

## Prologue

*Chang Zheng*

*Jin-Class Type 094 Submarine*

*38° 48' 95" N, 174° 48' 32" W*

*Pacific Ocean*

*1767 Nautical Miles Northwest of Hawaii*

Commander Liu Zhen of the People's Liberation Army Navy had given his crew the order to change course four days earlier. The Chinese Jin-class submarine had last surfaced north of Japan in the Sea of Okhotsk and received an encrypted high-priority message from the commander of the North Sea Fleet. The message had been routed from the chairman of the Central Military Commission through the PLA Joint Staff Department. In all his years at sea he had never read a message that originated at the level of chairman. That meant it came directly from the president.

The message simply ordered Commander Zhen to open a safe, one that could only be opened with the concurrence of and physical keys from his executive and political officers.

Even before they read the order, Zhen knew what it was going to say.

They had been ordered to start a war.

Zhen slowly inhaled the soothing warmth of his Chunghwa cigarette in violation of his own orders regarding smoking while underway. He closed his eyes, savoring the slight taste of plum in a cigarette that was rumored to have been a favorite of Chairman Mao, though Zhen wondered if that was nothing more than a clever marketing campaign. The red carton emblazoned with the Tiananmen Gate was a traditional gift given to him by Admiral Jun, who had seen them off from the North Sea Fleet's Xiaopingdao Naval Base in the Yellow Sea. Zhen much preferred to sail from the caves at Laoshan Submarine Base in the Shandong province or Yulin Naval Base on Hainan Island southwest of Macao in the South China Sea. Natural caverns had been excavated on the resort island to create tunnels for an underground naval base in an effort to counter U.S. spy satellites constantly collecting over the Middle Kingdom. It was there that the next generation of Chinese submarine, the Type 096, would enter service. Zhen hoped he would live to see it.

Had the Admiral known what lay ahead? He obviously knew what was in the safe, but did he know the order would come to execute those orders - orders that would change the course of world history - on this particular voyage? Zhen suspected he had.

The *Chang Zheng* had been at sea for close to two months. One of six operational Chinese Jin-class Type 094 ballistic missile submarines, she was armed with twelve new JL-3 SLMBs - intercontinental-range submarine-launched ballistic missiles. Zhen's boat had been retrofitted prior to sailing, her twelve JL-2s replaced with the longer-range JL-3s, giving her the ability to hit targets at a range of 10,000 kilometers. Six of the JL-3s were equipped with MIRVs - multiple independently targetable reentry vehicles - with varying nuclear yields. Curiously, on this deployment Commander Zhen's remaining six JL-3s were equipped with conventional,

non-nuclear payloads. They were participating in a training exercise when the new orders had come in.

*One more cigarette?* He would soon be needed on the bridge where he would address the crew. He would let them know that the *Chang Zheng* would fire the first shots in a campaign that would allow China to annex Taiwan and push the Americans from the South China Sea, extending Chinese territory all the way to Australia. The goal was to gain control of trade routes and give China access to the oil and natural gas the country desperately needed to fuel its economy. When combined with their reserves, controlling that territory would also allow them to dominate the world energy market.

China was feeling the pressure. The new trilateral AUKUS – Australia, United Kingdom, United States – defense partnership was “defensive” in name only. It was a direct threat to Chinese autonomy. The agreement was cloaked in phrases crafted around “deterring Chinese aggression” which were endlessly repeated in the Western media. In reality, the pact extended U.S. subsurface capabilities up to China’s doorstep. Australia would acquire three, possibly five, Virginia-class submarines in the coming years followed by a new AUKUS-class submarine co-developed by Australia and the United Kingdom. U.S. submarines would also begin to make regular deployments to naval bases in Western Australia as part of the new force posture. The enemy was massing its forces and would soon be able to park an undersea flotilla off the coast, threatening China’s fleet, command and control, and industrial base.

Zhen also knew it had to be done before the Americans deployed their new Block V Virginia-class submarines, scheduled to hit the water in less than a year and certainly before the Columbia-class submarines came online. Intelligence analysts projected that the entire surface fleet would be connected to an artificially intelligent quantum computer that would counter China’s current superiority in hypersonic missiles and passive targeting capabilities. If the U.S. fleet were to be synchronized with next-generation AI technology, China’s options for expansion would be severely limited. At least the Columbia-class sub was years away from sea trials. Once they were in the water, Jin-class subs like Zhen’s would become obsolete.

Zhen had been serving in the People’s Liberation Army Navy since his time in the Dalian Naval Academy. He had studied his American adversary since he was seventeen. With the Americans divided at home and their leaders sending untold billions to Ukraine and Israel, he understood why his president and National Security Commission had decided that this was the time to strike.

He had participated in enough war games and classified briefings over the years to know that his submarine’s actions would be coordinated with other subsurface platforms tasked with launching missiles at Alaska, California, Washington State, and Guam. He suspected that the Chinese intelligence services had leveraged their contacts in Iran to distract the Americans with terrorist attacks across their nation in population centers like Los Angeles and New York City through their Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad proxy forces. Chinese hackers would concurrently wreak havoc on critical U.S. domestic infrastructure, disrupting the electrical grid, internet, cell towers, air traffic control, water treatment plants, oil and natural gas pipelines, and erasing credit cards, bank accounts, and driver’s licenses. He also knew that a cyberattack would concurrently target Guam, as had been tested so successfully in 2020 during the COVID pandemic.

*COVID.* That had been a turning point. Zhen had lost his parents early in the pandemic. His wife's parents had succumbed to the illness a few months later while sequestered in their apartment. They had died without being able to hold their daughter's hand or look into her eyes one last time. The state had seen to that. His wife would take her own life a year into the lockdowns. Neighbors in their government subsidized housing complex had found her hanging from the exposed pipe that ran the length of their ceiling. Through his contacts in the regime, he had discovered that she had first taken rat poison. In these later years, he now regretted the abortion he had convinced his wife to have when they found out she was pregnant with a girl. China's one-child policy, a policy that ironically had forced them into their current position, was responsible for the gutting of Chinese society. The policy that had so devastated the nation had also shattered Zhen's life. Men in China wanted sons. Sons who could carry on the family name. The result of the one-child policy, other than the inevitable demise of Chinese civilization due to declining birth rates, was the aborting of millions of female babies. By the time the government realized the folly of its policy and lifted the mandate in 2016, it was too late. Too late for China and too late for Zhen and his wife; both in their 50s, their time for children had passed.

But Zhen's family name would now live on; Commander Liu Zhen of the People's Navy would launch one of the first volleys of the war. His targets were military and data centers in the Hawaiian Islands. Of his six non-nuclear missiles, three would target the United States Pacific Fleet Headquarters on Oahu at Makalapa Pearl Harbor; one would target the National Security Agency and Central Security Service Hawaii Cryptologic Center near Wahiawa in central Oahu; one would target the Aloha NAP data center in Kapolei; and the final missile would target the Endeavor Honolulu data center. Decommissioning the Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense System at Barking Sands had been a mistake. That facility would have knocked at least one of his missiles out of the sky.

Other submarines would target the U.S. Pacific Fleet in Guam and Pearl Harbor though he had no confirmation of orders given to other subs; that was the way when one fought from beneath the waves.

He knew that the United States had two carrier battle groups in the Mediterranean and one in the Persian Gulf to deter Iran from opening a second front in Israel's war with Hamas. Other American naval assets were patrolling the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden to counter Iranian backed Houthis in Yemen. Zhen wondered if Iran's use of proxy forces to attack Israel and then using the Houthis to attack U.S. Naval ships and commercial vessels of the coast of Yemen while ordering militia groups to hit U.S. troops in Iraq, Syria, and Jordan had been an orchestrated as part of the current campaign. Was it done to draw the U.S. Fleet into the Middle East so that China could annex Taiwan and push into the Pacific? How much had Russia, China, and Iran collaborated on plans that put him and his crew on the front lines of what was about to be the defining conflict of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

A knock on his stateroom door intruded on his thoughts.

"Enter."

"It's time, Captain," said his executive officer. "The men await your orders."

Zhen looked at his cigarette and at the red carton on the table before him.

He then leaned forward and extinguished it in an ashtray.

"Very well."

The captain stood and straightened his dress uniform. His hand confirmed that the Norinco QSZ-92-5.8 pistol was on his hip.

It was time to go to war.

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*McLean, Virginia*

Retired General Marcus Howe was awakened just past 2am eastern standard time. More than thirty years in the United States Army had confirmed that a call at that hour was never bearing good news. In this case it meant that he was urgently needed as director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Rising from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point through the ranks to lead the Joint Special Operations Command and eventually CENTCOM, he had been “retired” shortly after issuing an honest assessment to congress on U.S. policies in Iraq and Afghanistan. There was no place in senior U.S. military circles for generals who bucked the system. That “system” had been in place since President Truman signed the National Security Act of 1947 which had largely resulted in the disappearance of accountability. Howe had lived within that system his entire career, believing he could change it from the inside. The disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan had proven him wrong.

