

ONE

The swirling black clouds engulfed the entire sky except for the space right above his head where the reluctant swollen red sun remained within his arm's reach. As he stood on top of the mountain, Peter saw thousands and thousands of people below, screaming and wailing as they clawed their way to the top of the pile of bodies. He could see their faces but did not recognize anyone. They suffered miserably. Most cried or screamed incessantly. Some coughed and gagged on blood and sputum as they fell to the side as others worked their way up toward Peter. Then he saw her crying. Bending to his hands and knees, he stretched and extended as far as he could, but could not reach her.

Without warning, his body was cast away by a shockwave bursting from blinding light followed by fire. Then the wave pulled him back to the flame which disappeared into the blinding light. The light vanished. He was back on the mountain again. He no longer heard the wailing or screaming. He did not hear her crying either. When he looked back down the mountain, he realized to his own horror why only silence remained.

Peter abruptly sat up in bed. He was startled and even a little sweaty. It took a half a second for him to become aware of his surroundings. Sara still rested silently by his side. Her blond hair barely covered her angelic features so that Peter could still see her button nose and her soft cheek with its slightly golden tint. Her left hand was on top of the pillow revealing her claddagh wedding band. As Peter gently brushed the rest of her hair from her face, the horrors of his nightmare dissipated and the sweet memories of his wedding, and wedding night, filled his head.

"Don't even think about it," Sara said as a baby's cry erupted from the next room. "And it's your turn."

Taking heed of the vow of obedience he took eighteen months ago, Peter rose from his bed to see which one of the twins was crying. It had to be Fitz. John Fitzgerald Farrell was always the vocal one, just like his

namesake, Peter's late bother. Nola was the quiet one. Even Fitz's bout with pyloric stenosis, when he was crying and vomiting, didn't disturb Nola's nightly slumber, until she started with the same symptoms. Although identical to her brother physically in everything but sex, Nola's consistently serene attitude evidenced a calmness that Peter guessed would stay with her for the rest of her life.

The twins' room was next to the master bedroom in their Georgetown flat, so Peter did not have to walk far to discover that his daughter, Finola, was the culprit crying. He kissed her on the forehead as he picked her up. Despite a fear of the unknown, Peter swallowed up the parenting role hook, line, and sinker. It's not that he was one of those consummate bachelors who feared settling down behind a white picket fence, he just did not know better. His only exposure to kids was his nieces Catherine and Maggie, but other than those two, the only thing he knew about kids was that they liked chocolate at Halloween, which was not exactly the ideal resumé for fatherhood.

"Shhh, little one," he whispered. "Everything is all right. Dad's right here for you."

Peter slowly rocked her back and forth humming the theme from Rocky. Not surprisingly, what worked for the brother did not work for the sister. From the Post-it he attached to the changing table, he knew that Nola had eaten about an hour ago. Tossing the note into the diaper pail, he chuckled to himself thinking that Sara would kill him if he ever started putting Post-its on the kids for reminders. He finished changing Nola's diaper and brought her to the front of the house, so the other half of the family could continue with their Sunday afternoon naps.

As he walked down the narrow hallway, cradling his daughter tightly to his muscular chest, Peter stopped.

"Nola, there's your Grandpa Sean and your Grandma Ann. They are in Heaven now, but I'll make sure you know everything about them, so you can pass them on to your grandchildren."

The framed color photograph on the wall had been taken during their annual family vacation at the Lake of the Ozarks almost a year before his mother was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. His parents' bright smiles, twinkling eyes, full, thick heads of Irish gray hair, and slightly tanned and toned bodies misrepresented what the future held for the couple. Fifteen months later his mother had lost all her hair, dropped to ninety pounds, and only a faint twinkle in her eye could be found when she found the

energy to smile at the sight of Peter. The two were always close, and Peter never hid the fact that he was his mother's son. As a quiet, shy little boy, he never had the chance to talk because his older brother answered every question before Peter could speak his mind. But during his long walks with his mother, it was different. She just listened as they strolled for hours every Saturday along the paths of Forest Park as Peter detailed every minute of his school week or regaled her with the play by play from his soccer games. He missed her. He missed both his parents.

