



# Chapter 1

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IT BEGAN WITH President Coyle's children, Ethan and Zoe, both high-profile personalities since they had arrived in Washington, and probably even before that.

Twelve-year-old Ethan Coyle thought he had gotten used to living under the microscope and in the public eye. So Ethan hardly noticed anymore the news cameramen perpetually camped outside the Branaff School gates, and he didn't worry the way he used to if some kid he didn't know tried to snap his picture in the hall, or the gymnasium, or even the boys' bathroom.

Sometimes, Ethan even pretended he was invisible. It was kind of babyish, kind of b.s., but who cared. It helped. One of the more personable

Secret Service guys had actually suggested it. He told Ethan that Chelsea Clinton used to do the same thing. Who knew if that was true?

But when Ethan saw Ryan Townsend headed his way that morning, he only *wished* he could disappear.

Ryan Townsend always had it in for him, and that wasn't just Ethan's paranoia talking. He had the purplish and yellowing bruises to prove it—the kind that a good hard punch or muscle squeeze can leave behind.

“Wuzzup, *Coyle the Boil?*” Townsend said, charging up on him in the hall with that look on his face. “The Boil havin’ a bad day already?”

Ethan knew better than to answer his tormenter and torturer. He cut a hard left toward the lockers instead—but that was his first mistake. Now there was nowhere to go, and he felt a sharp, nauseating jab to the side of his leg. He'd been kicked! Townsend barely even slowed down as he passed. He called these little incidents “drive-bys.”

The thing Ethan *didn't* do was yell out, or stumble in pain. That was the deal he'd made with himself: don't let anyone see what you're feeling inside.

Instead, he dropped his books and knelt down to pick them back up again. It was a total wuss move, but at least he could take the weight off his leg for a second without letting the whole world know he was Ryan Townsend's punching and kicking dummy.

Except this time, someone else did see—and it wasn't the Secret Service.

Ethan was stuffing graph paper back into his math folder when he heard a familiar voice.

“Hey, Ryan? Wuzzup with *you*?”

He looked up just in time to see his fourteen-year-old sister, Zoe, stepping right into Townsend's path.

“I saw that,” she said. “You thought I wouldn't?”

Townsend cocked his head of blond curls to the side. “I don't know what the hell you're talking about. Why don't you just mind your own—”

Out of nowhere, a heavy yellow textbook came up fast in both of Zoe's hands.

She swung hard, and clocked Townsend with it, right across the middle of his face. The bully's nose spurted red and he stumbled backward. It was great!

That was as far as things progressed before Secret Service got to them. Agent Findlay held Zoe back, and Agent Musgrove wedged himself between Ethan and Townsend. A crowd of sixth, seventh, and eighth graders had already stopped to watch, like this was some new reality TV show — *The President’s Kids*.

“You total losers!” Townsend shouted at Ethan and Zoe, even as blood dripped down over his Branaff tie and white button-down shirt. “What a couple of chumps. You need your loyal SS bodyguards to protect you!”

“Oh yeah? Tell that to my algebra book,” Zoe yelled back. “And stay away from my brother! You’re bigger and older than him, you jerk. You shithead!”

For his part, Ethan was still hovering by the lockers, half of his stuff scattered on the floor. And for a second or two there, he found himself pretending he was part of the crowd — just some kid nobody had ever heard of, standing there, watching all of this craziness happen to someone else.

*Yeah, Ethan thought. Maybe in my next lifetime.*

## Chapter 2

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AGENT FINDLAY QUICKLY and efficiently hustled Ethan and Zoe away from the gawkers, and worse, the kids with their iPhones raised: *Hello, YouTube!* In a matter of seconds, he'd disappeared with them into the otherwise empty grand lecture hall off the main foyer.

The Branaff School had once been the Branaff Estate, until ownership had transferred to a Quaker educational trust. It was said among the kids that the grounds were haunted, not by good people who had died here, but by the disgruntled Branaff descendants who'd been evicted to make room for the private school.

Ethan didn't buy into any of that crap, but he'd always found the main lecture hall to be

supercreepy—with its old-time oil portraits looking down disapprovingly on everybody who happened to pass through.