President Gale Olsen had personally flown to Ohio where Howe was teaching high school history to convince him, and more importantly his wife, that the country needed him in the wake of President Christensen’s assassination. In the end, his wife gave her support and once again moved with the retired general back to the Beltway where he was confirmed unanimously by the Senate as Director of Central Intelligence. That he had not accepted financially lucrative board positions, written his memoirs, run for congress, or hit the public speaking circuit spoke volumes to the new president. She was not about to preside over a sham investigation into President Christensen’s death, one akin to the Warren Commission and its investigation into the assassination of President Kennedy. That commission should have been called the “Dulles Commission,” after former CIA Director Allen Dulles who in actuality led the investigation, an investigation that still divided the nation sixty years later.

Howe had been careful not to wake his wife as he made his way to his study to take the call from Langley.

“A car is on the way, sir. You will need to take this call from the SCIF.”

Howe knew not to ask further questions.

He splashed water on his face from a half bath to help wake him up and changed into a suit he kept on a hanger in a closet just off his study. This type of summons meant that he might not be sleeping for a while.

Two black Suburbans were pulling into his circular drive by the time he reached his front door. He paused and looked back up the stairwell. He then turned and exited his home, locking the door behind him and wondering if the world would be a different place by the time he returned.

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*Jin-Class Type 094 Submarine*  
*38° 48' 95" N, 174° 48' 32" W*  
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Captain Zhen made his way to his submarine's control room.

The solid fueled JL-3 missiles with hyperkinetic projectiles would leave their vertical launch tubes at a depth of 50 meters. Their engines would ignite below surface and accelerate the missiles into the atmosphere at Mach 10. They would cover the distance to their targets in just under twenty minutes.

He found it curious that the order was only to launch non-nuclear missiles. In the wargames he had participated in over his long career he had experience with both options. He had read numerous American papers, some classified and others not, on the use of submarine launched non-nuclear ballistic missiles. They called it "Prompt Global Strike" and would cause the maximum amount of damage possible without crossing what the American Navy's reports had called the "nuclear Pandora's Box." Even so, Zhen always thought that when the day finally came, it would be a nuclear confrontation. Could a war between China and the United States remain a conventional non-nuclear conflict? Zhen didn't think so, but that was not his decision to make.

Following the launch, he would reposition and prepare to fire his six nuclear JL-3s should the U.S. retaliate with nuclear weapons.

After the *Chang Zheng* broke from the fleet in the Sea of Okhotsk, Zhen had taken her deep. He changed course on a track that would take them 3500 nautical miles at an average speed of 18 knots to their launch point 650 nautical miles northwest of the Hawaiian Islands.

His route had taken him north of the underwater sonar detection range, a system of fixed bottom fiberoptic cable arrays set up by the United States during the Cold War to track Soviet submarines. The Ministry of State Security, China's intelligence service, kept all Chinese naval officers up to date on the current status of the American Integrated Undersea Surveillance System, the IUSS. According to their most recent intelligence estimates, the IUSS was undergoing a long overdue retrofit and upgrade with miniaturized sensors, hydrophones, autonomous undersea drones and what Zhen understood to be an underwater satellite called a Transformational Reliable Acoustic Path System specifically developed to detect submarines. The upgrade also included a fleet of uncrewed solar powered surface vessels with acoustic sensors in their keels from the San Francisco-based company Sairdrone and MQ-9B SeaGuardians, remotely piloted aircraft systems outfitted with MAD-XR - Magnetic Anomaly Detection-Extended Role - passive sensors that cannot be jammed and are designed to detect changes in the earth's magnetic field from metallic objects for anti-submarine warfare. These entities were all linked through a quantum computer system that analyzed real time open source and classified encrypted networks to identify and pinpoint the locations of surface and subsurface platforms and algorithmically project their courses, destinations and intent.

The United States had publicly acknowledged the existence of the IUSS in 1991. They should have kept it classified. At the height of the Cold War, Zhen's enemy manned thirty-one IUSS data tracking and processing facilities. Today, the only two still operational were located in Virginia Beach, Virginia, at Naval Air Station Oceana Dam Neck Annex and in Washington State at Naval Air Station Whidbey Island.

Zhen thought it was one more piece of the puzzle that must have factored into China's decision to preemptively attack. The upgrades would make covert subsurface transit extremely difficult. The IUSS retrofit was focused on enhancing surveillance capabilities to deter a war over Taiwan. Approaching Hawaii from north of Japan would allow Zhen to launch without prior detection.

Unknown to most of the world, China had been steadily constructing its own subsurface maritime surveillance system, appropriately code named the Great Underwater Wall, complete with undersea unmanned drones. Built predominantly in the South China Sea, it extended to a lesser degree as far into the Pacific as Guam. The existence of the program led Western intelligence agencies to determine that China was only interested in Taiwan. Their assessment was wrong.

Had the United States invested more in undersea surveillance, and been less influenced by lobbyists vying for larger legacy programs with more financially lucrative contracts for defense corporations, Zhen's submarine might already have been detected and blown from the water.

As much as he tried, he would never fully understand the Americans.

All talking ceased when Zhen stepped into the control room. Just like on an American or British submarine, the crew members manning their stations did not jump to attention. Due to the cramped compartments on a submersible, even one as big as the *Chang Zheng*, and equipment that required constant monitoring, rapt attention was mandatory. The Officer of the Deck turned to his skipper while the faces of the Helm, outboard watchstander, diving officer, Chief of the Watch, and submariners at the combat control consoles remained glued to their stations.

Zhen scanned the control room, proud to be in command of his country's most advanced undersea vessel and knowing that the speech he was about to give would propel them into legend. He stepped forward and accepted the outstretched intercom from his executive officer to address the crew.

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*CIA Headquarters  
Langley, Virginia*

Director Howe was at CIA headquarters twenty minutes after the alarm had roused him from his slumber. He was in the SCIF five minutes later where he prepared to take a call from Chen Yun, his counterpart in the Chinese Ministry of State Security. They had met eight months earlier when Howe had accompanied President Olsen to the G20 Summit in India. It was their first and only in person meeting. It had been a cold one.

Howe could be diplomatic to a point. It was a skill required if one was to rise above the rank of major in the armed forces. However, he was unable to fully mask his disdain toward the Chinese spymaster - COVID origins; fentanyl precursor drugs being shipped from China to Mexico and the resulting "accidental overdoses" he knew were more appropriately termed "intentional poisonings;" the manipulation of America's youth through Tik Tok, an application that also gave the Chinese military and intelligence services unfettered access to all the data coming from phones attached to plans paid for by parents in politics, intelligence, tech, and defense; Chinese "donations" and business dealings with America's political elite in what amounted to legal bribery; spies in all sectors of American industry; and the purchasing of farmland near U.S. military installations - all these thoughts were on Director Howe's mind as took the early morning call.

He also remembered the motto of the Chinese spy service: "Serve the people firmly and purely, reassure the party, be willing to contribute, be able to fight hard and win."

*And win.*

*Not today. Not any day.*

Howe nodded at his deputy director, Elliot Byrne, who sat across from him and hit the speaker function on the phone.

Byrne was a lawyer by way first of Yale and then of Harvard. He had spent time in private practice focusing on white-collar criminal defense and sanctions compliance before entering government service following the attacks of September 11, 2001. He worked as an aide to the General Counsel at the Treasury Department, eventually serving as Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence before his appointment to the CIA by the previous administration. Though his position was usually filled by a long serving CIA official or former military officer, with Howe's resume they were a good counterbalance.

"Minister, this is Director Howe."

"Director, thank you for taking my call," the Chinese Minister of State Security said in lightly accented English. "I hope I did not wake you."

Chen Yun's background was a mystery even to the CIA.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" Howe asked, intentionally refraining from answering the minister's question.

"We have an issue, a time sensitive issue, I'm afraid."

"Oh?"

"I come to you 'hat in hand,' I believe is your expression. Your cooperation would be appreciated, and I believe necessary."

"Please continue," Howe said.

"One of our submarines is missing."

"Missing?"

"No, excuse me, not missing. We know where she is, but we do not have the means to stop her."

"Stop her?"

"From launching nuclear missiles at the United States."

Howe and Byrne both shared a look and leaned forward in their chairs.

"Minister, keep talking and leave nothing out."

“Four days ago, one of our Jin-class submarines, the *Chang Zheng*, deviated from a training exercise just north of Japan. At first, we believed there had been an accident and began searching for her as part of rescue and recovery operations.”

The minister cleared his throat.

“We searched for a distress pinger and used side scan and synthetic aperture sonar but found nothing. As part of the investigation, we searched the homes of the senior ranking officers, including the commanding officer, Commander Liu Zhen.”

He paused.

