

THE NEMESIS MANIFESTO

ERIC VAN LUSTBADER



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Chapter One

December

Evan Ryder hated Washington. Like Hollywood, it was ruled by greed and fear. The frenzied stench of self-perpetuation was a smog that never lifted, even on the most sublime spring day, fouling the air inside the Beltway. Despite that, chances were it was as close to home as she was ever going to get. As someone who had lost the ability to find home or those with whom she had shared it, she supposed DC's tissue-thin façade of respectability was a tonic she needed to drink from time to time, like medicine, to remind herself of mankind's essential hypocrisy and the evil that arose from it. It was this evil, this hypocrisy, and her fight against them that gave meaning to her life. As she made her way through the morning throngs on their way to jobs at various self-important bureaus, she was reminded all over again that DC was like Narcissus staring into a mirror, admiring his reflection instead of taking care of the difficult business of governing.

Nevertheless, here she was in Foggy Bottom, bucking a tide of drones—suits with thousand-yard stares, talking on their mobile phones. She moved through them like a wisp, like a ghost. Her thick black hair was tied back in a ponytail and she was clad in black pants, a cashmere sweater that matched her eyes, which were the brindled color of a gray wolf, a waist-length black leather jacket, and steel-tipped ankle boots she had had made for her in Portugal. She had a wide mouth and an athlete's body, compact, wide at the shoulders, narrow at the hips. At restaurants, sometimes, and if the diners were drunk, she would get mistaken for Emily Blun, or, if drunker still, Katy Perry. But only sometimes. Mainly, no one paid her the slightest attention.

Benjamin Butler was the reason she was here. Butler was perhaps the only person in DC who could command her immediate attention; his briefs kept her in the field, doing what she wanted to do, what she needed to do. Evan and Butler had worked together as field agents some years ago and they had a complex, intimate history from those days. Now Butler was a director, and Evan's boss. A dyed-in-the-wool field agent, she was fine with that. Butler was one of the only two people alive whom Evan trusted; the handful of others were all dead.

Butler and Evan worked for the DOD—in a black-ops shop whose yearly budget was appropriated from one of several Pentagon slush funds, without oversight from Congress. Who Butler reported to Evan couldn't say; she knew only that whoever it was, was very high up in the DOD food chain. For that reason alone, Butler would have been feared throughout the clandestine community. Add to this his fierce personality, indomitable spirit, and uncanny ability to ferret out the bad apples, no matter how deeply embedded, and he should have been feared by everyone in the CI community. The reason he wasn't was simple: unlike any other of his colleagues, Butler trained and deployed a good number of female field agents, whereas other clandestine agencies deployed none. He was alone in understanding, as his Russian counterparts did, that females could extract intel more often than male agents, and more of it to boot. Females were considered circumspect, and could play off men's weakness for sex, love, and affection, which, most often, considering their profession, they failed to get from their wives—if they had wives, or ex-wives.

Butler, having moved from his original, inadequate quarters near the NSA, was now installed on the eighth floor of a massive white-brick residential building whose façade

was slightly curved to accommodate a semi-circular drive with a porte cochere, which allowed its tenants to delude themselves into believing they were living in a Southern mansion.

True to the neighborhood's name, tendrils of fog accompanied Evan into the chandeliered lobby. Massive leather chairs and settees were ranged along the walls, below painted scenes of old-school foxhunts. Evan would have found it amusing except for the fact that

everyone in the lobby was as grim-faced as gargoyles.

Stepping to the majordomo's high banc, she showed credentials identifying her as Louise Steadman, Consultant. What she consulted on wasn't enumerated and wasn't queried. She asked for Paul Roswell and, after a brief exchange on the house phone, was handed a magnetic card and directed to a bank of elevators across the marble lobby. Waving the card over the reader caused the floor buttons to light up. She pressed eight, and was whisked silently up.

"Paul Roswell" had had the entire eighth floor remade into a vast complex of rooms. The remodeling was so new she could smell the paint and corner sawdust that, here and there, had yet to be vacuumed up. The low staticky hum of electronics filled the air.

Apart from Brenda Myers, her honey-colored hair shorter and straighter than when Evan had last seen her, there were very few people in evidence. Brenda stuck out her hand for Evan to shake briefly. It was cool, dry, and hard.

"You're looking good, Evan," Brenda said as they crossed from room to room—there were no doors that Evan could see.

"Thank you. You too. Working for Ben keeps one in shape, doesn't it?" She smiled.

She liked Brenda, felt badly that they'd never had a chance to go to dinner and let their hair down. But then again, in the shadow world they both inhabited, confiding in anyone was not a good idea. As always Brenda was dressed in a pantsuit that was as stylish as it was practical. It was as if she used her style sense as an antidote to her bland, old-fashioned name. And this dichotomy brought up an echo in Evan's mind, a slippery sense that there was much more to Brenda than she showed on the surface. People went into intelligence fieldwork for any number of reasons—they were misfits, deeply unhappy, sociopaths—but most often, it was because they were running from something, possibly themselves. This last, she intuited, might be true for Brenda.