“You know, the president’s going to have to hear about this, Zoe. The fight, your language back there,” Agent Findlay said. “Not to mention Headmaster Skillings—”

“No doubt, so just do your job,” Zoe answered with a shrug and a frown. She put a hand on top of her brother’s head. “You okay, Eth?”

“I’m fine,” he said, pushing her off. “Physically, anyway.” His dignity was another question, but that was too complicated for him to think about right now.

“In that case, let’s keep this parade moving,” Findlay told them. “You guys have assembly in five.”

“Got it,” said Zoe with a dismissive wave. “Like we were going to forget assembly, right?”

The morning’s guest speaker was Isabelle Morris, a senior fellow with the DC International Policy Institute and also an alum of the Branaff School. Unlike most of the kids he knew, Ethan was actually looking forward to Ms. Morris’s talk about her experiences in the Middle East. Someday

he hoped to work at the UN himself. Why not? He had pretty good connections, right?

“Can you give us a teeny-tiny second?” Zoe asked. “I want to talk to my brother — *alone*.”

“I said I’m fine. It’s cool,” Ethan insisted, but his sister cut him off with a glare.

“He tells me things he won’t say to you,” Zoe went on, answering Findlay’s skeptical look. “And private conversations aren’t exactly easy to come by around here, if you know what I mean. No offense meant.”

“None taken.” Findlay looked down at his watch. “Okay,” he said. “Two minutes is all I can give you.”

“Two minutes, it is. We’ll be right out, I promise,” Zoe said, and closed the heavy wooden door behind him as he left.

Without a word to Ethan, she cut between the rows of old desk seats and headed to the back of the room. She hopped up on the heating register under the windows.

Then Zoe reached inside her blue and gray uniform jacket and took out a small black lacquered case. Ethan recognized it right away. His sister had bought it in Beijing this past summer, on a trip to China with their parents.



“I’m all about a ciggie right now,” Zoe whispered. Then she grinned wickedly. “Come with?”

Ethan looked back at the door. “I actually don’t want to miss this assembly,” he said, but Zoe just rolled her eyes.

“Oh, *please*. Blah, blah, blah, Middle East, blah, blah. You can watch it on CNN any hour of the week,” she said. “But how often do you get a chance to ditch Secret Service? *Come on!*”

It was a totally no-win situation for him and Ethan knew it. He was either going to look like a wimp—again—or he was going to miss the assembly speech he’d been looking forward to all week.

“You shouldn’t smoke,” he said lamely.

“Yeah, well you shouldn’t weenie out so much,” Zoe answered. “Then maybe assholes like Ryan Townsend wouldn’t be all over you all the time.”

“That’s just because Dad’s the president,” Ethan said. “That’s all, right?”

“No. It’s because you’re a geek,” Zoe said. “You don’t see Spunk-Punk messing with me, do you?” She opened the window, effortlessly pulled herself through, and dropped to the ground

outside. Zoe thought she was another Angelina Jolie. “If you’re not coming, at least give me a minute to get away. Okay, Grandma?”

The next second, Zoe was gone.

Ethan looked over his shoulder one more time. Then he did the only thing he could to maintain his last shreds of dignity. He followed his sister out the lecture hall window—and into trouble he couldn’t even begin to imagine.

*No one could.*

# Chapter 3

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AS SOON AS the door to the lecture hall slammed shut behind Agent Clay Findlay, he checked the knob—*still unlocked*. Then he checked the sweep hand on his stainless-steel Breitling. “I’m giving them another forty-five seconds,” he said into the mike at his cuff. “After that, we’ve got T. Rex going to assembly and Twilight headed to the principal’s office.”

Word from the president and First Lady had been to allow Ethan and Zoe as normal a school experience as possible, including their own conflicts—within reason. That was easier said than done, of course. Zoe Coyle didn’t always operate within reason. In fact, she usually didn’t. Zoe wasn’t a bad kid. But she was a kid. Willful.

And smart, and devoted to her younger brother.