“And?” Howe prodded.

“And we found a note in Commander Zhen’s computer.”

“A note?”

“Yes. A letter, actually.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It was an email that used a timer function. He had it set to send to Admiral Lí Jun, Commander of the North Sea Fleet, two days from now to ensure there would not be time to stop him.”

“What did it say?”

“Commander Zhen’s parents did not survive the worldwide pandemic and his wife of thirty years took her own life two years ago. Regrettably, he blames his country and has taken drastic action to punish us all.”

“What is he doing?”

“He is moving into position and preparing to launch MIRV-equipped JL-3 missiles at Hawaii in the hopes of drawing the United States and China into a nuclear confrontation. His personal mission is to ensure Beijing, and those he blames for his parents’ and wife’s deaths, will be eradicated by a nuclear response from the United States.”

“*Jesus Christ*,” Byrne said under his breath.

Director Howe could feel the perspiration beginning to soak through his dress shirt.

*Was this a ploy?*

*A stall tactic?*

*Was China making a nuclear move against the United States, this rogue submarine just a diversion?*

“Our analysts have estimated that his most likely location for launch is in the vicinity of 21 degrees, zero minutes, zero seconds north, 169 degrees, zero minutes, zero seconds east. We understand that leaves a lot of open water. That also gives us just over two days to find him and destroy him. We do not have the naval assets in place to avert this catastrophe. Please know that I called you at my soonest opportunity after confirming Commander Zhen’s email and receiving the best estimation of his submarine’s position.”

Director Howe took a deep breath to steady his nerves.

“Minister, send us that email, Commander Zhen’s service record, your investigation findings to date and the intelligence estimate you have on his location. Also, know that if he does launch a nuclear attack on the United States, this call and that email will not be enough to keep my country from retaliating using all means at our disposal.”

“I have already made that clear to my president.”

“Keep this line of communication open, minister, and pray we find him.”



“My sincere apologies for this development, director. My nation will be ready to support the United States and bring this unfortunate event to a successful, and peaceful, conclusion.”

“Thank you. Your cooperation will be essential if we are to avert a nuclear armageddon.”

Director Howe pressed a button disconnecting the call and immediately pressed another one connecting him to the White House.

“Wake up the president.”

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*Ministry of State Security  
Haidian District  
Beijing, China*

Minister Yun ensured the call was disconnected and turned his swivel chair to face his fellow countryman to his left.

“Did they buy it?” Ba Jin asked.

“I don’t know,” the minister said. “I believe so. The email will help, as will the fact that Commander Zhen is not exactly where we said he would be but close enough for the Americans to find him and blow him from the water.”

“And that he is the only Chinese submarine they will find currently outside of Chinese territorial waters should be enough to sell the story,” the other man said.

“There are no other Chinese assets postured to strike the United States or its allies,” the minister confirmed. “And if this goes nuclear, we are far enough from Beijing that we should be safe from any potential fallout.”

Ba Jin made even the Minister of State Security nervous. He was officially a strategic advisor. Unofficially, he was the president’s eyes and ears at the highest echelons of the Chinese intelligence apparatus. The president trusted no one and therefore had what amounted to a private security force with “strategic advisors” positioned at the top of every government agency. The minister was under no illusions; if Ba Jin sensed disloyalty, it would be reported to the president, and the minister would disappear soon thereafter, most likely at the hands of the man seated across from him. Though they had scarcely been apart over the past two years, Minister Yun realized he knew next to nothing about Ba Jin. Was he in his 40s? 50s? He was certainly in shape. Was he married? Did he have children? Was he prior military? How was he so well versed in geopolitics? Why was he so calm? Even as the head of the Chinese intelligence service, Minister Yun had refrained from researching the man the president had entrusted as his direct conduit. To Yun, Ba Jin needed to be respected as the president’s emissary, even if in reality he was nothing more than an assassin.

“The president is in Russia,” Minister Yun continued, “and senior political, military and intelligence officials, to include the premier, congress chairman, conference chairman, supervisory director, chief justice, procurator, and vice president are in the Underground City as part of what they believe is an exercise.”

The Underground City is a subterranean network of bunkers and tunnels built to protect not just the Chinese government, but most of the people of Beijing, at a time when war with the Soviet Union seemed imminent. Construction was ordered by Mao Zedong in 1969. The 85 square kilometer fortress is a city beneath a city. It had fallen into disrepair at the end of the Cold War with large numbers of low-income workers and homeless moving underground. Called “Rat People,” they existed out of sight and out of mind. As tensions escalated between China and the United States in recent years, the tunnel complexes had been renovated, their residents forcibly removed at the working end of Norinco QBZ-95 bullpup rifles of the People’s Liberation Army.

“Ah yes, the Underground City,” Ba Jin said. “If the United States launches, at least we will know if Mao’s tunnel system works or not. But they won’t launch.”

“How can you be sure?” Minister Yun asked.

“Because I know the Americans. They dropped two atomic bombs on our neighbors in 1945, and thank heavens they did. But they won’t do it again - not with the email, our warning, and our defenses down; and they won’t have to. Commander Zhen was ordered to fire conventional non-nuclear JL-3s; a nuclear retaliation for the actions of a rogue submarine commander would not be a proportionate response in accordance with international law. They have been pressuring Israel for a ceasefire with Hamas, and everyone from the United Nations to the UK to members of America’s own congress have been lecturing Israel on a proportional response to the murders and rapes of October 7<sup>th</sup>. A nuclear response is not on the table. But, more importantly, they will find and sink the *Chang Zheng*. War will come, but it will come on a date and time of our choosing.”

“But will they transfer the data?” the minister asked, well aware that if this plan failed there would be dire consequences for him personally. He would be the scapegoat.

“The data.” Ba Jin looked up at the ceiling of the minister’s office. “That is the real question, isn’t it. If they don’t, then we are in the same position we were. And, if they do, then we will have what we need to push them from the South Sea. Taiwan is already ours, success in our upcoming offensive will just make it official. The data is what we need. We will know shortly. In the meantime, play your part and stay by the phone.”

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*CIA Headquarters  
Langley, Virginia*

Deputy Director Byrne pushed back his swivel chair, a chair he never failed to notice was much more expensive and comfortable than the ones at Treasury. He leaned forward, putting his elbows on his knees. He had opted for slacks and a blue button-down at this hour of the morning.

“Fucking cocksuckers!”

Byrne may have been educated at the country’s most elite universities, but his mouth never failed to betray his working class South Boston upbringing.

“President Olsen will be on in a few minutes,” Howe said.

“Sir, these motherfuckers got us with COVID, they are screwing us with fentanyl, and now they have the audacity to tell us one of their subs is positioning to launch a nuke at Hawaii?”

Howe looked down at the Timex Ironman watch that had graced his wrist for most of his time in uniform, allowing his deputy to continue.

“China tells us they have a rogue submarine captain they can’t control and that they need help finding him before he starts a war. Meanwhile they are moving other assets into position to strike?”

“It’s possible,” Howe acknowledged, his voice measured, his mind already working through contingencies.

“It’s bullshit.” Byrne said.

“Get the SecDef and the chairman up and put the combatant commanders on alert. I want to brief them as soon as we are off with the president. Let’s get the SECNAV up to speed and COMPACFLT,” Howe said, referring to the commander of the Pacific Fleet. “The president will want to convene the National Security Council, so as soon as I’m off with her I’ll head to the White House. You’ll have the con here. If Minister Yun calls, patch him through to me in the situation room.”

“And, sir, Hawaii?”

Howe scratched his chin, taking a moment to process the evolving situation.

“I know. I was thinking the same thing. I’ll call General Abbett at the NSA. Too many unknowns right now. I’m going to advise we enact data transfer protocols.”

“I agree,” Byrne said.

A red light began to blink on the phone, indicating that the president was ready.

“I’ll tell President Olsen what we know,” Howe said. “You start waking people up.”

Deputy Director Byrne stood and left the room. It wasn’t every day that the second in command at CIA had the responsibility to alert the United States military and intelligence apparatus that a nuclear war was imminent.

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*USS Reagan*

*Columbia-Class Submarine*

*19° 48’ 63” N, -156° 49’ 81” W*

*Pacific Ocean*

*20 Nautical Miles Southwest of Hawaii*

The *USS Reagan* had started life in Kings Bay, Georgia under the cover of a 700-foot-long drydock. Though technically a ship, to submariners, they have always, and would always, refer to her as they did all submarines, as boats.