"Are you going mad yet?" Evan asked.

"Huh! Not yet. Not quite."

"Won't be long now, I imagine," Evan said. "Unless he gets you back out in the field."

"Any day now."

Brenda left her without another word at the threshold to Butler's office. Evan stepped into a large room that might once have been one of the eighth-floor apartments' master bedroom suites. It was saturated with light, but of a curious blue-green hue, as if she and Butler were submerged in a fish tank. She glanced at the window glass: bulletproof, spidery with anti-eavesdropping networks. Even though this location was well-hidden, Evan saw that he was taking no chances. She approved; but then she pretty much approved of everything Butler did.

He rose the instant she entered, coming around from behind his desk to meet her halfway across the room. He wore a dark-blue suit, a cream-colored shirt, a regimental striped tie. He was tall and stately. The year and a half since they had seen one another seemed not to have touched him at all. He still had the smooth pale skin and coffee-

colored eyes of his Jewish mother, who, in her day, had been a ravishing beauty. Of his WASP lawyer father there seemed little, save for the wavy hair and the pronounced widow's peak.

When Butler smiled the sun broke out. "How was your flight, Evan?"

"I'm alive, as you can see."

Butler laughed softly. They shook hands.

"And how is Zoe?" she asked.

"Seven going on thirteen."

She nodded. "Then everything is in order."

Butler laughed again, gesturing for her to take a seat on one of the chairs in front of his desk. He folded himself into the one opposite, crossed one leg over the other.

Evan took another look around. "Like the new digs. Do we have an actual name yet?"

"Just the alphanumeric one, M171473-HG," he said.

"So still MI7." A joke of sorts. A play on the British MI6.

"Sure, but right at the moment it doesn't seem so funny."

Evan paused for a moment.

"Thank you for agreeing to come back to DC," he said.

"You know my current brief is at a critical junction."

"This takes precedence," Butler said firmly.

"Five months I've been working this brief."

Butler waved a hand. "I know. Turkey is complicated, and you've done incredible work. I'm grateful, as always. And I know there are a lot of bad memories for you here. But believe me, Evan, it was necessary that I bring you back."

There was no use in digging in her heels. All that spadework down the drain. Well, it's not the first time, she thought, and it won't be the last. It was the nature of the game. "The credentials you sent me made it easy," she said, giving in, but only somewhat.

He cocked his head, his thick black hair brilliant in the light. "You know what I mean."

Indeed, she did. "Your summons was urgent," she said now. "What's up?"

Reaching over to his desk, Butler slid a sheet of paper off it, offered it to her.

Evan made no move, eyed the paper as if it were a coiled cobra.

Butler held the sheet faceup so she could see it. "You see? No official stamps. No circulation sign-offs. This is strictly ours. One hundred percent." His forefinger ran down the list. "Six names, four agents who disappeared over the last ten months, one who came back in very bad shape, and the sixth is completely unknown to us."

"Where did you get these names?"

"The agent who returned had the original list on him. It's been scrutinized by forensics. They found nothing, not even a partial fingerprint."

"Not even our agent's?"

"That's right."

"So he didn't compile it. He never even saw it."

Butler nodded. "It's a message, a taunt. Just like the agent's return. That's my belief, anyway." He produced photos—grainy headshots from what appeared to be surveillance operations—to go with the names. "Three are ours, two MI6."

"What links them?"

Butler sighed. "As I'm sure you know, the special relationship enjoyed by us and our British cousins has been sorely tested of late. The hard truth is they no longer trust us, so getting anything out of them is like pulling teeth. But so far as I can make out, the MI6

agents were looking for the same thing ours were—a person, or organization, known only as Nemesis.”

“What has Nemesis done to deserve all this scrutiny?”

“It controls an enormous network of Twitter bots that spew out the most egregious racial and gender epithets aimed at Democrats, women, Hispanics, immigrants, Muslims, and Jews.”

“Surely you have IT people who can—”

“The Nemesis net is like the Hydra. Cut off a cluster of ISPs and seven others take their place. I mean, we don’t even know whether Nemesis is a single person, a cadre, or a worldwide cabal. But because of our recent failures I determined that we’ve been going after Nemesis from the wrong direction. Hence the deployments of field agents.”

Evan frowned, shook her head as she stood up. “Okay, but you have plenty of other agents to handle this kind of routine—”

“Nemesis is anything but routine. Evan, if you’re worried that I’m going to be asking you to stay in DC and do work others could do—well, believe me I’m not.” He took a breath, as if preparing himself for what was coming next. “Jules and Albert?”

“Two of our best.”

“Were. Their throats were ripped out as if by a wild dog or a wolf or a cannibalistic madman.”

“How do you know that?”

“Traces of tooth marks at the ragged edges of the wounds. We can’t get any more specific than that. Forensics in this area is notoriously inaccurate.”

He handed over a sheaf of photos taken by his forensics team. Evan went through them carefully, a frown deepening the line between her eyes.

“Ligature marks on their wrists and ankles.”