Upon reaching the family room, Peter put in a Dave Brubeck CD and did a little dance with his daughter before sitting in a rocking chair by the window. As he rocked back and forth, he hummed along. Just as the combo was bringing "Take Five" to a close, his cell phone rang to the tune of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." The call could be coming from only one place.

"Hello?"

"Peter Farrell?"

"Yes?"

"This is the White House operator. I have an urgent call from the president. I am putting her through."

"Peter," President Madeleine Scholfield began, "I need a favor."

*

From the observation platform on Coit Tower above Telegraph Hill, a man watched the seagulls fly high above San Francisco Bay. His stern look, closely cropped, dirty blond hair, and black mock turtleneck, which clung tightly to his chest under a tan trench coat, gave the man the look of a model posing for a GAP or Banana Republic ad. But looking pretty was the furthest thing from his mind. He was watching the seagulls. The dirty, disease-infested birds were rivaled only their city-side cousins, the pigeons, on his list of least desirable creatures on the planet. He checked his sleeves to make sure he hadn't leaned into any bird crap.

Yes, he was in a foul mood again, but this time it was an excuse. Tomorrow would mark the anniversary of her death. As he flipped a locket between his fingers like a poker chip, he understood that there was no one to tell him to move on because no one knew about Helen. Hell, over the past decade and a half, only a few people were aware of his God-given name. Moreover, neither he nor Helen had any family left. She had some

friends in Paris, but he had long since fallen out of touch with them. Plus her friends spoke French, and Sebastian Pope always avoided speaking French. Even the sound of the language stirred up emotions that he fervently repressed. Helen's death was too much of a motivator for him given the occupation he had chosen. And yes, he did choose it. Since someone had taken the only one he loved, he was expected, no entitled, to inflict his pain on others. Violence beget violence. Death beget death. The irony was not lost on Pope that the terrorist who murdered Helen also lost his family as a result of violence. That terrorist would not end this cycle, nor would he, because not only was he good at killing, but killing was good for him. With every completed assignment, a sense of accomplishment filled the void inside of him, if only for a moment. That is how he convinced himself to wake up in the morning. Well, that and the fact that every time he woke up in the morning it gave him another chance to end his life.

*

As Peter waited for the president to call back on his cell phone, his unlisted landline rang. With the ringer off in the back of the house and Nola now asleep in her crib, Peter let it ring. He didn't want to be in the middle of another conversation when the president called back.

His cell phone vibrated, but there was no tune. An unlisted number. Peter needed to clear the line.

"Hello."

"Mr. Farrell, I presume" inquired the English voice on the other end.

It was not the president, but another voice from his past.

Peter hung up as a chill raced up his spine. Not again. Not with Sara. Not with the twins. He set the phone down on the coffee table.

After less than a minute of deafening silence, his cell phone played the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" as it vibrated across the coffee table.

"Peter."

It was Roland Miller, the "counselor to the presidents," who had the ear of the presidency for the past fifty years but had his eye on Peter ever since the young lawyer saved his life two years ago. Peter, on the other hand, had little desire to be Roland's, or anyone's, political apprentice.

"Yes, Roland?"

"You are on speakerphone with the president."

“Good afternoon, again, Madame President.”

“Sorry I was so short with you before,” President Madeleine Scholfield responded before she continued. “Take that call, Peter.”

“I know, M’am. I just did not want to miss your call?”

“At least someone still ranks me at the top,” commented the president before she returned to Peter. “He will call back, and when he does, find out what you can for Roland, and then meet with Roland.”

“Peter,” Roland interjected, “we don’t know what the CIR is up to, but I want to find out. Your phone is being monitored, so I will be right there with you. So hang up and wait.”