At thirty-nine, Commander Ray Mendoza still felt young and at times could not believe that the United States Navy trusted him at the helm of a ballistic missile submarine. The crew

of the boomer kept him energized. Even his ten-year-old twins at home thought it was pretty cool that their dad drove submarines. His wife, Karrie, had thought the long absences would be a thing of the past following his successful command tour as CO of the *Ohio*-class SSBN *USS Louisiana*. The *Ohio*-class subs had been protecting the United States since the last decade of the Cold War and were nearing the end of their service life. Ray had expected to observe the transition to the next-generation submarines from behind a desk at the Pentagon. Next up for the growing family was a shore duty position where Ray would await his promotion to Captain. As one of the youngest commanding officers in the subsurface fleet, he thought he would soon be assigned to a staff job in the Pentagon. He would be able to coach his kids' soccer team and enjoy weekends with his family. It was a staff job in the submarine force's budget department which meant that GS staffers who lived and breathed numbers would be doing most of the work as yet another O5 rotated through on his way to O6.

On his first day, Ray discovered he was not bound for a nine-to-five desk job. That was just cover. Instead, he would be conducting sea trials in the new prototype *Columbia*-class submarine, a submarine that most of the world thought was at least three years out from delivery. In what was one of the most closely guarded secrets in the Navy; a prototype was already in the water. Ray was going back to sea.

He had been put through the paces the year before in what he thought was a simulation designed to introduce future Captains and Flag Officers to the next-generation submersible. It was an immersive on-motion replica of the *Columbia*-class bridge developed by CAE, the world's leading aerospace and defense training and simulation company, and designed not as a concept but as a testing ground. The simulated bridge had perfectly accurate physical controls and tactile hardware, but created an augmented reality with holographic characters. With the realistic sounds, smells and motion of the actual submarine, the officers engaged in a full range of AI-driven scenarios that reminded Ray of being in a science fiction novel or video game. *Who didn't like a good video game? Was this really going to be a reality in less than a decade?*

The best and brightest in the U.S. submarine fleet passed through the simulator, most expecting that they would be long retired by the time the first *Columbia*-class saw active service. What they did not know was that a prototype was already close to delivery. The Navy could not control news that the next-generation sub was in development, but they could manipulate timelines. When the ten billion dollar SSBN slid into the water in a covered shelter without ceremony that the General Dynamics facility in Groton, Connecticut, Ray was there to take command.

Military watchdog groups, think tanks, news outlets and navy public affairs officers all reported that the first *Columbia*-class submarine, the *USS District of Columbia*, was scheduled to be operational in 2027, followed by the *USS Wisconsin* three years later. The top-secret prototype, christened the *USS Reagan*, was commissioned to work out the bugs and thereby alleviate some of the costs inherent in building two multi-billion dollar boats and then having to retro fit them with emerging technologies after the fact. The *Reagan* would allow the *USS District of Columbia* and *USS Wisconsin* to hit the water ready for war. It was no secret that different sections and components of the *Columbia*-class submarines were under construction by General Dynamics Electric Boat division at their facilities in Groton, Connecticut and Quonset Point, Rhode Island, and by Huntington Ingalls Industries Newport News Shipbuilding in Newport News, Virginia. What was a secret was the rate of progress and the date a fully

operational Columbia-class would be operational. The secrecy surrounding those dates was similar to the protections attached to the Manhattan Project in the Second World War. In building the most survivable component of the nuclear triad in a race with China for supremacy below the seas, the *USS Reagan* was America's trump card.

At 560 feet in length, she was five feet longer than the Washington Monument. And with a 42-foot beam, she was the largest U.S. submarine ever built. The undersea killing machine boasted a nuclear core that was not only designed to last the life of the submarine without replacement, but also emitted less acoustic energy than a standard light bulb. Armed with 16 low and high yield UGM-133 Trident II D5LE SLBMs and Mk 48 ADCAP, Advanced Capability, torpedoes capable of destroying targets at distances of over five nautical miles at 55 knots with 650-pound high-explosive warheads, she represented the pinnacle of SSBN design. The *Reagan* was at the sharp end of a policy designed to keep the peace by guaranteeing an enemy's total annihilation if they attempted to use weapons of mass destruction against the United States. With her electric drive propulsion system and Submarine Warfare Federated Tactical System seamlessly integrating optical imaging, active and passive sonar, countermeasures and offensive weapons, the *USS Reagan* was the most silent and lethal boat in the water. No sub in the world could outrun, out fight, or out maneuver her.

Her crew of 138 men and seventeen women had the honor of being "plankowners" – crew assigned at the commissioning of new command or vessel, even if this one was classified. Within the silent service lay some of the last true secrets in the United States military. The government added additional classification levels and non-disclosure agreements to the project for those building and crewing the sub, with penalties and consequences up to and including the death penalty for leaking classified information. The U.S. Navy took its submarine secrets seriously. Let the SEALs write the books and make the movies; the silent service would remain as such; silent, effective, and capable of wiping countries from the face of the earth.

The *USS Reagan* was on sea trials off Hawaii when Commander Mendoza received the order. Their target was nearly 700 miles away and, if the intelligence estimates and area of uncertainty were accurate, that target was somewhere in an expansive 4,900 square mile box. The *Reagan* had to be within five miles of the *Chang Zheng* to eliminate her with torpedoes, and Mendoza and his crew had just over two days to find her - a speck in an ocean of 68 million square miles with an average depth of 14,000 feet.

The crew thought this was a new test. Only the CO, XO, and Chief of the Boat knew otherwise. They had precise coordinates, but even with those coordinates, finding an adversarial submarine was far from a sure thing. The intelligence could be wrong, and the captain of the aggressor submarine could deviate from his course, not just laterally but also vertically.

Soon the crew would learn that this was not a part of an exercise. The *USS Reagan* had the mission of averting World War Three or, if they failed, be responsible for starting it.

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*Chang Zheng*  
*Jin-Class Type 094 Submarine*

21° 94' 63" N, -168° 66' 04" W  
Pacific Ocean  
650 Nautical Miles Northwest of Hawaii

Commander Zhen fought the urge to come to periscope depth and ventilate the ship, to take in one more breath of fresh air, to see clear blue skies in a pre-war world, even if it was through a periscope. Instead, he ordered the crew to spin up their missiles.

"Crew of the *Chang Zheng*," he said over the intercom, the intense pride evident in his voice. "Today, our nation has trusted us with the greatest of responsibilities; defense of the homeland. The war with our American enemy has begun. We have been ordered to go to Alert One."

Zhen then rested the handset back in its cradle and lit a cigarette in the control room, something he had never done before. He inhaled deeply, the nicotine soothing his raw nerves, nerves he was doing his best to conceal from his sailors. He exhaled the smoke into the confined space. He considered each of his men; young solemn faces looking to him for the next set of orders. A resolute determination had replaced any initial uncertainty and fear. They were ready.

"Officer of the Deck, proceed to fifty meters depth and prepare to hover," he said.

"Depth fifty meters and prepare to hover, aye, sir. Dive – make your depth fifty meters and prepare to hover."

"Depth: fifty meters," Zhen said.

"Fifty meters, aye," came the reply.

"Man battle stations, missile. Chief of Watch, sound the general alarm."

Zhen felt his submarine come alive as the alarm echoed through the hull, his crew rushing to battle stations. It was time to fight.

"Man battle station, missiles. Spin up missiles seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, and twelve."

"Six missiles, aye."

"All stop," Zhen said.

"All stop," came the reply. "The ship is ready to hover."

"Diving officer, commence hovering."

The control room remained silent as Zhen lit another cigarette, the seconds turning to minutes as the missiles inertial navigation units stabilized and were fed the *Chang Zheng's* position as the launch location. Zhen looked at the Tianjin Seagull 1963 watch on his wrist. The process had taken twenty minutes. It was time.

"This is the captain," he said into the handset. "The launch of non-nuclear missiles has been authorized. Arm missiles."

Zhen handed the intercom to his executive officer, the sweat glistening from his brow.

"This is the executive officer, the launch of non-nuclear missiles has been authorized. Arm missiles."

"Standby fire order," the captain said.

"Standby fire order, aye, sir."

"Fire order verified."

Zhen, his executive officer and political officer exchanged firing keys.

“Pressurize tubes,” Zhen said.

“Tubes pressurized.”

Zhen paused before bringing the intercom to his lips to give his weapons officer permission to fire.

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*USS Reagan*

*Columbia-Class Submarine*

*21° 90' 52" N, -168° 63' 18" E*

*Pacific Ocean*

*645 Nautical Miles Northwest of Hawaii*

The *USS Reagan* lay in wait at a depth of 600 feet. Navigating at three knots, she kept just enough forward movement to allow for a degree of maneuverability in what sailors called “bare steerageway.”

Two days earlier the entire fleet had mobilized. The bulk of surface, subsurface and airborne assets converged on a general location 650 nautical miles northwest of Oahu while navy public affairs officers explained the situation to local media outlets. Their prepared talking points stressed that the unprecedented size and speed with which the ships and submarines had gotten underway for what they termed a ‘bold new annual exercise’ highlighted the U.S. Navy’s high levels of professionalism and preparedness.