“Yes,” Butler affirmed. “They were bound.”

Evan looked up at him. “I don’t see any sign of blood. None at all.”

“The coroner we sent out there told me that the mutilations were done elsewhere, then the bodies were drained of blood.”

Evan stared at him. “After they were mutilated.”

“Yes.”

“So it’s possible that their throats were torn out while they were still alive.”

“That’s the coroner’s guarded opinion. And here’s the kicker. The coroner found blood in their feet, mouths, and, in Jules’s case, hair.”

“Which means they were strung up by their ankles, like pigs.” Evan studied the photos again. “Some form of ritual then.”

“Ritual is my prime suspicion.”

Evan shook her head. She was fully on board now. “Where?” she said softly. “Where were they found?”

“You’ll love this. It’s why I sent for you.” He took back the photos. “The Caucasus Mountains, the ancient dividing line between Europe and Asia. Georgia. To be exact, inside a national park with the longest name in the world: Racha-Lechkhumi-Kvemo Svaneti Planned National Park.” He gave Evan a hard stare. “The Russian Federation is virtually your backyard.”

He shuffled the photos. "This is bad, Evan. As bad as it gets. These were highly skilled field agents, not a bunch of friends out for a picnic in the park. Racha, their end point, will be your starting point."

"Did you send them out together?"

"A month apart."

"But they were dumped in the same place."

"That's right," Butler said.

"And our third, the one who came back. Patrick Wilson—the Toad, as we used to call him."

Butler gave a grimace. "Seems an unfortunate nickname now. Save for being thinner and suffering from dehydration and exposure, he came back unharmed . . . physically. On the surface, at least."

"How is that?"

"Unknown. He won't see a psychologist or even a PTSD doctor, but something major is clearly wrong. Maybe you can . . . You should visit him before you head off to Georgia. He knows you. I think it would be instructive."

"And?" She rose and stepped toward the doorway. "With you there's always an 'and.'"

The ghost of a smile played across Butler's lips. "Take Brenda with you."

"You know I work better alone."

"You and Brenda have history, an excellent rapport. I'm not sending another lone agent out on this."

Butler rose as well, crossed to where she stood, still holding the paper. "The two names below our people are the MI6 agents."

Dropping her eyes, Evan looked at the list. "Have they been found?"

"Not as of today. No word from them. Nothing."

"And the sixth name?" She stared past the page to Butler's expression. "Charles Isaacs?"

"As I said, there's no info on him. None at all. He's a blank slate, a tabula rasa." His gaze turned searching. "Charles Isaacs is a legend. A manufactured identity. Must be. He's a complete enigma." He put the list aside. "One thing I have been able to determine absolutely is he's not one of ours. And I've checked with our cousins across the pond. As I said, we're not so friendly these days, but I have a few personal friends, and we still trust one another. He's not one of theirs, either. And, of course, they're intensely interested as to what happened to their two MIA agents."

"Isaacs belongs to an agency that Nemesis is out to eliminate," Evan said. "Which could mean Isaacs is an ally of ours."

"Possibly, but he could also be Russian, Interpol, or anything else, for that matter." Butler was looking more and more troubled. "As yet, we don't know Nemesis's goal, which is why we need to be extremely vigilant."

"You're sending us out on a fact-finding mission?"

"That's a Nemesis kill list, Evan, one that's destroyed the lives of three of our agents, and maybe two of theirs." He waved the sheet of paper. "This is not simply another group of netbot trolls. It's not just another terrorist organization. Nemesis is targeting Western clandestine agents. My intuition told me that you were the right one for the job. The only one."

Out of the corner of her eye, Evan noted Brenda standing in the doorway, silent as a shadow. How much had she heard? How much did she know?

“Go see Patrick Wilson, Evan.” Butler stepped closer, gripped her arm briefly. “See if you can find out what the hell has happened to him.” He nodded in Brenda’s direction. “She’s ready, Evan. Are you?”

Chapter Two

Evan, staring out the side window of the armored black Chevy Tahoe, was reminded of her history with Butler, of their work together in the field, and of the one time they had succumbed to the pain and loss that work sometimes rained down on them, and had had frenetic, sweaty comfort sex all night long in an anonymous hotel room in Berlin. She had made such poor decisions when it came to men. But none worse than Josh, to whom she had willingly given her heart, only to have him crush it. “I thought our love was forever,” she had said stupidly, naïvely. Only to have him respond: “Forever is fungible.” He was a high-powered lawyer. “I live in the moment and each succeeding moment changes.” It was positively, absolutely the worst, cruelest breakup, one she never in a million years could have imagined. A breakup that even to this day, four years later, made her feel as if she had been shot through the heart.

“How bad is the Toad?” she asked, trying to bring herself back to the present. I live in the moment and each moment changes.

“I think that’s for you to decide,” Brenda said, maneuvering deftly through the traffic flow. “And by the way thanks for that vote of confidence.”

Evan ignored her gentle dig. “But you’ve seen him—Wilson.”

“Afterward, I had nightmares for two nights running.”