The Englishman was not only a spokesman for the Council on International Relations, or the “CIR” for those Washingtonians who spoke in acronyms, but he was a member of their elite Executive Board, the CIR’s inner sanctum. The CIR described itself as “a consortium which represents global interests.” The organization had a public profile, but its activities were not well-known. After the United States refused to join the League of Nations following World War I, representatives of American financial dynasties met with their British counterparts to discuss ideas on global stability. The crash of the Market led to further meetings and to the formation of what we now call the Council on International Relations. In the beginning, they sought to ensure global stability to promote their own financial stability. With industrial development thriving on both sides of the Atlantic during and after World War II, the Council flourished and its members came to include the wealthiest and most influential people in the world. With the advent of the Cold War, the membership began to meet secretly several times a year. Secrecy was born not only out of the Red Scare, but to avoid the appearance that these elite members of society somehow manipulated world events. However that was exactly what a small band of members had in mind. Over time, these few CIR members began to implement many global policies. The Englishman was a part of this core group.

Five minutes passed: no call. Peter paced back and forth over the faux Persian rug. He turned on the television, only to turn it off again a minute later. He walked over to the window and surveyed his quiet Georgetown neighborhood. Cars were parked on either side of the street, but there was no outside activity. For an early Sunday evening it was awfully quiet. Peter turned around and stared at his phone on the coffee table. He had not heard the Englishman’s voice since he left the West Wing. In fact, Roland

had not even brought up the CIR since he, the president, and Miller argued about the group last Christmas.

His cell phone vibrated and slowly moved across the table.

“Hello.”

“My dear Peter, we must work on your manners.”

“What do you want?”

“I need you again, Peter.” The Englishman, with his flare for the dramatic paused, then continued, “We all need you, Peter.”

“What are you talking about?”

“As we speak, I am transferring a new file to Roland which will supplement what I already sent him. It contains preliminary information that your government already has ignored, but hopefully this information will convince your friends to send you to me.”

“What?”

“I’ll be staying at the Kensington. You know the place, Peter. Roland, I know you are eavesdropping. Please make sure Mr. Farrell gets here as soon as possible.” After another dramatic pause he continued, “Oh, and Peter, please give my best to your lovely bride.”

The Englishman hung up abruptly, leaving Peter staring at the scar on his neck in the adjacent mirror’s reflection. That wound was the reason he left the White House. He had already served his country, and now it was time for him to start a new life with his family. Eager to put the past behind him, Peter returned to the hallway decorated with family photos and concentrated on a picture of him and Sara holding the twins up high under the Gateway Arch in St. Louis. Pulling his silver St. Peter’s medallion from underneath his tee shirt, he turned back to his parents’ family vacation photo, stared at his mother, and rubbed the medal. She had told him that if he ever doubted whether he was making the right choice, to rub the silver medallion three times to remind him to take his time with important decisions. He did.

“The Battle Hymn of the Republic” played again.

“Peter, it’s Roland again. The president is still here, but she has to go.”

“Peter,” President Scholfield began, “look at this CIR angle for Roland. What would you say if I asked you to go to San Francisco for me?”

“I serve at the president’s pleasure.”

TWO

Sebastian Pope entered The Bank of Ireland Pub, a local gem hidden at the end of an alley just shy of San Francisco's Chinatown. He ordered a pint from the bartender, Glennon, who was the kind of bartender that could feed the special needs of his patrons and the guests staying at the trendy hotel around the corner. Tickets for concerts and sporting events were his specialty, though he was also adept at fulfilling requests of a more nefarious nature.

"Is it open?"

Glennon nodded.

Pope walked the length of the bar, looked around, then continued half-way down the hall to a beat up wooden confessional located between the bar and the Hibernian room. He sat down so that he had a view through the small archway to the entrance. His appointment would be entering right below the EXIT sign. Pope surveyed the surroundings from his vantage point. No one was in the Hibernian room since it was still too early for dinner. Other than Glennon, there were only seven others in the dimly lit bar area which was decorated with bolted down, framed, black and white photos, newspaper clippings, and rugby posters hanging on the brick walls. Three men sat at the bar carefully spaced away from one another to avoid casual conversation yet still able to comment on the soccer match on the television, if warranted.

Pope refolded Friday's edition of the International Tribune Herald so that the headlines were back on the outside. In bold type, the headline read: CHINA RATTLES SABER (Hong Kong, AP). He read the first two sentences.

