared. Then she opened her mouth and spewed the words, "Operation aborted."

Joe dropped to his knees on the chair.

*Thank you... Oh, Heavenly Papa, thank you...*

His throat swelled. His heart chugged like a piston in his chest. And then pain seared through him, and he lunged to his feet.

*Joey.*

Rushing across the aisle to Sergeant Lopez, he pulled his son into his arms.

"Joey," he kissed his son's cheek, "we did it," he said. Tears climbed from his eyes, and his voice choked. "Mom and the boys are safe... we did it."

## TWENTY-NINE

One Year Later

Joe lay in the oversized hammock which he'd tied to a pair of oak trees on the south side of his farmhouse. With his hands caressing the newborn curled on his chest, he closed his eyes and let the moment fill his senses. That's what Brother Hernandez had counseled them to do as they had fought their way through grief and blame in the soul-crushing months following Joey's death. Stay in the moment. Find God in the present.

But the pastor's advice had proven to be much more difficult than it sounded. Even after a year, Joe still woke each morning with a hollowed-out pain in his chest and thoughts of the child he lost filling his mind. Sometimes Joey would visit his dreams, and Joe would lay with his eyes closed, trying to slip back into the world where Joey moved and breathed and raced through the gardens like the deer.

For a while following Joey's death, it had looked as if Joe's marriage would not survive. After devastating months of fighting

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and isolation, Amy had taken Moses and Danny to her parents' house and had not returned for weeks. Finally Joe had humbled himself and gone after her, praying for the family they once were and could be again.

But he had done more than pray. He had worked hard to comfort his wife and to lead his family in a way that would be pleasing to his Creator. Now when he saw Amy crying, he no longer slipped silently away. He did the thing that was harder than any physical feat he could imagine. He faced the thing he could not fix. He drew his wife close and held her, letting her pain wash through him, knowing there was nothing he could do to make it go away.

And Amy had responded in kind, sensing his need before he spoke a word. What had once threatened to destroy them was now drawing them closer as they braved one day at a time, leaning on each other and the Comforter of their souls.

The infant on his chest stirred, and a smile stretched across his face. Lucy had yawned her way into the world two weeks ago at an elegant six pounds and seven ounces. The first time Joe had held her, he'd been overwhelmed by the love of his Creator, his Heavenly Papa, who had lavished him with the wonder nestled in his arms. She was a light in his world, a hope, a heavenly balm for her papa's grief-stricken heart. His little girl.

The sun flickered through the budding tree branches, warming Joe's face and turning the insides of his eyelids pink. A breeze washed over him, trailing the lingering scent of the cookout they'd shared with Fazal and his fiancé and with the Hernandez



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family earlier that day. Across the lawn, he heard Moses and Danny laughing and Harry barking as he romped in the grass with the boys.

Joe's smile deepened. Love wrapped him like a blanket. Peace whispered through his soul. God was good, and His grace was sufficient. Rolling his head to one side, he opened his eyes and gazed at the woman he loved lounging in an Adirondack chair.

Amy flipped a page in the novel she was reading then stopped when she felt her husband's eyes on her. Lowering the book to the arm of her chair, she met his gaze.

"She okay?" Amy said.

"Perfect."

"Want me to take her?"

"No, I'm good."

Amy smiled. "All right." She picked up her book then put it back down on the arm of her chair. Standing to her feet, she moved to the hammock and lay down beside her husband.

Joe drew her close, and Amy rested her head on his chest next to Lucy. Minutes ticked by. A sparrow sang from one of the oak trees as they lay in each other's arms without speaking, soaking in the moment and the nearness of each other.

A lump grew in Joe's throat. How he had missed the quiet moments.

In the weeks and months following Joey's death, he had spent countless nights at the statehouse in Topeka, doing his part to chart a new course of freedom for the state he loved. Each time Joe approached the capitol building, his eyes were drawn to the

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*Ad Astra* statue of a Kansas Indian perched atop the capitol dome, bow raised, arrow aiming at the North Star. He sometimes paused to admire the warrior, the provider, standing guard over the statehouse in rain, snow, sleet, and sun. A fearless heart named after the Kansas state motto.

*Ad Astra Per Aspera.*

To the stars through difficulty.

Joe could not have imagined how difficult the road would be—how high the cost of freedom.

Tears stung his eyes. He drew a deep breath then let it go.

“A penny for your thoughts,” Amy said.

“Mmmm... just thinking about all that’s happened, how difficult it’s been.”

Amy cupped his cheek in her hand. “Heavy thoughts for a Sunday afternoon.”

Joe smiled. He gazed at the woman in his arms, the love of his life and the mother of his children, and his heart swelled with emotion.

“I love you,” he said.

“I love you too, baby.” She leaned closer and kissed him.

Then Lucy stirred on his chest, fussing to be fed.

“Come here, sweetie.” Sitting up on the hammock, Amy pulled the baby into her arms.

“Papa!” Moses and Danny charged in their direction with Harry lumbering at their heels.

Amy stepped out of the way as the boys crashed into the hammock then clambered on top of their papa.

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“Look what we found!” Moses opened his hand and held out a tiny frog for Joe to see.

“Eeeeww!” Amy made a face, and Danny dissolved in a fit of laughter.

“It’s just a frog, Mama, look.” Moses swung the amphibian in her direction, but it sprang from his hand and disappeared in the grass.