“I’m probably going to get reamed for this,” Findlay radioed quietly. “Tell you what, though. That Ryan Townsend kid’s a little prick. Not that you heard it here.”

“Like father, like son,” Musgrove radioed back. “Kid got what he was asking for, and more. Zoe really clocked the little shithead.”

There was some low laughter on the line. Ryan Townsend’s daddy was the House minority whip and a rabid opponent of virtually every move President Coyle ever made or even thought about. Sometimes the Branaff School could feel like Little Washington. Which it kind of was.

Findlay checked his watch again. Two minutes exactly. End of recess for the Coyle kids. Now back to work for everybody.

“All right, ladies and gentlemen, we’re on the move,” he said into his mike. Then he knocked twice on the lecture hall door and pushed it open.

“Time’s up, guys. You ready to . . . *goddamnit.*”

The room was empty.

*No. No. No. Not this. Goddamn those kids. Goddamn Zoe!*

Findlay's pulse spiked to a new high, at least for today. His eyes leapt to the multipaned windows along the back wall.

Even as he moved toward them, he was opening all channels on his transmitter to address the Joint Ops Center as well as his on-site team.

"Command, this is Apex One. Twilight and T. Rex are unaccounted for." His voice was urgent but flat. There would be no panicking. "I repeat, both protectees are unaccounted for."

When he reached the windows, they were all pulled down to the sill, but one of them had been left unlatched. A quick scan of the grounds outside showed nothing but plush green playing fields all the way to the south fence.

"Findlay? What's going on?"

Musgrove was there now, standing in the doorway from the hall.

"They must have snuck outside," Findlay said. "I'm going to kill her. I really am. Long overdue." This thing had Zoe written all over it. It was probably her idea of a big game, or a joke on her keepers.

"Command, Apex One," he radioed again.

“Twilight and T. Rex are still unaccounted for. I need an immediate lockdown on all exits, inside and out—”

All at once, a commotion broke out on the line. Findlay heard shouting, and the grating sound of metal on metal. Then two gunshots.

“Command, this is Apex Five!” Another voice blared over the radio now. “We’ve got a gray panel van. Just evaded us at the east gate. It’s proceeding south on Wisconsin at high speed. Sixty, seventy miles an hour! *Request immediate backup!*”

# Chapter 4

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MPD PATROL SERGEANT Bobby Hatfield had just spotted a gray van, doing at least sixty through downtown Georgetown, when the emergency call came from dispatch. “All units, patrol area two-oh-six. Possible armed kidnap in progress. Two kids. That’s *two!* We have a gray panel van, traveling at high speed, south on Wisconsin, Northwest. Secret Service is in pursuit. Requesting backup! Please turn to channel twenty-three.”

Hatfield fired up his siren and pulled a fast three-point turn just as a telltale black Yukon went racing by. As soon as he got onto the dedicated channel, he could hear Secret Service broadcasting the chase.

“We are proceeding south. Plates are DC, tag number DMS eight-two-three—”

“Secret Service, this is MPD unit two-oh-six,” Hatfield cut in. “I’m coming right up on your back.”

“Copy that, MPD.”

Hatfield accelerated as the Yukon fell back and let him take the lead. Already, the speedometer was pushing toward seventy, and his adrenaline was going off the charts. There was a whole lot more that could go wrong here than right.

At M Street, the van careened left, almost looked like it might tip.

It took the corner too wide and sideswiped two parked cars without stopping. Hatfield coasted into the turn—slow in, fast out, was the drill—and punched it as soon as he was pointed in the right direction. It gained him some ground on the van, but not enough.

“Suspect headed east on M,” he called in. “This guy’s flying. Where’s the damn backup? C’mon people!”

When they came to Pennsylvania Avenue just before Rock Creek, the van peeled off to the right.



It was a wider street now, and whoever was doing the driving picked up even more speed, weaving dangerously across the bridge.

Hatfield blinked hard to keep his vision from tunneling. There were cars and pedestrians everywhere. The whole scene couldn't possibly be more confusing.

*This thing is not going to end well.* He could feel it everywhere in his body.