In what has been described as a slow response to Taiwan's declaration of independence, President Guan Jingwei, with Premier Li Zhou at his side, announced without explanation that the long standing policy of "one country, two systems" would not be jeopardized by Taiwan's recent declarations of independence and that any illegal action would be dealt with swiftly and appropriately. Experts opine that the presence

of the moderate Li on the same podium with the octogenarian ultra conservative Guan marks a compromise between the two on the Taiwan issue.....

Same old shit.

He checked his cell phone. Even though most analysts considered him “old” and “ready to be put out to pasture,” Pope knew he would soon get a call just to check in; they always did at this time of year. He was older than most of the analysts, and he was also slower and less agile than others in his line of work. However, he made up for it in experience. The twenty-five-year-old version of him was stronger and faster, yet that person had no chance against the efficient killer he had now become. That was the reason why they would still call. That, and the fact that they were over-extended and still needed everyone they could get, no matter what baggage the agent carried with him. No one could afford the shit to hit the fan again.

He intentionally avoided the article in the bottom right corner of the front page. At first glance he knew he didn’t want to go there. A Paris labor strike had paralyzed the country’s transportation system with trains immobile for the fourth straight day.

Paris-Helen. Helen-Paris.

Helen was the gentle one, and as a couple they were full of contradictions. Pope’s tall, muscular build dwarfed Helen’s petite frame. Pope’s hazel eyes were hardly noticeable as they changed from blue to gray to green depending on what he was wearing. On the other hand, Helen’s doe-like brown eyes attracted everyone’s attention when she entered a room. She had attended the best schools in New England before pursuing a PhD at the Pasteur Institute. Home-schooled his entire life, Pope never set foot in a classroom, but that fact never curbed his passion for history, especially military history. Helen enjoyed the classics, Mozart, Bach, Schubert... He listened to techno, hip hop, and every kind of club music, even the Euro-techno music that he became addicted to when he lived above that small Montparnasse night club called Xanadu where he bartended four nights a week. Paris is where he found himself drifting off to, again and again.

After traveling for months across Europe, he settled in Paris. Europe was an escape from an empty Savannah mansion that awaited him after he ended his tour in the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany. He was finishing a morning ritualistic run around the Montparnasse cemetery down Boulevard

Pasteur past the Ecole Militaire along the Champ de Mars around the Eiffel Tower to the Seine and back again. Helen was watching the attendant spray down the café sidewalk as she stepped wide of the splashing water. A cyclist, oblivious to the world around him with heavy metal music blasting through his headphones, cut the corner and glanced into Helen with his shoulder, causing her to spin to the ground. Pope, only a few steps behind the cyclist, ran to Helen to see if she was alright.

“Ca va a toi?”

“American?”

“Red, white and blue.”

“Those are French colors, too.”

“But not in that order.”

As Pope helped her up from the ground, he lost himself in her big brown eyes.

“Are you ok?”

“Yes, thank you.” She wiped some dust off her sleeve. “Here I am in a city that boasts that it has the most romantic men, and a fellow American comes to my rescue.”

“We’ve been saving people in this country for almost a hundred years, and now I can see why?”

“My name is Helen, thank you.”

“I’m Sebastian.”

“I like that name.”

“I would offer to buy you a coffee, but...” Pope motioned with his hands displaying his sweaty body, tee shirt, and shorts.

“Oh, I’m late anyway, thank you.”

Helen started to walk away.

“Wait a second,” Pope caught up to her. He took out one of the club’s promotional business cards that he was supposed to tuck under the wipers of expensive cars. “Call me here or stop by the club.”

Helen took his card and smiled.

As she walked away, Pope shouted again, “Call me!”

Helen turned her head and smiled again.

She did not call, but Helen and a friend of hers showed up at Xanadu a week later on Disco Night. Helen displayed a simple sophistication in her black cocktail dress and was easily the most beautiful woman in the club; her smile turned every heterosexual male’s head in the room, including Pope’s. Unfortunately for him, the busy night behind the bar and the loud music

stifled casual conversation. Although he did catch a funny story about Helen roller skating in her basement with her friends to the soundtrack of Saturday Night Fever, Pope was left with pretty much just Helen's smile, which was more than enough for him. However, he did get her to agree to meet him in the Luxembourg Gardens the next day. Pope knew that tomorrow would be the beginning of the rest of his life.