Evan glanced at her. “That bad.”

Brenda shivered. Evan had seen Brenda on the field of battle, how fearless she was, and this made her wonder what was awaiting her in the Toad’s hospital room. Then she turned back to the window, her head filled with Butler. Their shared past was why she was here, why she had acquiesced to his request to come on board when he was given his own shop. He understood her. Understood her need to stay away from DC, her desire to have no permanent home, but rather live wherever her briefs took her. And it was imperative that she work, stay occupied, although it certainly wasn’t for the salary he paid her. She had long ago stashed away money—as well as other practical items—in a Cayman Islands account. More than she could ever spend in a lifetime. But then again she wasn’t a spender, material things had little meaning for her. She wasn’t, she reflected, much of anything. She was like a ghost, a walking, talking shell that every once in a while sprang into action, afterward retreating to her own netherworld, untouched, untouchable. That was the way she needed it, or, in any case, wanted it. She had learned over and over again that being intimate with others brought only misery, betrayal, and death.

Amid this wasted landscape there was Butler, always Butler, who lived in the shadowed margins as she did. And yet somehow he still managed to love his daughter, to be a good father. To be a complete human being. She envied him that, but she didn’t understand it.

They crossed the Potomac into Virginia. For the next twenty minutes Brenda took them south by southwest, along a highway, before exiting onto a secondary road, passing by tony enclaves of large homes, guarded, set off, an all too regular sign of nervousness and paranoia. Not long after they’d passed a large shopping center, the road went from a four-lane blacktop to a two-lane rural byway. There were no signs, no markers in this part of Virginia’s rolling hills, but Brenda obviously knew the way as she slowed and turned left onto an easily missable crushed stone lane.

“We’re here,” she said after a several bumpy minutes, pulling up before the entrance to a gated area that included a main building parking lot and heavily manicured grounds.

Brenda slid down her window, handed over a pair of ID passes. The guard checked them, peered in at her and at Evan, then nodded, handed them back.

“Spot 11,” he said, handing her an official slip. “Place this on the dash before you leave the vehicle.” The gates swung open, and Brenda eased the car along a wide paved drive bordered with cherry trees, bare now in their winter sleep. Ahead of them was a large, perfectly anonymous-looking structure, similar to other hospitals Evan had seen.

Brenda pulled the Tahoe into Spot 11, between a green Jaguar and a white Nissan Altima. As they got out, the chill air hit Evan’s face. She followed Brenda up the gold-veined granite steps to the entrance with its seeing-eye glass doors. There was no signage, no indication whatsoever as to what the building housed.

“Butler said this used to be called St. Agnes Charity Hospital,” Brenda said over her shoulder, “before it fell into disrepair and the feds bought it dirt cheap.”

They passed through the sliding electronic-eye doors. Showing their credentials at the front desk, they were assigned a nurse, who arrived at speed and walked them briskly down a carpeted hallway lined with closed doors, wood panels, and abstract paintings so generic they might have been Rorschach test rejects. The light was cool and indirect. In contrast with the institutional exterior, the repurposed interior had the feel of a five-star hotel.

The Toad was waiting for them in the library and from the get-go the optics were wrong. His hair was washed and pomaded, his cheeks so clean-shaven they shone in the lamplight. He wore cognac-colored corduroys, a clean white shirt with a starched collar, and a rep tie with an impeccable knot. A black wool blazer was draped over one arm of the upholstered chair in which he reposed, one leg over the other. In his left hand he held a cut crystal glass which appeared to hold three fingers of whiskey. By his left elbow was a small oval side table on which was a cut-glass decanter with more whiskey. He smiled when they were ushered in. The nurse did not walk them over, but vanished the moment they stepped into the room.

And what a room it was. Octagonal in shape, high in ceiling, with tall windows on three sides overlooking skeletal rear gardens which, apart from several yews, were showing their winter bones. Heavy velvet curtains framed the windows. Three walls were covered in mahogany shelves filled with books of every sort. The seventh wall was taken up by the kind of enormous fireplace usually found in hunting lodges deep in the woods. The only thing missing was a mounted deer or elk head above it. Instead, there was a wall of stones on which was hung a portrait of a religious nature. Possibly St. Agnes, though whether the cowed figure holding out a hand either in supplication or in warning was female or male was difficult to discern.

Patrick Wilson watched them approach with glittering eyes. It was only when Evan and her companion neared the Toad that the illusion of normality was shattered. Wilson’s eyes, once the same rich hue as his trousers, were now almost colorless. They reflected the light, making them appear depthless. And then there was his complexion, which was as pale and bloodless as moonlight, and almost as insubstantial.

Two chairs had been arranged facing him. Without waving them to sit, Wilson said, “The last time I saw you, Evan, you were a lot younger.”

“I don’t recall.” Given the effect he had had on Brenda, Evan was determined to make this interview as straightforward and businesslike as possible.

“Ah, yes. I remember now. Forgive me, I’m feeling a little peaked these days.” The Toad smelled strongly of a cheap cologne that was inadequate in masking both the alcohol on his breath and his body odor. “And looking a good deal worse.”