At Twenty-eighth Street, a second marked unit finally fell in behind. Hatfield recognized James Walsh's voice as he took over radio communication. Walsh was a pal of his on the force, but also a tormenter.

"How you doing, Robert?"

"Fuck you, how am I doing?"

"Continuing southeast on Pennsylvania," Walsh went on. "Suspect's driving is extremely erratic... seems to be a single occupant, but it's hard to tell. We're going to hit Washington Circle any second now and—oh, shit! Bobby, look out! Look out!"

As the van came into the rotary, it cut left instead of right, straight into oncoming traffic. Cars and cabs swerved to get out of the way.

It was like the parting of the Red Sea from where Hatfield was sitting—and there, on the other side of the gap, was a city bus, too big to avoid. The bus driver cut hard to the right, but it was no good.

All he did was give the van a solid wall to run into!

Hatfield slammed his brakes and sent his own car into a hard skid. Even then, his eyes never came off the van.

It crashed, head-on at full speed, right into the Neiman Marcus ad on the side of the bus. The front end crumpled like an accordion. Glass flew everywhere and the van's back wheels lifted a good foot off the ground before the whole mess finally came to a sliding stop.

Hatfield was out of his car right away, with Walsh running up behind him. Miraculously, it looked like the bus had been out of service—nobody but the driver on board. But Washington Circle was a tangle of stopped cars and rear-end collisions.

Within seconds, another half-dozen marked units had converged on the spot.

Uniformed officers were suddenly everywhere,

but Hatfield was the first to reach the back door of the van. Its gray metal panels were buckled inward and the chrome handle was smashed to shit.

His heart was still thudding from the chase and he could feel the blood pounding in his ears. This wasn't over yet. What the hell were they about to find on the other side of that door? Armed gunmen? Dead men?

Even worse — *dead kids?*

# Chapter 5

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AT THE TIME of the first incident in the chain of events, I didn't know it was the president's son and daughter who were missing. All I'd heard on my radio was "possible kidnap." That's all any of us knew at that point.

I'd been driving east on K Street at the time and I was off duty. The location given put me less than two blocks from the crash site and I got over to Washington Circle even before the EMTs. I had to help if I could.

I was there in less than sixty seconds. A uniformed cop scurried behind me, unspooling a roll of yellow tape as I headed toward the smashed-up van.

The first thing I noticed was the wide-open

back door. Second, that there was no sign of any kidnap victim here at all.

And third—Secret Service were everywhere! Some of them in the usual dark suits, others in preppy blazers, knit ties, dress shirts, and khakis. They looked like schoolteachers, but the corkscrew wires behind their ears told another story.

I badged my way over to the van to see inside for myself. The driver was pinned to his seat where the engine block had come all the way through in the crash. He was covered in blood below some obvious trauma around his mid-section. His right arm was sticking up and out in a way that arms weren't meant to go.

The guy looked to be midthirties, curly black hair, a sketchy beard with soul patch that was as slight and pathetic as he was.

But where was the victim? Had this whole thing been a hoax? An intentional diversion? Already, I was starting to think so, and the possibility sent a rush of adrenaline through me. *A diversion from what? What else had happened at that school?*

“Is he cogent?” I asked the tweed-clad agent next to me.

“Hard to say,” he answered. “He’s out of it. Maybe shock. We don’t even know if he speaks English.”

“And no sign of the missing kid?” I said.

The agent just shook his head, then held up two fingers. “Two missing kids.”

This was turning into *déjà vu* for me—the worst kind. Some years back, I’d worked with Secret Service on another double kidnapping, perpetrated by a monster named Gary Soneji. Only one of the two children had survived. In fact, I’d barely made it myself. John Sampson had saved my life.

I flashed my badge some more, then leaned in through the shattered driver’s-side window.

“Police. Where are the kids?” I asked the guy, straight up. By default, I had to assume he knew something. This was no time to equivocate.

He was panting in quick shallow breaths, and his face was blank—like his body knew how much pain he was in, but his brain didn’t exactly get it.

His pupils were huge, too. He had some of the signs of PCP, but this guy had just navigated a high-speed chase through the city. I’d never seen

anyone on angel dust who could do that.