*

Sara stared at Peter. She was so beautiful. Even when angry, Peter could not keep his eyes off her as she slipped on his faded blue Billiken T-shirt—it barely made it to her thighs—then ran her hand through her blond hair to put it into a ponytail. From her mannerisms and the fact that she had not said a word in five minutes, Peter could tell that his explanation of the calls in the past twenty minutes had not gone over very well.

“You know you have a wife and two kids who depend on you,” she said coldly.

Sara was angry, but in her mind she deserved to be a little pissed off at her government because they were the ones who almost took Peter from her two years ago.

“I’ll be fine,” said Peter.

She stared at the scar on his throat. The cause of the blemish was still fresh in her mind, but the chain of events that led up to Peter sacrificing himself to foil a terrorist attack reminded her why she fell in love with him in the first place. As long as she had known him, Peter had always been full of life, inspiration, and hope. He was always finding a silver lining in any dark cloud, but more important, he was never the focus of his own life. He was a giver, not a taker. Peter not only risked his life for her but was willing to give his life for strangers. Admittedly, the last item became less appealing when they had children, but one day Nola and Fitz would know the man who was their father. For the remnants of the wound along his windpipe not only represented his courage, but also the lengths he would go to for his wife and children.

“Your hero days are over,” Sara reminded him. “You are a father and a husband now.”

“Some of my favorite heroes are husbands and fathers and most of them served in the military over and over again with scars a lot worse than mine,” retorted Peter before realizing he was on shaky grounds. “The

president asked. I won't be long."

"You don't owe her anything, Peter. You don't owe any of them. They owe you." She loved him, but Peter also reminded her too much of her mother, an idealist with her feet just close enough to the ground to be on the earth with the rest of us.

"I am just supposed to meet Roland. No one is after me, or us."

"Okay, then why you? Why not someone else?"

"They like me. I'm irresistible. I finally trapped you, didn't I?"

Sara didn't smile.

Peter's smirk disappeared.

"Sara, it's no big deal. The president and Roland just want me to look at some documents to see if I can tell what the CIR is up to and maybe take a meeting."

"Peter," Sara stood before him, looked up into his blue eyes, and put both of her hands on his cheeks, "you're a smart man with a big heart which makes it easy for others to appeal to your sense of duty. And I'm sure this is Roland's idea."

"No," responded Peter, "it was the Council's."

"Nola and Fitz need you to come home. I need you."

"I'm sure its nothing but gamesmanship."

They both knew that was not the case, but neither one of them wanted to admit it to the other.

*

Pope had arrived forty minutes early for his appointment which meant that the man he was waiting for more than likely would arrive in five to ten minutes. Surprise was an occupational hazard that neither of the men would tolerate. Protocol required arriving early and surveying the surroundings before contact. Jones would follow it. That's why Pope was early.

As he sat and waited, Pope drifted back to Paris, remembering his first real date with Helen in the Luxembourg Gardens. That afternoon unfolded like a movie in his head: Paris, springtime, and a new romance...

The gorgeous Saturday afternoon had drawn hordes of Parisians outside, and at times for Pope, it felt as if most of them were in the Luxembourg Gardens. In the spring this Paris landmark is bright with cheerful pink tulips, white English daisies, blue forget-me-nots, and yellow primroses and pansies,

offering nary a clue as to its unhappy origins. After the assassination of her husband, Henry IV, Marie de Medici longed for Florence. To assuage her loneliness, Architect Salomon de Brosse sought to recreate her childhood home, Florence's Palazzo Pitti, on land she had acquired from the Duke de Luxembourg on the left bank of the Seine. The palace remains, housing the French Senate, on a sixty-acre park dominated by terraces, alleys of trees, with fountains and grottos in central locations of the central parterre. But instead of palace guards, children now run up and down the crushed gravel paths. Their presence eased the tension as Pope and Helen walked the gardens.

Her presence was a breath of fresh air that whisked away recent memories of Somalia and his recovery at Landstuhl. She made him feel like a real person, the way he imagined normal people felt living their lives.