Every available P-3 Orion on the Hawaiian Islands took to the skies. A *Ticonderoga*-class cruiser and five of the eight homeported *Arleigh Burke*-class destroyers sailed from Pearl Harbor into the Pacific while *Los Angeles*-class and *Virginia*-class fast attack submarines built to locate and destroy enemy submarines slipped beneath the waves.

Four Ocean Aero Triton autonomous underwater vehicles being tested in Hawaii had also been tasked in the search. But in the end, the *Reagan* had been vectored onto its target by the venerable P-3 Orion, a four-engine turboprop aircraft purpose built during the Cold War to hunt submarines.

“Captain,” the Sonar Tech said following several maneuvers designed to separate the sniff from background noise. “We’ve got him.”

“Are you sure?” Mendoza asked, walking the few feet to look at the passive sonar display for confirmation. His SSBN had not been built to attack other submarines, that was a job for the SSNs, rather its mission was one of nuclear deterrence. Known as the “most survivable leg of the nuclear triad,” the nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine force motto was to “hide with pride.” The *Reagan* could do it better than any sub ever built. Though the older SSNs were better suited for a mission of stalking and killing an enemy submarine, the *Reagan* was nothing if not capable.

"It's him, sir. Bearing 314 degrees. Range 5.2 nautical miles. He's headed right at us. Classification solid: Jin-class."

"Well done, ST2," Mendoza replied.

His eyes traveled from the screen to his chief of the boat, his senior enlisted advisor. The chiseled COB had more time underwater than almost any man on active duty. The Skipper knew that to the young submariners under his command, both he and COB looked like what they were – ancient mariners – despite the fact that neither had yet turned forty.

"Hull pops. He's coming shallow, Skipper," the sonarman said.

Mendoza turned to his Officer of the Deck.

"Take us to 800 feet," he ordered.

"800 feet, aye," the OOD replied.

The submarine slowed to two knots and finalized its firing solution: bearing 314, range eight thousand yards.

The torpedo would be launched at high speed toward the point of intercept, with precise sonar settings required to prevent alerting the unaware target until detonation was imminent.

"Open outer door on tube one," Mendoza said.

"Open outer door, aye, captain," replied the weapons officer.

Mendoza took a deep breath.

*Dear God, let this fish fly true.*

"Plot ready, sir."

"Ship ready, sir"

"Weapons ready," reported the combat systems officer.

"Solution ready at 314 degrees, now 8092 yards."

"Fire on generated bearing," Mendoza ordered.

"Standby," directed the weapons officer to his fire control technician.

A moment later the torpedo showed ready.

"Shoot," came the order from the weapons officer.

A single fish deployed from the tube.

It was an ADCAP torpedo. Complete destruction of their targeted vessel would only take one.

The weapon was impulsed by a slug of water from the tube as designed. It angled downward for twenty meters before igniting its otto-fueled, self-oxidizing engine. Still connected to the sub via a fiberoptic cable, all data was relayed to the active targeting computer aboard the *Reagan*. The submarine would feed target position updates to the torpedo via the cable until the point where the torpedo detected the target with its own sonar. Then the weapon would update the ship's computer on the location of its prey. The lethal journey would take just over four minutes.

The skipper viewed the fire control console as he had hundreds, if not thousands, of times in training, aware that this time was not an exercise. In just minutes over a hundred Chinese submariners would meet a dire fate.

He looked to his XO and COB. Nothing needed to be said.

Commander Mendoza and the crew of the *USS Reagan* were about to have the distinction of sinking the first nuclear submarine in combat history.



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Inside the kill box, 200 meters from the *Chang Zheng*, the ADCAP went active with its sonar for the terminal phase of the attack run. Twenty seconds out from its objective it began echo-ranging, using rapid active sonar pings as the range to the target closed.

Contrary to what one sees in the movies, when a torpedo as advanced as an ADCAP is launched at distance, the targeted submarine will not know “fish” are inbound until it is too late.

Seconds later, the torpedo's magnetic sensors detected the metallic signature of its target's hull, and its proximity fuse detonated its 650-pound high explosive warhead precisely three meters beneath the enemy submarine.

The detonation created a volume of gas that sent a shockwave upward, impacting the submarine in excess of 3000 miles per hour, rupturing the outer hull. Inside the submarine, the violence was devastating; electrical breakers tripped and severed power to the missile launch systems, seawater pipes burst causing catastrophic flooding, crewmembers were thrown against steel bulkheads, the concussive force killing and maiming indiscriminately. Chaos reigned. The same shockwave crushed the lower hull and separated the decks, bowing the *Chang Zheng* upward into a banana-shaped tomb. Two hundredths of a second later, as water collapsed into the pocket of gas created by the warhead's detonation, a second shockwave hit the doomed submarine, slicing through steel plates and bulkheads, ripping the pride of the Chinese Navy nearly in half. Almost immediately, the bubble reflected outward again and whipped the sub in the opposite direction, creating a reverse bowing, breaking hinges, pipes, and seams, and tearing through the superstructure.

ADCAP torpedoes were specifically designed as “one fish one kill” weapons, and this one worked precisely as intended.

Inside the submarine, the massive shockwave turned loose items into shrapnel, blowing out computer screens and tossing crew members from the decks into overheads and bulkheads before the secondary expanding gasses nearly tore the sub in two.

From his battle station in the control room just forward of amidships and aft of the sail, Commander Zhen had a brief sensation of weightlessness before his eardrums burst and his head smashed into a steel overhead beam, crushing the side of his skull. He landed on the deck breaking his back and both legs. He managed one last breath, bringing oxygen to the one side of his brain that still functioned, as the secondary gas bubble expansion lifted the sub upward once again cracking the pressurized hull. His final thoughts were not memories of his life, of his parents or his wife. Instead, he fixated on a single question: *Who betrayed us?*

The unforgiving ocean found its way into all remaining spaces that still held air, the sub filling with seawater, its two halves pirouetting into the depths.

The few crew members left alive in the fore and aft sections of the boat crawled over dead bodies in a vain attempt to reach emergency hatches, as what were now two separate sections of the sub continued to sink toward crush depth. In the Chinese submarine's torpedo room, a fire raged, and just over ten seconds after initial impact, the boat's own torpedoes

exploded, sending an underwater fireball throughout the remnants and ensuring the *Chang Zheng* and her crew would forever rest in a watery grave.

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*Elba Industries Headquarters  
Mountain View, California*

Andrew Hart, founder and CEO of Elba Industries, disconnected the secure call in his private SCIF on the grounds of his tech company campus in the heart of Silicon Valley.

“Well?” a stocky, powerful built man asked. His raspy voice held traces of an accent that came not from being raised in the South but from years in uniform; the military’s version of accepted cultural appropriation. “Did it work?”

Hart waited a moment before replying, tapping his fingers against the dark tabletop that was almost indistinguishable from the floors, walls and ceiling.

“As we anticipated, the data was transferred from Hawaii to the Bumblehive,” he said, referring to the NSA’s 1.5 billion-dollar data center on Camp Williams in Bluffdale, Utah. He was unable to hide the smile that materialized on only one side of a face that most would think of as handsome; the result of obvious good breeding.

The thick man remained silent.

“And to answer your question, general,” Hart preferred to address Ian Novak by his former military rank. “Yes. It worked. We captured it in transit. It’s still encrypted but that won’t be a problem for much longer.”

The former general grunted, running his hand through short salt and pepper hair.

“Are you still skeptical?” Hart asked.

“I think almost exclusively in contingencies and worst-case scenarios,” he responded. “Which is one of the reasons you hired me.”

“True.”

“And there is no indication, yet, that we left a trail?”

“No. And there won’t be,” Hart responded. “We are light years ahead of our competition and the inept government cybersecurity agencies.”

“Let me remind you, this is an untested technology.”

“Only because it is constantly evolving and learning, all behind a firewall the NSA doesn’t even know exists.”

“For now.”

“What, are *you* going to tell them?” Hart asked, that smile once again slowly creeping up the left side of his face.

“No one knows if we actually have it?”

“Hence the beauty, general. We have the data, yet only a select few partners know we even attempted to free it from its chains.”

Novak had grown accustomed to the drama Hart infused into both the intense and the mundane.

“But we don’t know how long it will take to decrypt or even if we can decrypt it?”

“Oh, we can decrypt it,” Hart said. “It’s just a question of time.”

“Always a question of time,” the former military man said.

“Our CRQC,” Hart said, using the acronym for a Cryptanalytically Relevant Quantum Computer, “is already up, running, collecting and decrypting information. The military and intelligence services have only recently started to upgrade their systems and networks to post-quantum cryptography and in short order, ours will be able to decrypt even that. Soon we will have all the information we need. You want to quit?”

“Quite the contrary,” Novak said. “Let’s change the world.”

## Part I: The Call

All warfare is based on deception.

- Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

### Chapter 1

*Kumba Ranch, Flathead Valley, Montana*

“You sure you still want to do this?” Liz Riley asked the man in the left seat of the small vintage 1976 Lake Buccaneer amphibious aircraft.