When he didn't answer—not a word or a nod or a grunt—I tried again.

“You hearing me?” I shouted. “Tell me where the two kids are! If you want us to help you out of there.”

The ambulance was here now and two EMTs were at my shoulder, trying to push me out of the way. I wasn't moving anywhere.

I heard a hydraulic motor fire up somewhere behind me, too. That was for the spreader tool—the Jaws of Life—and this guy was definitely going to need it. But not until I got my answer.

“What do you know?” I said. “Are you working for someone? Just tell me where the kids are!”

Something in the driver's face changed then. His breath was still shallow, but the corners of his mouth turned up and his eyes crinkled, like someone had told him a joke no one else could hear or maybe understand. When he finally spit out an answer, a spray of blood came with it, all over the mangled steering wheel and column.

“*What kids, man?*” he said.

# Chapter 6

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THE RESCUE TEAM used a Hurst tool to cut the posts flanking the van's windshield and door, then a halogen bar to peel the roof back like a can of sardines. It's amazing to watch, but usually you're rooting for the person trapped inside. Not so much this time. Actually, not at all.

While they lowered in a chain to pull back the engine and get our empty-eyed friend out of there, I tried to get a quick lowdown from the Secret Service agent I'd been speaking with, Clay Findlay.

"So, who are these missing kids?" I asked him, but he just shook his head. He wasn't going to tell me, was he? What was that about? "Listen," I said. "I've had experience on this kind of thing—"



“I know who you are,” he said, cutting me off again. “You’re Alex Cross. You’re MPD.”

My reputation precedes me more and more these days, but that can cut both ways. It didn’t seem to be helping right now.

“We’ve already got all MPD units on alert,” Findlay said, “so why don’t you go check in with your lieutenant. See where he could use you? Obviously, I’ve got my hands full here. I’ve had some experience in these quarters, too, Detective.”

I didn’t like the brush-off. It was a mistake for somebody who claimed to have experience. Every passing minute meant those kids were a little farther out of our reach. Findlay should have known that. Even worse, maybe he did.

“You see that guy?” I said. I pointed over at the driver. They had a protective collar around his neck and were finally making some headway getting him out. “That’s an MPD arrest. You understand me? I’m going to talk to him as soon as I can, with or without your involvement. If you want to wait your turn, fine, but just so you know—once they get him to the ER, he’s going to be sedated and tubed up for God knows how

long. So it might be a while before you get your interview.”

Findlay stared hard at me. I watched his jaw work back and forth, heard a cracking noise. He knew I had jurisdiction here, that I had him if I wanted to go that way.

“It’s Zoe and Ethan Coyle,” he said finally. “You’ll hear about it soon enough. They disappeared from the Branaff School about twenty minutes ago.”

I was stunned into silence. Knocked back on my heels. The enormity of this—the implications—started to fall on me at once. “What else is happening on your end?” I asked in a lowered voice.

“The school’s locked down,” Findlay said. “Every available Secret Service agent is either there or on the way.”

“Could they still turn up over there?” I asked.

He shook his head. “We’d have found them by now. No way they’re still on the campus.”

“Any idea how someone could have gotten them out of there?”

Again, he paused. I got the impression he was editing himself as he went forward. The other

thing I didn't know yet was that Findlay was lead agent on Ethan and Zoe's protective detail. This was all on his head. *The president's children.*

"Not really. It just happened," he answered. "There's an underground passage. Used to connect the main house with some of the service buildings. Way back when it was the Branaff Estate. We keep it all closed off now, but kids still break in there sometimes. Smoke a cigarette, grope each other. Believe me, if Ethan and Zoe were in that tunnel before, they aren't anymore."

The van driver was out on a gurney now, hooked up to a nasogastric tube and IV. As they wheeled him to the back of the ambulance and loaded him up, Findlay and I fell in behind the procession.

My badge was out again. So were his creds.

"Hey!" one of the medics yelled at us as we climbed in. "You can't—"

"We're coming with him," I said, and closed the ambulance doors. No further discussion. "Let's go."

# Chapter 7

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MY MIND WAS working even faster now, probably too fast. So was my pulse. And I couldn't catch my breath either.