The two were lucky to find a quiet spot by the Medici Fountain. They sat and talked for two hours only to discover that they shared no common ground other than the fact that they both liked to laugh and both appreciated self-deprecating humor. He enjoyed making her laugh with her bright smile, dimpled cheeks, and a chuckle that would masquerade an ever-so-faint snort. After tossing centimes into the grotto, the two walked some more, trading some French and American truisms as the crowds thinned out. A little off the beaten path they parked themselves on a bench near two older French gentlemen who were playing petanque.

"You play?" asked Helen.

"Not since the career-ending injury that made me question the lunacy of playing such a deadly game," responded Pope.

"So you're afraid?"

"Of you?" Pope smiled.

Noticing the two men had just finished, Helen interrupted, "Excusez-moi, messieurs..."

Pope could not hear what the three discussed, but Helen pointed at him twice and the two men laughed each time.

"Sebastian Pope, I challenge you."

"I think I should be told what I am being challenged to."

"Petanque," she answered and handed him three metal balls.

"So what is the wager?"

"A second date," replied Helen as she began to juggle her set of three balls. Again, Pope smiled.

"How do you play? Is it like lawn bowling?"

"It's petanque, not lawn bowling."

"Ok."

"You want to throw your boule nearer to the coche than your opponent's boules."

"Lawn bowling."

"Just wait."

"Lawn bowling."

"The team that throws the coche also throws the first boule. The opposing player throws next."

"Lawn bowling."

"But," unnerved by the constant interruption, "from then on the team further from the coche throws the next boule."

"Aha, the lawn bowling twist?"

"Here," Helen threw the coche about seven yards ahead. "I'll go first."

With a graceful underhand motion but with her palm facing down, Helen flicked her boule within six inches of the coche.

The two old men on the bench clapped.

"Do I have to throw it like that?" asked Pope.

"Only if you want to get it close."

Pope threw the metal ball overhand and watched it sail past the coche.

The old men laughed.

"Haven't you ever thrown something like this before?"

Realizing that the answer 'a grenade' was not a good first date answer, Pope just shrugged his shoulders.

"You're away, so it is still your turn. Try to throw it like I did."

"You mean like a girl?"

"Like a girl who's beating you."

Pope tried to throw it like Helen, but could only get it within three feet of Helen's ball. Close enough for a grenade, but no help here.

"Better."

The old men laughed at Pope's expense, again.

"Here," began Helen as she stood behind Pope and took his right hand in hers and brought it backwards, "this is called a demi portee." They released the ball together and it landed within a foot of the coche but still outside of Helen's ball.

The old men clapped.

Helen stepped up and threw her two balls within a foot of the coche. The two old men gave her a standing ovation.

"What do you think of that?"

Pope took four steps toward her, leaned in, and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek.

Helen smiled, "That's a breach of Article 17 concerning behavior of players during a game."

"Isn't that how the French concede defeat? And I thought you were a biologist, not some lawn bowling lawyer."

"Rules are rules whether they are applied to molecular biology or games of skill."

The two remained inches from one another.

"I disagree. Rules are made to be broken."

"Hmmm," responded Helen before standing on her tip toes to give Pope a kiss on the lips that he remembered forever.

The old men clapped and whistled.

"Wasn't that a breach of Article 17?"

"Actually, it was one of my own rules that I broke, come on." Helen put her arm in his, then turned back to the men and shouted, "Merci beaucoup!"

*

With an overnight bag packed just in case, and wearing a comfortable pair of tan slacks, a navy jacket, and a blue shirt, the handsome young attorney was almost ready to go, but could not decide whether or not to put on a tie. As deputy chief of staff to the president of the United States, Peter had to wear a tie every day, something that he rarely did as a trial attorney back in St. Louis. It was symbolic in a way. As an attorney, he wore a tie in court or in a meeting with clients who expected him to wear a tie. Essentially, as an attorney, he wore a tie when he really needed to be 'on.' In the White House, he had to be 'on' every minute of every day. It was an adrenaline rush, but draining on everyone. So when Roland Miller stepped down from chief of staff to his more comfortable role of "counselor to the president," Peter asked the president if he could resign as well. Knowing that Peter was about to marry Sara, President Scholfield reluctantly accepted his resignation. The day he left the White House, Sara proceeded to cut up most of his ties. After the two were married, they enjoyed a lengthy honeymoon, then started working for Sara's old friend Redwood and his disaster relief foundation. With her background at the Siena Club, Sara was better suited for the job than Peter, but at least he no longer had to wear a tie.