The plane floated comfortably on its hull at the western end of the lake, its fuel-injected 200 horsepower Lycoming IO-360 engine mounted atop the pylon behind the cockpit at idle.

The big man next to her did not answer immediately. His eyes were focused ahead on the light ripples visible on the dark water. He tilted his head to the right, looking to the skies above. Blue with scattered clouds. Perfect flying weather.

“You got this, Reece,” Liz said. Her voice was strong and confident, the southern accent a proud reminder of days lying in the grass in the backyard of her family’s house on the outskirts of Fort Rucker in Alabama, looking skyward, dreaming. The near constant echos of turning rotors from Blackhawk and Apache helicopters overhead had instilled in her a love of aviation. She would follow that passion into the Army’s Warrant Officer Flight Program, and into the cockpit of an OH-58D Kiowa Warrior helicopter. Injuries sustained in combat cut short her Army career, but did nothing to diminish her love of flying.

James Reece turned to his passenger, a passenger who in this case was also his flight instructor and dear friend, Elizabeth Riley. She looked perfectly at home in the confines of the aircraft, almost as if it had been built around her. It did help that she was a full seven inches shorter than Reece’s six-foot frame. Her dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail under a crimson University of Alabama ball cap. Ray-Ban aviator sunglasses shielded her eyes from the glare. She was a professional in her element.

“What?” she asked, prompting him to explain the look on his face.

“You know, I intensely dislike flying.”

“You tell me that every time,” Liz replied. “What you mean to say is, you ‘used to intensely dislike flying.’”

“Ah, that’s it,” Reece confirmed.

“And, as I recall, it wasn’t necessarily the flying; it was the taking off and landing.”

“Once again: true,” Reece said. “Just like jumping.”

“Out of planes?” Liz asked.

“Yeah. I always loved the actual jump. Not a big fan of the pull.”

“Why?”

“That was the moment of truth. Either that chute was going to open, or you were going to have a malfunction in which case you would need to go through your EPs – your emergency procedures. After that you would have a clean canopy overhead or you were fucked and would have to cut away. Once you did that you were stuck to that last option. I’d pack my main, but our riggers would pack our reserves.”

“I can see how that could be disconcerting,” Liz said.

“That was one of the reasons we kept our parachute riggers happy with cases of beer on jump trips.”

“Wise.”

“I also didn’t like the fact that you had a bunch of other jumpers in the air you needed to account for and who needed to account for you.”

“And the landing?” Liz asked.

“Well, with a static line jump your landing is a hot mess regardless. You do what they call a PLF – a parachute landing fall. It realistically requires about two days of training. The Army manages to cram those two days into three weeks at Fort Benning. The PLF does help reduce injuries, but most of the time it turns into feet, ass, head.”

Liz laughed.

“Didn’t they rename Fort Benning like they did Rucker?” she asked.

“Fuck if I know,” Reece replied.

“How about freefall landings? Those look fairly graceful,” Liz said.

“With freefall it’s different. You can still hit hard though, especially when you are loaded down with gear.”

“Well, in this case – no jumping,” she said.

“That’s good, considering we don’t have chutes,” Reece observed.

Liz ignored his comment.

“We are going to take off, spend some time exploring northern Montana and then land right back at the lake. I’ll be here if you need me,” Liz said, motioning to the controls in front of her.

“That’s reassuring,” Reece responded sincerely. He turned back to the instruments.

“Might want to close the door,” Liz reminded him.

“Good tip,” Reece said. He reached up, pulled the gull wing door shut, and twisted the latch.

“What are our procedures if we have an engine failure?” Liz queried.

Scouting the channel ahead for debris, Reece replied: “if we are on the lake I’ll power forward. If we are in transition, I’ll make a judgment call – but please feel free to take over. If we are airborne over 600 AGL I’ll turn back. Turn will be to the right to avoid the mountains.”

“Correct.”

Reece scanned the lake and the skies to his right and left.

“Skies and lake look clear,” he said.

“Clear,” Liz confirmed, doing the same checks from her seat.

Reece’s left hand went to the yoke. Liz’s eyes hesitated over his left ring finger, a finger that would soon be adorned with a wedding band. A stainless-steel watch she knew had been purchased by his father, Tom, in Saigon during Vietnam was on his wrist below a powerful forearm. Reece’s arms had once hoisted her to safety in violation of orders in the war-torn streets of Najaf, Iraq. To Liz, it felt like yesterday. She suspected it always would.

She would never be sure if it was the RPG or the resulting crash that had killed her copilot. Liz had struggled in an attempt to release his harness, the metal slick with blood. She screamed at him to wake up, even though his head was partially crushed, and a large section of his upper body cavity had been torn away. The unmistakable crack of AK fire from Muqtada al-Sadr’s Mahdi Militia penetrating the aircraft’s mangled frame forced her onto the streets of Old Town Najaf with her M4. She remembered thinking that being killed in the crash would have been preferable to what would befall her should she be captured by the Mahdi Militia. She also knew that she would not be alive today had it not been for James Reece.

Reece and his four-man sniper team had been in position just blocks away when they witnessed the helo go down. She found out later that he had radioed his command-and-control element back at the forward operating base and requested permission to move to the crash site. That request had been denied. A risk-averse higher command authority, concerned with the political fallout of losing five more SEALs in combat, had ordered Reece to stay in position to provide overwatch while an Army Quick Reaction Force was dispatched to the scene. When Reece heard Liz’s M4 start to mix with the sounds of AK fire, he moved to assist in a clear violation of orders.

Liz’s helmet had been torn off in the crash, and she had ditched her body armor so she could move unincumbered as quickly as possible toward friendly lines. By the time Reece arrived, the adrenaline that had allowed her to escape the Kiowa had worn off. The back injury, the effects of which she still kept at bay with a vigorous MTNTOUGH daily functional fitness training routine, had all but immobilized her. She was also on her last round, a round she was saving for herself.

Reece had stripped off his own body armor and secured it around the injured pilot. He then secured his helmet to her head, hoisted her over his shoulder and ran to a stolen vehicle that his Teammate Boozer had maneuvered into a nearby alley. He didn’t stuff the hole caused by a bullet that passed through his calf until they had survived the harrowing drive back to base.

For Liz it was an airlift to Balad for emergency surgery; then a flight to Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany; and then another to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

For Reece it was an ass-chewing for insubordination and threats of Trident Review Boards, Captain’s Masts, and Court Martials. Those threats quickly turned to accolades when Liz Riley’s Commanding Officer called the Commander of Naval Special Warfare to express his

gratitude to the entire SEAL chain of command for their quick thinking and audacity. He followed up by awarding Army Commendation Medals with Valor to Reece and his sniper team.

The battle in Najaf had bonded Liz and Reece for life. Reece's wife Lauren and daughter Lucy had become Liz's family as well. After they were ripped from the earth she had been by Reece's side as he brought those responsible to justice. In her mind, the debt she owed Reece would never be fully repaid.

He deserved to finally be happy, Liz thought.

Reece's strength had returned after his recent ordeal in solitary confinement and the events that followed. She knew that he and Raife Hastings trained every day, pushing each other on steep trail runs, swims in the frigid lake, and in the Sorinex gym they had set up in the barn. They had also improved the range on Kumba Ranch, the Hastings sprawling property in the Flathead Valley, with barricades and TA Targets. Daily competitions with pistols, rifles and shotguns kept the two men sharp. He looked stronger than Liz had ever seen him. She didn't need to ask why he trained so hard. She knew.

Though he didn't talk with her about his time in the darkness, Liz knew it had left an impact. How could it not? His own government had locked him in a small cell with no light and no visitors for three months, an action tantamount to torture. She didn't know if he talked about it with his fiancée. Men like Reece tended to keep some things locked away, though if she were being honest, there really weren't other "men like Reece."

She must have asked him a thousand times over the years to let her take him up and work with him on getting his pilot's license. He had never shown any interest until recently. And, as with everything he did, Reece was all in.

"It won't happen today in these conditions," Liz said, "but tell me what causes and what you do if we start to porpoise."

"Just like a boat with too much weight up front, in the Buccaneer it's caused by choppy conditions and too much power which causes a nose-low attitude. Excess weight in the cockpit can also be a factor, but I've been working out so that won't be an issue," he said, tapping his trim stomach in jest.

"And if it is?"

"I use more up-elevator until it stops."

"If it doesn't?"

"Then I reduce power and come off step and, discretion being the better part of valor, we try this again another day."

"Pretty close; remember to *slowly* reduce power," Liz reminded him.

"Right. Slowly."

"There are ripples today, so we have perfect training conditions for your first water takeoff. If it were glass, we wouldn't be doing this. Glassy water is the enemy. Well, not really, but it's dangerous, especially on landings. You lose your depth perception. We'll do it, but not until you have more experience reading the water."