“I’ll go find another one!” Moses jumped to the ground then streaked across the yard toward the pond.

Curling an arm around Danny’s waist, Joe climbed from the hammock then hoisted the boy onto his shoulders.

Danny threw his arms into the air. “I’m king of the world!” he shouted.

Joe smiled. Every boy wanted to be king. To rule. To be worshipped. But not Joe. He harbored not the faintest desire to be king of the world, only to be what he was.

A man... living free.



## EPILOGUE

Following the aborted air strike on Topeka, Vice President Wells, along with a majority of the principal officers of the executive departments, had exercised their power under the twenty-fifth amendment to the Constitution and had submitted a written declaration to leaders in Congress declaring President Campbell unable to discharge the powers and duties of her office. Wells had then assumed the powers and duties of the office as Acting President.

The first thing Acting President Wells did was lift martial law and reinstate Congress and the Supreme Court. He then ordered the immediate release of all state governors and legislators and the withdrawal of federal troops from the capitol buildings in the seceded states.

Then began the arduous task of separation. After President Campbell's heinous plot had been revealed, Wells had committed himself to letting the seceded states part without suffering further harm.

Joe had traveled to Washington to testify at the trials of

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President Campbell and Operations Czar Karich, who had turned against the president in an attempt to save himself. The two of them, along with Chief of Staff Robert Horning, had been convicted of multiple crimes against the American people in addition to 3,281 counts of murder stemming from the sixteen terrorist attacks carried out on April 23rd of that year. They'd each been sentenced to death, but their cases were under appeal.

Once the Supreme Court had been reinstated, it picked up where it left off. The ruling in the Perkins quo warranto case came back 5-4 in favor of former Inspector General Perkins. The court found that Louise Campbell had never been eligible to occupy the office of president.

In the majority opinion, Justice Logan explained that due to the British citizenship of Louise Campbell's father, she failed to meet the natural-born citizen requirement mandated by the Constitution. He cited the supreme court case *Minor v. Happersett* as well as Emmerich de Vattel's eighteenth century work, *Law of Nations*, which states, "The natives, or natural-born citizens, are those born in the country, of parents who are citizens." Additionally, Justice Logan's seventy-three page opinion had explored the original and final drafts of the Constitution and the founders' intent...

Suppose Osama bin Laden and American citizen, Jane Doe, had a baby, John bin Laden, and John bin Laden grew up to be President of the United States? Would we question John's loyalty to his

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mother's homeland? Probably so.

But what if British citizen, Average Joe, and American citizen, Jane Doe, had a baby, John Average Joe, and John Average Joe grew up to be President of the United States? Would we question John's loyalty to his mother's homeland? Probably not.

And while these two scenarios may seem quite different to us, the question arises, did our founders envision and provide defense against the likes of John bin Laden assuming the mantle of the Oval Office, and in such a provision, necessarily exclude John Average Joe as well?

History shows that they did.

In a 1787 letter to George Washington, John Jay wrote, "Permit me to hint whether it would not be wise and seasonable to provide a strong check to the admission of foreigners into the administration of our national government; and to declare expressly that the command in chief of the American army shall not be given to, nor devolve on any but a natural born citizen."

It is significant to note that the first draft of the Constitution listed the citizenship requirement for the president as one who was "born a citizen", but following Jay's letter to Washington, the final draft of the Constitution required that the

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President of the United States be a “natural-born citizen”. And so while it is true that John bin Laden and John Average Joe would each be “born a citizen” of the United States, it is evident by the difference between the first and final drafts of the U.S. Constitution that being “born a citizen” is not the same thing as being a “natural-born citizen”.

Clearly, Louise Campbell was “born a citizen” of the United States due to her mother’s United States citizenship. But just as clearly, Louise Campbell was not and never will be a “natural-born citizen” of the United States due to her father’s British citizenship.

Half of the population had been stunned by the court’s ruling. The other half had rejoiced that the truth had been at last set free. And so had the people.

Twenty-one of the twenty-six seceded states had joined together to form a new union. Pennsylvania had returned to the old union while Vermont, Texas, Alaska, and Hawaii had each chosen to remain on its own. The twenty-one newly united States called themselves the Free States of America, and free they were, recognizing that the pursuit of happiness means different things to different people.

Eleven states outlawed abortion while the other ten legalized the same. Five states recognized gay marriage and three approved



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polygamy. Twelve states embraced school prayer. Nineteen states denied benefits to illegal aliens who trespassed their borders. Eight states legalized marijuana. Seven states abolished all gun control laws. Twenty states forbid Sharia law. And so it went across the new union.

A government of the people.

Citizens were no longer clones enslaved by the whims of political elites in a faraway Capitol. The new seat of government was established in the Flint Hills of Kansas, no more than one or two day's drive from the farthest reaches of the union. Term limits were set for members of the new Congress, and citizens were now engaged in a government closer to the people. The Congress met for just three months out of the year, ample time to legislate the few, enumerated powers entrusted to it.

And so a new constitutional republic was born, and its citizens schooled to defend it. Unlike the old union, which had disintegrated into the mob rule of entitlement, the new republic secured its power more firmly in the hands of the States. The Free States of America had learned from the old and started anew, a child born of the greatest experiment in human freedom the world had ever known. And like the cherished parchment to which pen had been set nearly two-and-a-half centuries before, the Constitution of the Free States of America took its first brave step with the words, "We the People..."