He hadn’t said a word to Brenda, hadn’t looked at her, hadn’t so much as acknowledged that she was even in the room with them.

“Wilson,” Evan said, seating herself, “we’ve come to find out what happened to you and where you were when it happened.”

Something akin to a shadow passed behind the Toad’s eyes.

“Wilson, eh?” Those colorless eyes turned canny. “Why don’t you call me Toad? Everyone else does.”

“I prefer your real name,” Evan said.

With that, the Toad’s demeanor brightened, he bared his teeth in the semblance of a smile. This was a mistake; they looked like bits of burnt toast. They reminded Evan of photos she’d seen of prisoners released from Dachau after World War II.

“Names. What are they, really? They only mask what’s underneath. The rotting self inside.”

Wilson took a long draught of his whiskey, rolling it around his mouth before swallowing noisily. “Back in the day I never much cared for this stuff,” he said, as if to no one in particular. “But now I’ve come back I’ve found an appreciation I never knew I had.”

“And where was that, Wilson? Where did you come back from?”

Wilson twitched. “Oh, many places, Evan. Many, many places.”

“Let’s start with the last place. Where were you when you were damaged?”

Wilson let go a croak of a laugh the way others pass gas. Another shadow seemed to move behind his eyes. “Damaged, is it? Oh, yes, I’m damaged all right. But not in any way these quacks and cranks can figure out. I’m an enigma to them, Evan. That should be familiar to you. You’re also an enigma to anyone you come in contact with. Nobody can figure you out.”

“Just answer my questions, Wilson.”

The Toad glugged more whiskey. The glass was all but empty. He reached for the decanter, Evan put a hand out to forestall him, but he batted it away. “This is my place,” Wilson said in a steely tone. “My rules.” His voice was full of needles as he bared his toasted teeth again. They looked loose, ready to fall out, as if he were ninety-five years old.

The Toad poured himself more whiskey. “But I shouldn’t be surprised.” As he placed the decanter back on the table, he threw Evan a sideways glance. “You always were afraid of the past, weren’t you?”

Evan was about to tell him how wrong he was, but the image of a red-brick monstrosity rose up in her mind, clear as if she had been there yesterday. She could almost hear the ravens shriek. Then her eyes refocused, and she saw Wilson peering at her with a curious, almost avid expression.

Without knowing why, Evan felt herself withdrawing, felt herself wanting to be far away from here, as if she couldn’t bear to be in the presence of this person one moment longer. She had to steel herself, had to remind herself that she was here for a purpose. She’d never cut and run from anything in her life; she wasn’t about to start now, no matter the bizarre effect the Toad was having on her.

“The last place you were—the last place you can remember—was it in the country, a city, what?”

“And ravens,” the Toad said. “Don’t forget those fucking ravens.” A muscle in one cheek began to spasm. “Where’s that place, Evan? I don’t remember.”

Chapter Three

At this time of day the church was all but deserted. The morning Mass had been given, the choir practice wasn't scheduled until 3 p.m. One or two penitents could be seen in the pews, heads bowed over clasped hands. A smattering of tourists standing in the rear. And a security detail.

"Ah, Mr. Secretary, I hoped I'd find you here," Riley Rivers said.

"You're in big trouble, meeting me like this," Brady Thompson said, waving away one of the security suits. "Get the fuck out of here."

Thompson was Secretary of Defense. Unlike with other presidents, this POTUS used Thompson, rather than the CI heads, as his sole advisor on intelligence matters. He alone had a direct pipeline to the president. He listened to others, skimmed their daily reports, but acted only on Thompson's say-so.

"I'm the newest member of our snug little cadre here in America. I have a control back in Moscow same as you."

Thompson looked to the left, at an enormous painting of the Assumption. To his right was an old-fashioned wooden pulpit straight out of Moby Dick. He felt a shiver run down his spine; he never felt comfortable in churches. He was a lifelong politician; politics was his religion.

"Talking directly to me is way above your pay grade." His lips barely moved, and he hadn't so much as glanced at Rivers since the other had sat down beside him. "Go," he said. "Now."

Rivers made to get up, then changed his mind, plunked his butt back onto the pew. "The thing is—the reason I sought you out, Mr. Secretary—I have an idea I think you'll like very much."

Thompson sighed. This kid was like a no-see-um you couldn't get rid of. Might as well humor him, he thought. "What is it?"

"OOC," Rivers said with a sly smile.

An older woman rose, threaded her way up the center aisle. Thompson waited until the church door shut behind her before he said in a harsher tone than he had intended, "What the fuck is OOC."

"The Office of Official Communications."

Thompson cocked his head. "There is no such thing."

"Not today, there isn't," Rivers told him. "But tomorrow's another day."

"Okay," Thompson said slowly. "So what is OCC, and what does it mean to me?"

Rivers told him the barest outline. "I'll need fifty million," he said in conclusion. "To start."

Thompson was on the verge of laughing. "You're out of your mind."