"I trust your judgment," Reece said.

"What's the airframe's no-go criteria for water takeoffs?"

"Any waves over twelve inches," Reece replied.

"Your time sailing will help you when maneuvering on the water," Liz continued.

"Yeah, I'm noting a few similarities."

“Think of the Lake Buccaneer as a boat on the water and a plane in the air. As soon as we are airborne, things will change. What’s happening on the lake is different than what is happening up there,” she said, looking skyward.

“Understood.”

“Take me through it,” Liz said.

“All right,” Reece began. “Seatbelts – check. Briefings – complete. Doors – secure. Magnetos – both. Circuit breakers – on. Flap handle – down. Hydraulic pressure gauge – up. Water rudder – up. Trim - set.” Reece checked the indicator and twisted his head to visually confirm the tabs on the tail were in the correct position. “Fuel selector – on. Mixture – rich. Prop – full forward.”

Liz pulled her headset down around her neck.

“This is a loud aircraft, but on the water I like to have auditory cues. You did great by the numbers, now it’s time to get a ‘feel’ for the plane. We can put the headsets back on once we are in the air.”

“Just like our Peltors back in the day,” he said, following Liz’s lead with his headset. “Some guys liked them, and others couldn’t stand them. They protected your hearing but made it tough to identify the direction of incoming once the bullets started flying.”

The distinct growl of the engine coupled with the propeller behind the exhaust filled the cockpit.

“This thing sounds like my old Harley,” Reece observed.

“Greg O’Neal and Harry Shannon down in Florida refer to them as ‘Sky Harleys,’” Liz responded. “The sales pitch for these birds back in the seventies and eighties was ‘the most fun you can have with your clothes on.’”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Reece said.

Jonathan Hastings had sent Liz to Kissimmee, Florida for the Lake Amphibian 25-hour owner’s course under the tutelage of instructors who lived and breathed these classic airframes. Already a Certified Flight Instructor, Liz received her specialized Lake Amphibian qualification at the O’Neal’s Seaplane Base managed by Greg’s son Ben on nearby Live Oak Lake, close to where Armand Rivard set up shop after buying the Lake Amphibian company in 1979. Greg O’Neal had put her through the paces during the certification process and Liz had fallen in love with a plane that traced its roots back to the iconic Grumman Goose, Widgeon, Mallard and Albatross aircraft of the 1930s and 1940s. The legendary aviation mechanic and Lake Amphibian guru, Harry Shannon of Amphibians Plus, had passed along his intimate knowledge of the unique aircraft as well.

Liz glanced from the former SEAL to the instruments, double checking her student before turning to look in the two seats behind them. A small Eberlestock go bag was on its side partially obscuring a new coyote tan SIG Sauer MCX-SPEAR LT with Tango6T 1 – 6 x 24mm optic. From the profile of the magazine, she could tell it was the 7.62 x 39 version. Liz was more familiar with weapons than she was with earrings or purses. It had a Dead Air suppressor, VTAC sling, folding iron sights, a Surefire Scout light, and an ATPIAL laser aiming device. All of Reece’s weapons had been confiscated in an FBI raid almost two years earlier so the SPEAR was a new addition to the arsenal. Because they had been seized in an investigation into the assassination of the president of the United States and Reece had been taken to the Federal Penitentiary in

Florence, Colorado, and locked in solitary confinement in violation of the Fifth, Sixth, Eighth, and Fourteenth Amendments, getting them back had proven to be a bureaucratic nightmare.

Reece noticed Liz staring at the rifle behind them.

“Just in case, Liz.”

“Just in case,” she repeated.

Reece nodded and his right hand went to the overhead throttle.

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Katie Buranek sat in a chair on the small beach, her feet propped up on the stone fire ring, gazing out across the lake through binoculars at the single engine aircraft that appeared to be more of a boat with wings. It had a unique, almost odd, configuration with the engine and propeller mounted above and behind the pilots. She tucked a strand of blonde hair behind her ear and rested the 10 power Swarovski binos in her lap. The fingers of her right hand found the diamond engagement ring on her left ring finger, the dazzling gemstone fixed in a simple but elegant and timeless platinum setting.

They had made Montana home, and though they had not set a date, a wedding was on the horizon. Reece had been intentionally vague on the how and why behind the injuries he had returned with a few months back; he seemed different. She didn't know whether it was the investigative journalist in her or her instincts as his lover and fiancée, but there were changes, some stark, others subtle. Though he was never far from a gun, his eyes no longer had the look of a hunted animal, cornered and tensed, ready to explode in a sudden fight to the death at any moment. His eyes still shifted from brown to green to hazel depending on the environment. It wasn't that. It was a sadness.

Katie reached down to pet Pollux behind his right ear, her hand was soon nudged by Castor. The two black Labrador retrievers had been in the back of the old FJ40 Toyota Land Cruiser that Reece had borrowed from Caroline Hastings when he returned from a trip a few months back. He had told Katie the dogs used to belong to an old friend who could no longer care for them; he didn't specify why. Healthy and strong, they had taken to her and loved when Zulu, the Hastings' Rhodesian Ridgeback, came down to play.

Katie had started a vegetable garden in a small greenhouse that Reece and Raife had built by the barn where Reece's old 1985 Jeep Waggoner still sat inoperable. They shared her 4Runner, but she knew his friend Kurt Williams of Cruiser Outfitters in Utah was on the lookout for a 1988 FJ62, Reece's preferred mode of transportation.

Caroline Hastings, the matriarch of the Hastings family, would drive down from the main house with Zulu a few times a week. The three dogs would chase each other and swim while the two women worked in the garden and Caroline passed along what she had learned of gardening and life to someone she already considered a daughter-in-law.

Though Reece had never been what one would call a “morning person,” most days before dawn, Katie would feel him swing his legs from the bed and slip from the room still cloaked in darkness. After he was gone, she would slide her naked body into one of his T-shirts and move to the bedroom window, watching in the early nautical twilight as Reece walked



barefoot down to the lake with coffee in hand to watch the sun rise over the mountains. In the dim light of a new dawn, Reece would disappear as he walked down the well-worn path. As the sun crept closer to the horizon, Katie would begin to make out familiar shapes: the deck, the sloping lawn, the beach, the fire pit, the dock, and finally the man she loved, his frame silhouetted against a sky shifting through brilliant hues of red, yellow, and orange. He would come into focus at the end of the dock, leaning casually against a pylon, sipping what she knew was a light blend coffee mixed with cream and local honey.

*What was he thinking about?*

*Her?*

*Their future?*

*His future?*

*His wife Lauren and daughter Lucy? Was he asking them for forgiveness or was he communing with their memories as the world came to life?*

Their lives had been violently extinguished, their final moments filled with horror. Reece blamed himself. But instead of waiting for what he thought was a terminal brain tumor to reunite them in the afterlife, he had done what he did best. Reece had visited upon his enemies a violence and terror unlike anything they could have ever imagined upon them. And Katie had helped him. She had become part of the story.

*Was he thinking of his SEAL Teammate Ben Edwards, standing behind Katie, her neck wrapped in det cord, a detonator in his friend's hand?*

*Or, was he thinking about Boozer, and the 9mm pistol used to take his life in an attempt to make it look like suicide, a mistake that had exposed the conspiracy?*

Katie knew now that Boozer had been the key. Boozer was a .45 guy and would never have taken his own life with a 9mm. That realization had started Reece down the warpath toward a reckoning.

*Or was he thinking of Freddy Strain? His former sniper partner had tracked Reece down in Africa and presented him with a choice, one that had ultimately led to Freddy's death on a rooftop in Odessa.*

*Was he thinking of Raife's sister, Hanna, hunted for sport on an island in the Bering Sea? Or was it something more recent? The assassinated president? Revelations about his father? Or something else? Something of which she was not aware. A classified mission?*

*Was he thinking of a certain Israeli? A spy he had known in Iraq. A woman who was blown out of the sky by the same terrorist who had killed Freddy?*

*Reece had known pain. Was it possible for him to move on? Had he forgiven himself? Had a new chapter finally begun for them both?*

Katie would never intrude on Reece's memories of the dead. Those were his. She suspected these quiet mornings were his time with ghosts. They would always be with him.

Once the sun had broken the horizon, she would watch him turn and walk back to the cabin where he would make her a cup of coffee in the kitchen. Before he cracked the door, she would strip off her shirt and settle back into bed for a reawakening from the man she loved.

She would hear him set her coffee on the nightstand to the side of the bed, and then feel him slip back under the covers, his cool body quickly warming next to hers before making love with a passion and intensity that left them drained and breathless. They were free.

Reece and Raife had started construction on their archery-bookstore-coffee shop-whiskey bar concept in Whitefish. The owner of Glacier Archery had retired and sold it to the two former frogmen. The shop was now undergoing an extensive remodel along with the building to which it was attached. Glacier Archery was on one side, and Abelard's Bookstore, Coffeeshop, and Whiskey Bar was on the other. The Hastings Family was bankrolling the project, not because they expected or even cared about a return, but because Jonathan and Caroline wanted their boys close. Reece was family.