“You avoided telling me how long you’re going to be?”

“I really don’t know,” answered Peter. “The president said San Francisco, but I think I can talk Roland out of it. I’m hoping to be back this afternoon. Worst case scenario, I’ll catch the red eye.”

“Are you okay, Peter?”

“I’m fine Sara, just haven’t fully caught up on my sleep this week.”

“I heard Fitz the night before last, but was he crying last night?”

“No, and for a change Nola was a little fussy. But that’s not it. Actually, I have been having some strange dreams lately.”

“Anything involving me in a French maid’s outfit?”

Peter smiled. She was back to her old self.

“I hope the dream is not about you in the French maid’s outfit,” Sara continued. “Although, I would like to have that dream sometime.”

“Nothing like that,” Peter could still picture the ominous backdrop around the mountain with everyone screaming below.

The doorbell rang.

“I have to go.”

Sara had long moved past the idea that she had fallen in love with Peter out of spite for her father. Maybe that, as well as Peter’s tall, dark, ruggedly handsome features, were part of the first attraction, but she was head over heels for this Irish Catholic former altar boy because he was *nothing* like her father. Her father was distant, secretive, and ultimately conspiratorial. Peter, on the other hand, was open, honest, and trustworthy.

The doorbell rang again.

He kissed her on the forehead. She stood up and planted a long slow kiss on his lips, “We need you back in one piece. We need you to be a father and a husband, not a hero.”

The doorbell rang again.

Peter kissed her back, not as long, but just as meaningful. Afterwards he took two steps to the bedroom door, hesitated, and then grabbed a royal blue tie out of the closet as he winked at her.

*

After several minutes of daydreaming had passed, in came Clifton “Nails” Jones. The six-foot-four, muscular African-American man entered the bar wearing a dark jacket, white T-shirt, and black slacks. The loose-fitting clothes concealed his military build. The last time Pope laid eyes on him

was in Iraq where Jones was working for some mercenary outfit. Pope corrected himself. The term ‘mercenary’ was not only dated but detested by the foreigners who were paid money to help fight insurgents. What was the term Jones used in describing his work? ‘Private security.’ That’s right, Jones worked for a private security firm, a ‘PSC’ as he would say. They were both in Special Ops together, and after Nails left the service, Pope still hired him for some black ops. Nails had the quality that most others lacked, Pope trusted him. It would be cheap to say that Pope owed Nails his life, since the two had pulled one another’s tail out of trouble more times than could be counted, even if Nails still tried to keep score. It was more than that. The two had an understanding between them that had been ingrained in them individually since Fort Bragg but forged together in Bosnia, the Second Gulf War, and Afghanistan, as well as numerous other counterterrorism missions. In fact, he was one of the few people who knew Nails’s full name. So when Clifton “Nails” Jones contacted him through some back channels, Sebastian Pope was definitely going to show, albeit forty minutes early.

At their last meeting, Pope had tried to recruit Jones away from his PSC to tag along with General Adnan’s crew in Mosel. However, Jones admitted that he enjoyed a measure of job security and was no longer interested in Pope’s freelance work. His new PSC had landed a billion dollar no-bid contract in Iraq, and Jones had become a company man. Pope could no longer afford Nails. He was out of his price range, or more aptly put, not within the budget.

“Nails,” Pope greeted him a smile.

Pope recalled when Jones came into his sniper unit in Bosnia before the two started hunting war criminals. Trying to stake out his own territory, Jones told everyone to call him Nails. As with all the rookies, Pope paid little attention to the newbie and only addressed him as “you” or “Jones.” After a particularly hairy mission in Kosovo, the two got drunk, and he admitted how he had earned his nickname. While he was in with the 82nd Airborne and passing through Hong Kong, Jones and some of the guys tied one on before shipping out again. Drunk and off the beaten path, Jones and two other soldiers decided to get tattoos. Jones and his lack of communication skills told the artist that he wanted a man and a woman “getting it on.” The confused artist did not understand English, much less the slurred speech of the soldier swaying before him. Jones tried to explain with some body language before quickly getting frustrated. The artist still

had no idea what Jones was talking about and offered Jones a catalog of tattoos to review. Finally, Jones pounded his fist into his palm, saying something to the effect that, "You know, he nails her." The artist grinned and repeated the word "nails." Jones then repeated the word "nails" and pounded his fist into his palm three times. The old artist repeated the word "nails" and pounded his fist into his palm three times. The two laughed. The next morning Jones woke up with three nails tattooed to his ass.