"Just hear me out," Rivers said.

And he did.

* * *

It was a snap for Thompson to summon the White House's director of communications. Dan Derry was a harried-looking man with thinning, sandy hair, flushed cheeks, and a mouth pursed in a perpetual expression of hauteur that reminded Thompson of the Russian

Sovereign's demeanor of choice. His hands were as small as a child's, the fingers constantly in motion, drumming on the tablecloth, fiddling with a fork, tapping the bowl of a spoon against the stem of his glass, until Thompson was compelled to say, "Stop! For the love of Christ, Dan, stop." Derry withdrew his hands, held them in his lap. His right leg started to pump up and down as if he were about to jump on a bike and peddle out of town.

They were installed at a banquet at the rear of the Thompson's favorite steak house, a power lunch spot on Pennsylvania Avenue. Management always had a table for him, even if he walked in at the height of the lunch or dinner hours.

The two men sat across from each other. At Thompson's suggestion they were drinking gin and tonics out of season because the place made the best gin and tonics inside the Beltway. The large menu cards lay at their respective right elbows.

"What's up with you, anyway, Dan?" Thompson said in his most solicitous voice, though he knew perfectly well what was up.

"Mr. Secretary, this damn barrage of negative press is coming so fast and furious it's all my office can do to keep the items away from POTUS." He ran a hand across his moist brow. "I'm beginning to feel like the post office on Mother's Day, except what I have to deal with twenty-four-seven is fake news. Propaganda, actually. From the Deep State."

"Condolences." Thompson shrugged, cased the room, saw a justice with his flock of clerks, a couple of representatives from opposing parties, seated on opposite sides of the room. Three members of the White House press corps huddled at one end of the bar like Roman senators in the Forum on the Ides of March. The knives were indeed out. "But what can you do except work harder?"

"We're already at the breaking point," Derry said morosely. "What I need is something to pull me out of the deep end. I'm drowning here."

Thompson picked up the menu, pretending to study it, frowning. "Get POTUS to rustle up some appropriations from Congress."

"You must be joking. What with the way the fighting on the Hill is going. I'm dreading the moment fisticuffs break out." Derry shook his head. "Plus which, even if I could get that done, to do it I would have to explain to POTUS things no one in the White House wants him to know."

This was nothing that Thompson didn't already know when he'd made the lunch date. "I think I'll have the shell steak. And a Cobb salad first," he said without looking up from the menu. "What about you?"

"Oh, please, I haven't the stomach for lunch."

"Maybe you don't have the stomach to protect POTUS from these outlandish lies." Thompson's voice was like the point of a knife.

Derry froze. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It means that if you're going to be POTUS's champion you've got to find another way."

Derry snorted. "Like what? I can't get the appropriations committee to move off the proverbial dime."

"I can think of a way," Thompson said. "A damn good way."

Derry arched one eyebrow. "Really, Mr. Secretary? Like what exactly?"

"A little operation to spread our own brand of propaganda."

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“How about I order this meal for both of us.” It wasn’t a question. Thompson summoned the waiter, gave their order, and when the waiter had taken away the menus, said, “What if I can get you the funding?”

Derry reacted as if the Secretary of Defense had stuck a live wire into his ear. “Can you?”

“It’s possible.”

Derry, firmly on the hook now, said, “What would make it probable?”

“You would have to be dead serious.”

“Of course I’m dead serious. Jesus, man, my tit’s in the fire. People in the White House want me gone. I can’t have that. I won’t.”

Thompson, rather than the CI heads, as his sole advisor on intelligence matters. He alone had a direct pipeline to the president. He listened to others, skimmed their daily reports, but acted only on Thompson’s say-so.

“I’m the newest member of our snug little cadre here in America. I have a control back in Moscow same as you.”

Thompson looked to the left, at an enormous painting of the Assumption. To his right was an old-fashioned wooden pulpit straight out of Moby Dick. He felt a shiver run down his spine; he never felt comfortable in churches. He was a lifelong politician; politics was his religion.

“Talking directly to me is way above your pay grade.” His lips barely moved, and he hadn’t so much as glanced at Rivers since the other had sat down beside him. “Go,” he said. “Now.”

Rivers made to get up, then changed his mind, plunked his butt back onto the pew. “The thing is—the reason I sought you out, Mr. Secretary—I have an idea I think you’ll like very much.”

Thompson sighed. This kid was like a no-see-um you couldn’t get rid of. Might as well humor him, he thought. “What is it?”

“OOC,” Rivers said with a sly smile.

An older woman rose, threaded her way up the center aisle. Thompson waited until the church door shut behind her before he said in a harsher tone than he had intended, “What the fuck is OOC.”

“The Office of Official Communications.”

Thompson cocked his head. “There is no such thing.”

“Not today, there isn’t,” Rivers told him. “But tomorrow’s another day.”

“Okay,” Thompson said slowly. “So what is OCC, and what does it mean to me?”

Rivers told him the barest outline. “I’ll need fifty million,” he said in conclusion. “To start.”