*The president's kids.*

George Washington University Hospital was only a few blocks from the crash site so this was going to have to be quick. While the EMTs worked over our suspect and radioed in his vitals, I leaned in as close as I could to get his attention.

“What's your name?” I said.

I had to ask a couple of times before he finally responded.

“Ray?” He said it like a question.

“Okay, Ray. I'm Alex. You with me here?”

He was flat on his back and staring at the ceiling. I ran a finger back and forth in front of his eyes to get him to look at me.

“What are you on, Ray? You know what you took?”

His expression was as distant as ever. “Just a drink of water,” he said finally.

“Don’t give him anything!” one of the medics barked at me.

“*I’m not,*” I said. “‘Drink of water’ is PCP. That’s what he thinks he took.”

“Thinks?” Agent Findlay asked.

“Something heavily anesthetic, anyway. Probably some kind of nose cocktail.” And I was guessing he didn’t mix it himself.

“Who got you the van, Ray?” I said. “Who put you up to this? There’s somebody else, right?”

“Anyone, anyone,” he said. “Five hundred bucks and a little drink of water.”

“*Five hundred bucks?*” Findlay looked like he was ready to tear the guy’s face off. “Do you have any idea what kind of shit storm you just landed in—for five hundred dollars?”

Ray wasn’t listening to the Secret Service agent, though. He was looking around now, like

he'd just figured out where he was. When he got down to his own midsection, and the blood soaking through the heavy gauze dressing, he just grinned. "This is some good shit," he said.

"Ray?" I tried again. "Ray? You said something about 'anyone.' What did you mean by that?"

"No," he said, twitching away. "Anyone, anyone." The fingers on his left hand started moving rapidly; it looked like he was playing scales on a piano.

Findlay and I looked at each other. Whoever had put Ray up to this knew what they were doing. Now, while the trail to the kids was warmest, the one person we had in custody was virtually useless. We were wasting precious time on this guy. That was exactly what the kidnapper wanted, wasn't it?

"We're here!" the ambulance driver yelled back. "Interview's over." The other two stood up and started getting Ray ready to go.

"Who's anyone?" I tried one more time. "What do you mean by that, Ray?"

"An-y-one. An-y-one," he said again, tapping a different finger on each syllable—and I realized it wasn't like he was playing a piano. It

was like he was hitting keys on a keyboard. Then I had another idea.

*N-E-I-N-E-I.*

“Is that a screen name?” I asked. “Did somebody find you online, Ray?”

“Watch out, guys!”

The back of the ambulance opened from the outside. Findlay and I had to jump out first to get out of the way.

An emergency medical team was already waiting, along with an incongruous crowd of gray suits off to one side.

It wasn't just any crowd, either. Findlay stopped short on the pavement, and I almost knocked into him.

“Sir?” he said to one of the suits.

Right there in front of us was the secretary of Homeland Security himself, Phil Ribillini.

“Detective Cross,” Ribillini said with a curt nod. We'd met once before, back when I was with the FBI and he was with Defense. There were no pleasantries today. “We'll need a statement from you right away,” he said. “But my people will take it from there. Has to be that way.”

In other words, I wasn't going any farther

with the prisoner. All I could do was watch as they wheeled Ray inside through the automatic sliders and out of sight.

But that wasn't the bad part. The clock kept ticking on those two missing kids.



# Chapter 8

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DR. HALA AL DOSSARI was twenty-nine years old, slender and attractive, humorous when it was useful, very bright, with a photographic memory. Her husband, Tariq, was thirty-nine, pudgy everywhere, and hopelessly in love with his wife. They looked like they had everything to live for, but in reality, the Al Dossaris were prepared to die at any time. Probably sooner rather than later. That was their mission.

Hala snuck a sideways glance at her watch. They had been warned repeatedly about the dangers of Dulles Airport. The International Arrivals area was one of the most scrutinized in the world. Besides the armed security and usual customs agents, the terminal was staffed with a

well-trained team of behavior detection officers —BDOs. The purpose of these police devils was to scan the incoming crowds for anything considered beyond the norm.