"Shut up," he shot back with a smile on his face. "I told you not to call me that."

After Nails told him the truth about the tattoo, Pope would cackle every time he tried to use the nickname. Jones finally had enough, and although he required everyone else in the outfit to call him Nails, he forbade Pope to use the nickname.

"I thought you were still in Iraq," inquired Pope.

"Reassigned. Just got in last night, and I am supposed to be in Hong Kong soon, so I'm going to hunt down that son-of-a-bitch who drew those three little lines on my ass."

Pope laughed again.

Jones took a swig of his beer then asked, "What are you still doing, freelancing?"

Pope maintained the cover of a 'gun for hire' even though he worked only under the immediate direction of the Director of National Intelligence. Only Chief of Staff Foley, DNI deputy Mike Nichols, the DNI, and the president had actual knowledge of his missions even though they all enjoyed plausible deniability with his Ghost status.

"I enjoy making my own schedules."

"Cool as usual," said Jones as he shook his head. "Well, I have a schedule for you."

"What?"

"Another babysitting job. In fact, I told them that they should have called you."

A little concerned about the free publicity, Pope asked, "Who are 'them' and 'they'?"

"The firm I work for, Notruillah."

"Notruillah? Isn't that some kind of French peanut butter?"

"Nah, that's just their Iraqi name. They're part of a big corporate conglomerate called IRIN. International something something something."

Holding companies, offshore accounts, you know the drill.”

When Jones went into the private sector, he never cared who paid his fee. After spending most of his adult life killing people, he decided not to take a moral high ground on issues beyond his control.

“So what brings you to San Francisco?”

“The head honchos in New York wanted their best man...only their best man was in Iraq.”

“And that’s you.”

“I like my gig in Iraq. So like I said, I gave them your number.”

“We’re going in circles here, Nails,” said Pope, this time without the smirk.

“Anyway, they gave me an unusual amount of money to take the job.”

For Jones to say it was an “unusual amount of money,” it must have been some sweet deal. With his new firm, Jones pulled down fifty thousand U.S. dollars a month as a bodyguard. To be fair to Jones, he was worth every penny. He was a one-man security detail that rivaled anything the Secret Service or Mossad could offer.

“And?”

“I found out about two days ago that their point man in Hong Kong died of some very unnatural causes.”

“Unnatural causes?”

“The locals say he was mugged, but his body had about thirty bullet holes in it.”

“That’s some mugging.”

“Something does not smell right about this job. And for a change, I thought I’d hire you out. There is more than enough bonus money for us to split. Sixty-forty, of course.”

“Of course,” mimicked Pope.

“Actually, I think I can get you your own cut. They would put you on the payroll, no questions asked.”

“I am not big on filling out W-2’s or giving out my social security number.”

Jones tilted his head and laughed at Pope.

“I don’t need the money,” added Pope.

“Just think about it. I have a meeting in an hour, and I can bring it up.”

“I don’t need the money,” replied Pope as he shook his head.

“Just let me find out how much they will throw in. Believe me, you can’t say no to these people. They throw a lot of money around.”

“What’s the assignment?”

“Just a little babysitting trip to China,” Jones answered with a big grin on his face. “You cannot believe the money.”

Pope, admittedly, was curious. Not about the money, but he wondered what Jones had stumbled into. He wrote down a number on a napkin and slid it across the table.

“Give me a call tomorrow.”

“I’m leaving tomorrow. I’ll give you a call tonight. One more round for old time’s sake?”

Pope nodded, and then held up two fingers to Glennon who kept a watchful eye on the two former Delta soldiers.