Thompson was on the verge of laughing. “You’re out of your mind.”

“Just hear me out,” Rivers said.

And he did.

* * *

It was a snap for Thompson to summon the White House’s director of communications. Dan Derry was a harried-looking man with thinning, sandy hair, flushed cheeks, and a mouth pursed in a perpetual expression of hauteur that reminded Thompson of the Russian Sovereign’s demeanor of choice. His hands were as small as a child’s, the fingers

constantly in motion, drumming on the tablecloth, fiddling with a fork, tapping the bowl of a spoon against the stem of his glass, until Thompson was compelled to say, "Stop! For the love of Christ, Dan, stop." Derry withdrew his hands, held them in his lap. His right leg started to pump up and down as if he were about to jump on a bike and peddle out of town.

They were installed at a banquette at the rear of the Thompson's favorite steak house, a power lunch spot on Pennsylvania Avenue. Management always had a table for him, even if he walked in at the height of the lunch or dinner hours.

The two men sat across from each other. At Thompson's suggestion they were drinking gin and tonics out of season because the place made the best gin and tonics inside the Beltway. The large menu cards lay at their respective right elbows.

"What's up with you, anyway, Dan?" Thompson said in his most solicitous voice, though he knew perfectly well what was up.

"Mr. Secretary, this damn barrage of negative press is coming so fast and furious it's all my office can do to keep the items away from POTUS." He ran a hand across his moist brow. "I'm beginning to feel like the post office on Mother's Day, except what I have to deal with twenty-four-seven is fake news. Propaganda, actually. From the Deep State."

"Condolences." Thompson shrugged, cased the room, saw a justice with his flock of clerks, a couple of representatives from opposing parties, seated on opposite sides of the room. Three members of the White House press corps huddled at one end of the bar like Roman senators in the Forum on the Ides of March. The knives were indeed out. "But what can you do except work harder?"

"We're already at the breaking point," Derry said morosely. "What I need is something to pull me out of the deep end. I'm drowning here."

Thompson picked up the menu, pretending to study it, frowning. "Get POTUS to rustle up some appropriations from Congress."

"You must be joking. What with the way the fighting on the Hill is going. I'm dreading the moment fisticuffs break out." Derry shook his head. "Plus which, even if I could get that done, to do it I would have to explain to POTUS things no one in the White House wants him to know."

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“Good man.” Thompson sipped at his gin and tonic. Patrons were drifting slowly from the bar to their tables, their conversations jocular or secretive. “You’ll create a separate office of . . . well, you know . . .” he leaned forward, said in a whisper, “counter-propaganda.”

Derry thought for a moment. “Are you involved?”

“Not at all,” Thompson said. “We never had this conversation.” He cocked his head. “How’s your wife, by the way?”

“Betty’s fine, thank you. So are Rose and Philip.”

Thompson nodded. “Are you ready to move on the idea? Immediately?”

Derry nodded eagerly, with the avidity of a vulture first on the scene of a roadkill. But he would’ve nodded to most anything Thompson said now, seeing as how it would save him from going under for the last time.

Thompson appeared to be deep in contemplation. “Who would you get to run it—the nuts and bolts of it, I mean?”

“Well, Mr. Secretary, I’d need someone who’s IT savvy, who has connections across the internet.”

“As it happens,” Thompson said, just as the Cobb salads arrived, “I have the very man.”

Chapter Four

Brenda looked from the Toad to Evan. “What ravens?”

“What ravens, she says?” Pat Wilson’s smile was as crooked as his teeth. It was the first time he’d acknowledged Brenda’s existence. He still hadn’t looked at her though. He blinked; it was as if she were nothing more than a speck, an irritant caught in the corner of his eye. Then, all at once, he lunged toward her. As she recoiled, Evan left her seat, caught Wilson’s clawed hands before he could reach her.

As Evan gently but firmly pressed him back into his chair, Wilson said in a venomous voice: “The ravens that picked me apart. That’s what ravens.”

Evan stared at the Toad, silent, while Brenda gathered her composure; no wonder she had nightmares about him. There was something seriously off about Wilson, something alien. Wherever he had been last—whatever had been done to him—had changed him significantly and most probably irrevocably. He seemed to exist in another land, unseen, unimagined.

At length, Brenda cleared her throat. “Evan, what’s he talking about?”

“I’ve no idea.”

“But you will, Evan.” Wilson’s smile cracked his face open like the shell of a rotten egg. “It’s my firm belief you will.”

Evan leaned forward, elbows on knees. “Why is that, Wilson?”

“You never fail, Evan. Never, ever. Everyone knows. Everyone.”

“What do the ravens mean to you?” Evan said, trying to shift the conversation away from herself. Brenda looked lost, but she couldn’t help that.

“Death,” Wilson said. “And another life.”

“Another life?”

“The one I have now. In here. In this room. Drinking this whiskey.”

“Don’t you want to get out of here?” Brenda said. “Don’t you want to get better?”

“I am better. Better than.” The Toad, staring fixedly at Evan, spoke without conviction. “And, no, I’m quite content here.”