Too much sweat on the brow could get you pulled out of line here.

So could rapid eye movement.

Or a nervous gait.

Or a cranky BDO.

“Almost through,” Hala said, giving her husband’s hand a reassuring squeeze. “Not much longer. Give me a smile. Americans love a nice smile.”

“*Inshallah*,” he answered.

“Tariq, please—*a smile*. Just show your teeth for the surveillance cameras.”

Finally, he did as he was told. It was a stiff-jawed attempt—but a smile, anyway. So far, so good. Another minute or so and they would be perfectly safe.

Passport control had gone by without incident. Baggage claim, other than feeling like a cattle yard, had been fine. Now they were down to luggage screening, one final queue to wait in before they could truly say they’d arrived safely in Washington.

But everything had suddenly slowed to a crawl. This was a nightmare.

In fact, Hala realized, *the line had completely stopped.*

A couple of uniformed TSA agents were unhooking the stanchion belt up ahead, motioning for two people to step out of line. It was another couple—also Saudi, also in Western dress.

“Sir? Ma’am? Could you come with us, please?”

“What for?” the other man asked, immediately on the defensive. “We haven’t done anything wrong. Why should we lose our rightful place in the queue?”

His accent was Najdi, Hala noticed. The same as theirs.

But who were these people? Could this just be a coincidence? One look at Tariq’s worried face and she knew he was wrestling with the same questions. Was their American mission about to be compromised before it had even begun?

More American security personnel hurried over now. A husky black female officer took the Saudi woman firmly by the arm.

“*Farouk!*” the woman screamed for her husband. Then she yelled at the security police. “Leave us alone! Take your dirty hands off me!”

As Hala watched the husband, her heart skipped. *He was reaching for something in his pocket.* One of the guards tried to pull his arm away. But the man pushed back hard. The guard went down on his ass.

Two more officers rushed forward. There was a violent scuffle. The police threw the Saudi man to the floor. Jumped on his back. But he fought and got one hand free. The next moment, he’d stuffed something into his mouth.

And that’s when Hala knew—this was no coincidence. She had a potassium cyanide capsule in her pocket as well. So did Tariq.

Whatever this couple had done to tip off the authorities, there was nothing the Al Dossaris could do for them now. Their only obligation at this point was to avoid detection. Above all, they mustn’t be captured, too.

And they wouldn’t be. Not if they kept their heads, Hala knew. Service to the cause was everything. Their mission could change the world. But first, they had to make it out of here

alive. The Family was depending on them. Their mission here meant everything.

Tariq grasped her hand tighter. His own hand was wet with sweat. “I love you, Hala,” he whispered. “I love you so much!”

# Chapter 9

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“THIS GUY JUST ATE SOMETHING!” one of the TSA officers shouted to his partners. He held down the struggling, writhing husband while another guard tried to force the man’s mouth open.

Hala saw the stream of blood run down over his chin. That meant he’d bitten through the capsule’s rubber coating, into the glass bead inside. Her heart was thundering now. As a doctor, she knew all too well about the effects of potassium cyanide on the body. It was going to be horrible, absolutely awful to witness. Especially with a capsule right there in her own pocket.

Almost immediately, the man began to

convulse. His torso bucked slowly, his legs kicking back and forth. It was an instinctive but ultimately useless response. While the oxygen built up to dangerous levels in his blood, less and less of it would reach his vital organs, including the lungs. The panic alone would be excruciating. The terrible burning inside.

The man's young wife collapsed at his feet next. A trickle of blood ran down her chin, too. Then more blood, from her nose.

"Something's wrong!" the female guard yelled. "Call emergency services! We need a doctor right now!"

Border Protection was doing its best to maintain order, but panic had begun to take over the arrivals hall. People started bottlenecking toward the screening stations. Frantic voices echoed against the high ceiling. Two-way radios crackled everywhere.

"Tariq?" Hala said. He was standing perfectly still, even as other travelers pushed past them. "Tariq? We have to go. *Right now.*"

His eyes seemed to be locked on the other couple, dying there on the terminal floor.

"That could have been us," he whispered.