

Chapter Two

Jeremiah Jones stared at the sentinel camera until he heard the slight click of the door unlocking itself. Then he opened the door and stepped into Elias Leach's office, where multicolored lights imparted a sunset glow to the room.

Eli stood up from behind his desk, turned to his elderly cleaning lady, Mrs. Harris, and said, "That will be all, Manyara."

Mrs. Harris muttered something about nonsense and secrets as she shuffled over to her cart. "Leave you two bigshots to ruin the world," she said as she wheeled the cart out the door, shaking her head.

Eli chuckled as he gestured for Jeremiah to take a seat. "Couldn't get along without her. Her incessant insults keep me grounded." Then he moved across the office to a small divan opposite the chair Jeremiah took.

Jeremiah studied him. Forty years older than Jeremiah's forty-two, Eli stood five-feet, two-inches tall. The hair atop his head had long vanished, leaving only a white fringe around the edges. He'd mentioned once that he chose not to re-grow his hair or his body, though he could have done so quite easily, because he wanted people to know that appearance was unimportant. Yet Jeremiah knew he was sensitive about his height too, rarely standing in the presence of others. Sitting on the sofa he looked almost childlike—certainly not threatening. He loved to cultivate an avuncular air. In conversation, his eyelids often drooped, as if he were half asleep, but Jeremiah knew better than to assume that Eli was ever anything but fully alert. Today he wore a red cardigan and dark brown pants, and sat with his legs crossed, one finger tapping lightly on the arm of the sofa.

He was the most dangerous man Jeremiah had ever met.

He was also the brightest. He ran CINTEP—the Center for International Economic Policy—an independent organization ostensibly working to open free markets worldwide. In reality that was a secondary

aim. Under the direction of Elias Leach, CINTEP eliminated dictatorial regimes, fought terrorism, engaged in espionage and developed strategies to ensure the political and economic dominance of America around the globe. Jeremiah had been a field agent—a ghost—then Head of Operations. But after Joshua was kidnapped he worked only haphazardly, as a consultant, while he devoted the bulk of his time to searching for his son. He'd been in and out of uncounted government buildings and databases in the past four years; he'd searched orphanages, shelters and schools; so far he'd found nothing.

"How've you been?"

"I'm fine," Jeremiah answered.

"Have you got Jack Marschenko?"

Jeremiah furrowed his brow. "Marschenko?"

"Come now, Jeremiah. Richard Carlton's been calling me constantly. Somebody broke into his computer system last month, downloaded archival vid footage and exited the system without leaving a trace as to his whereabouts. He thinks it was you."

"Why?"

"Carlton claims he finally recovered the footage you were seeking, the feed that was supposedly damaged beyond repair. It puts Marschenko at the park where your son disappeared. He says you're the only one who was seeking access to it, so you must have been the hacker. He's furious, wants you arrested."

Jeremiah shrugged. "He can't prove anything."

"I'm worried about you, Jeremiah. Carlton Security runs the Elite Ops. If Richard Carlton decides you had something to do with Marschenko's disappearance, he'll sic his troopers on you like the wrath of God. I don't want to lose my Head of Operations."

"Former Head of Operations," Jeremiah corrected him. "I'm still on leave. And the Elite Ops are soldiers. They'll comply with the rule of law."

"Marschenko didn't...if he took Joshua. Listen, Jeremiah, although the Elite Ops are technically government employees, Carlton Security owns all their equipment, all the software. More of the privatization

STEVE MCELLISTREM

of the military. And with all that hardware in their bodies,” Eli shivered, “all the hormones and proteins and programmed nanobots, who knows how they’ll react to somebody snatching one of their own?”

“What did you tell Carlton?”

“I told that asshole nothing. He stonewalled us for a long time on the vid feed from the park, saying it was damaged beyond repair.”

“I still can’t figure why the Elite Ops took Joshua.”

“I don’t know, Jeremiah. For the last four years I’ve kept my ears open. I’ve checked every source I have for anything that might help locate your son. There’s been no hint of his whereabouts.”

“I appreciate your help,” Jeremiah said. He fought to keep his voice under control. Privately he wondered just how much Eli had done. If Eli cared about Joshua’s disappearance, it was only because of the impact that event had on Jeremiah’s ability to run Operations. All Eli ever concerned himself with was making sure the job got done. Jeremiah shook his head. “It doesn’t make any sense. No ransom, no demands. Nothing.”

Eli’s hands spread apart. “Maybe Marschenko acted alone.”

Jeremiah got to his feet and began pacing. He took measured breaths. Calming breaths. “Marschenko’s no perv. This wasn’t some random event. Whoever sent Marschenko knew I was a ghost. Somebody with high sources in the government.”

Eli shook his head. “It wasn’t that.”

“How can you be sure?”

“If Joshua’s kidnapping was ordered by someone highly placed, I would know. Jeremiah, please. Stop making yourself crazy. You can’t blame yourself for Joshua’s kidnapping. Sooner or later Marschenko will tell you what he knows. Meanwhile, I have a job for you.”

“What kind of job?”

“A field assignment of vital importance.”

“Aren’t they all?”

“Yes.” Eli smiled briefly and gestured for Jeremiah to sit. Jeremiah remained standing. “The President herself will be joining us any moment now.”

THE DEVEREAUX DILEMMA

“The President’s coming here?”

“She’ll be on projection,” Eli said.

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