“Why?” Evan said. “How can you be content here?”

Wilson said nothing for such a long time Brenda began to fidget, her hands scraping back and forth along the arms of her chair.

“Here I’m safe,” he said finally.

“Safe from what?” Evan’s voice had turned urgent.

“From them.”

“The ravens?” Brenda asked.

“Of course the ravens,” he spat with the same venom as before. “What else?”

“I don’t understand. How did the ravens hurt you?” Evan said with grave intensity.

The Toad remained mute, but the pain behind his eyes spoke for him.

“Wilson, I need to know.”

“They pecked at my brain,” Wilson said, his voice suddenly silky, drifting as if on a tide of his own imagination. “As they will at yours.”

“Let’s stop this right here,” Brenda said, moving out of her chair so that she stood between Evan and the Toad. “You’ve had your demented version of fun, Wilson. The time has come to stop talking in riddles and give us some straight answers.”

“Listen to her!” Wilson crowed. “All cocky just like a man!” As she drew her right arm back to smack him, Evan pulled her away, stood with her in a shadowed corner, holding her gaze until she calmed down. She was clearly a talented agent, agile and quick-witted in the field, but when it came to reading people she was still raw. She had yet to learn to take the temperature of people, to control her first impulses and not allow them to get under her skin.

Leaving Brenda to consider her sins, Evan stepped back to the Toad. “You had better explain yourself, Wilson.”

The Toad sighed. It wasn’t one of those theatrical sighs, but one of genuine exhaustion. “It’s the old bean, I’m afraid.” He tapped the side of his head with a crooked forefinger. “Something rather dreadful has been done to it.” His moods seemed as unpredictable as they were mercurial.

“In what way?” Evan asked.

“The ravens . . .” The glass of whiskey crashed to the floor. “Death.” Wilson began to convulse.

“Wilson!” Evan gripped the agent’s arms, felt spasms running up and down them as if a knot of snakes were uncoiling beneath his skin. “Pat!”

Brenda ran to the door, calling out for a doctor.

The Toad’s eyes were rolling up, spittle flecked his lips, drooled down his chin. When he spoke, his voice was a dry rattle. “What . . . whatever was done to me . . . you’ve seen them . . .” With what appeared a supreme effort his eyes focused on Evan in a moment—possibly the last moment—of lucidity. “You’ll fail, Evan. This time you’ll fail. And if you don’t stop, your brain will get eaten too.” A gout of blood erupted from his mouth.

Then hands were peeling Evan away as a coven of doctors, nurses, and strong-armed orderlies transferred Pat Wilson to a gurney, strapped him down, and as quickly as possible rushed him out of the library.

For a long, silent moment Evan and Brenda stood looking at each other.

“What did he say,” Brenda said at length, “at the end?”

Evan shook her head, then swung it away, to the view of the withered garden visible through the windows. The day had moved on; no sunlight reached the barren trees. The yews seemed made of brass. Nothing stirred, not a bird, not a breeze. Nothing at all.

* * *

Outside, they climbed silently into the Tahoe. When Evan got behind the wheel Brenda did not protest. The day was failing, the chill turned icy. The parking lot was windswept, grit whirling in ascending cones. They sat side by side. Evan did not seem inclined to go anywhere or even start the engine. It was possible that Brenda was in some form of shock.

“What the hell happened in there?” she said at last. Her teeth were chattering slightly. She turned to look at Evan. “I know he said something to you before he was carted away. What was it?”

Evan felt as if her mind and body were moving through melting ice. The hands on the wheel seemed to belong to someone else. They were frigid. There was something about those ravens.

She shrugged. “Nothing intelligible.”

“I’m not so sure I believe you.”

“Believe what you want. It won’t change what happened.”

“No, it won’t.” She tossed her head impatiently. “How d’you expect us to have a working relationship—”

“We don’t have a working relationship,” Evan said. “I work alone.”

“But Butler said—”

“I know very well what Butler said.” Evan hadn’t meant to snap. But there it was. Pat had unnerved her—him and his bloody ravens. And now that she’d seen Pat in the flesh, seen what had been done to him, what his presence had done to Brenda, she was not about to put Brenda in harm’s way. Not this time; not with what was happening here.

Brenda regarded Evan darkly. “You aren’t doing yourself any favors by cutting yourself off like this, you know.”

“That’s not for you to say,” she retorted. She felt raw, as if her insides had been scraped by a scalpel.

“Jesus, Evan,” Brenda said, clearly irritated. “It’s a thankless job, but someone has to.”

Evan turned halfway toward the other woman. “Listen, there’s nothing more for us to discuss.”

“And what will we tell Butler?”

When the white Nissan Altima disintegrated, it did so in a hundredth of a second. Leaving her question blown away in the shock wave. The explosion was so powerful it shattered all the glass on the front of the former St. Agnes’s façade. As for the Tahoe, the blast crumpled the entire driver’s side as it lifted the SUV off its tires, flipped it over, and slammed it down onto the top of the green Jaguar parked in the space on the passenger’s side.