Katie did most of her writing on her laptop at the lake and would send her op-eds from a coffee shop in town that offered WiFi. A studio in Whitefish made it possible to do her weekly news spots. Reece would check on progress with the renovation and pick up supplies while she worked. They had installed a fly rod holder to the Gobi rack on her 4Runner and on their way home would stop and hike to an alpine lake or stream. His cast was improving; she enjoyed watching him progress at something she had been doing since she could walk.

Katie heard the whine of the plane's engine increase and watched as it surged forward. The white aircraft with green pinstriped markings gained speed as it moved across the lake into a light headwind, finally lifting off and arching toward the heavens.

Maybe the flying was a replacement for the mission? Could Reece survive without a mission?

And what of Reece's concerns? Was he still worried that violence would find them? She knew better than to push. Reece would tell her in good time. And right now, it felt like they had all the time in the world. In the interim, she had a wedding to plan.

Katie was so lost in thought that she failed to hear the sound of the approaching vehicle.

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Reece found it therapeutic and meditative up amongst the clouds with the familiar feel of the noise canceling headset against his ears. Now, instead of muffling the deafening sounds of gunfire and explosions, they reduced the monotonous hum of the piston-driven engine to a more tolerable level. The peace would only be broken by the voice of his instructor or that of Air Traffic Control at the airport in Kalispell if they were using the retractable tricycle landing gear to practice runway landings. Donning equipment like the headset in pursuit of a new goal, something challenging, felt right. He imagined a day when he would fly Katie and their kids from their lake house on the Hastings' property to former senator Tim Thornton's hunting cabin in northern Idaho close to the Canadian border or to one of the numerous secluded lakes in the high country. Anything farther than that and he would enlist the services of Elizabeth Riley.

Reece had never cared much for orders coming from the top. Those removed from the blood, dirt, and grime of the battlefield oftentimes had different priorities. The consequences of violating orders did not weigh on him in the slightest or cause even a moment's hesitation. The decision to rescue Liz in Najaf had been a natural one. While Reece's leadership had built trust with his men and was dangerous to a constantly adapting enemy, it oftentimes caused strain between him and those above him in the chain of command. "Making rank" and climbing to the next rung of the military advancement ladder never entered into his calculus. As Reece saw it, his job was to crush the enemy and bring his men home.

Reece also knew the importance of maintaining the moral high ground, something that was one of the few, and perhaps only, differentiators between U.S. forces and the enemy. That he had abandoned his principles when his troop and family had been murdered was not lost on him. The conspiracy permeated his own SEAL command and included a nexus of governmental, financial, and pharmaceutical entities; all their power allied against him. Reece had become the terrorist. He had become the insurgent. And he was good at it. Maybe even better than he was a SEAL. It didn't matter now. He was done. He had left that life behind. It was time to move on.

The urge to fly had taken even Reece by surprise. He had never been a huge fan of flying. That was until he began sifting through his father's old documents; some had been left behind in boxes, and a few had been passed along by contacts at the CIA. Reece had been shocked to discover that Tom Reece had been a pilot. The files indicated that he had earned his private pilot license and instrument rating while at the Agency in preparation for an assignment in Central America.

Why had he never talked about it? Reece had no recollection of him ever mentioning it. Why had he never taken Reece or his mother flying? Reece imagined the three of them around a campfire on the shore of a remote lake grilling freshly caught trout over the coals, a plane like the one he was currently flying beached nearby. Had he told his wife? Had he ever taken her flying? Reece would never know. Another mystery left behind by Tom Reece.

And he thought of his father's letter.

*Use the time you have, James. When you put down the gun, walk away. Don't live in the past. Love your wife. Raise your kids. And don't look back. Treasure each moment, because once it's gone, it's gone forever.*

Since his return from Cyprus, he and Raife had been spending more and more time with Raife's father Jonathan. The old Selous Scout was getting on in age and they all knew the rough living would eventually catch up with him. In one of their conversations, Reece had asked if he knew that Tom had his pilot's license. Jonathan shook his head.

"Some men compartmentalize certain parts of their life for the benefit of their families," he had said, the ghosts of Rhodesia still strong in his voice.

Reece knew, even better than Raife, what part of Jonathan's life he had locked away. Caroline had once told him the story. A story of Sunday, September 3, 1978. The day Jonathan's sister had died in a terrorist attack that had taken Air Rhodesia Flight 825 out of the sky. And she had told him of the events that followed. Caroline had confided in Reece and sworn him to secrecy, passing along a lesson of forgiveness.

"He may not have shared flying with you, lad, but that doesn't mean you can't share it with Katie and perhaps your kids one day, eh?" Jonathan had said, taking a drag on a freshly rolled cigarette. "Liz will get you settled. I've got an old Lake Buccaneer I think you might like. I've been storing her for years. It's time she flew again."

"What's a Lake Buccaneer?" Reece had asked.

"It's better if I show you."

Jonathan had taken Reece to one of his hangers at Glacier Park International Airport and unveiled the unusual flying boat.

"I don't fly much anymore. Years ago, Caroline told me to pick between the cigarettes and the flying, thinking I'd choose flying."

"You sure showed her," Reece joked.

"My flying days were behind me as it was," he said, taking a drag of his cigarette. "Smarter to have Liz behind the controls."

"What is this thing?"

"A Lake Buccaneer. Made by Lake Aircraft. I found her in 1985. The original owner made a rough water landing with the landing gear down and wanted nothing more to do with her. This one was built at their factory in Sanford, Maine, in '76. It was \$26,000 new back then. In '85 I got a hell of a deal."

"How did you find her?"

"I wound up in hunting camp with Armand Rivard, a former Lake Amphibian dealer who had purchased the company a few years earlier. Made the deal over the campfire, fueled by a few too many whiskies."

Jonathan laughed at the memory.

"After the hunt, we linked up in Kissimmee, Florida, where he had moved the company headquarters. He wouldn't let me have it until I went through his course. It's been back to Florida a few times over the years. Flew her down in '88 when they realized the alligator population was getting out of control. Caught a gator with Armand from her nose there," Jonathan said, pointing to the front of the plane. "Damn dinosaur had a deer in its mouth. Gator got away but we ate venison that night. Anyway, this Buccaneer became my first plane in America."

"I didn't realize you learned to fly in Africa," Reece said.

"Ah, in the Rhodesia of my youth one had to be skilled and resourceful out of necessity." Reece nodded.

"You like her?" the old man asked.

"Like her? I love her," Reece said, running his hand along the wing.

"What do you say we give her a second life, eh?"

Reece had looked at the aging patriarch of the Hastings clan.

"I'll ask Harry Shannon to make sure she's air and seaworthy, and then Liz can go to work."

"What do you mean?" Reece asked.

"I mean, it's time for you to fly. In fact, you are looking at your wedding present."

"Reece. *Reece.*"

The familiar voice in his headset broke him from his memories.

"Yeah."

"Thought I lost you, buddy," Liz said.

"Just thinking," Reece replied.

"Well, it's time to think about this landing."

"Got it."

"Complete the turn. What are we looking for?"

Reece had banked the plane to the left with flaps down. He came out of the turn at 800 feet above the lake.

"Debris. Wires. Boats. Paddlers. Surface conditions. Depth. Area clear," Reece said.

"Clear," Liz confirmed. "What else are you looking for?"

"Enemy submarines?"

"How about wind direction?"

"Oh yeah, wind direction. Moving east to west across the lake. We will come in from the west, into the wind," Reece said.

"Correct."

Reece banked the plane again, the forest of northern Montana like a dense green carpet below.

"Stay on this base heading," she advised. "What do we want to avoid?"

"A crash?" Reece responded.

"Be more specific."

"We want to avoid a water loop," he said.

"That's right, no high speed turns on landing. Before that, what's the first thing we want to check?" she nudged.

Reece looked across the instrument panel, going over the procedures in his head.

"Landing gear," he said. "Hydraulic pressure is up."

He turned his head to visually confirm that the landing gear was up. "Visually confirmed."

Liz double checked her student.

"Alternator switch on," Reece said, deep in concentration, as he went through his checklist. "Fuel boost pump on. Hydraulic pump on. Wheels up. Flaps down. Water rudder up. Trim set. Propeller set. Mixture set."

"Good," Liz said. "Now, remember to control the rate of descent. Small throttle adjustments."

"Small throttle adjustments," Reece repeated.

"Speed?" Liz asked.

"Between 80 and 85 miles per hour," Reece responded, remembering that speed in a Lake Amphibian was relayed in miles rather than knots.

"And?" she coaxed.

"And..."

"What else?"

Reece's eyes scanned the instrument panel as the plane continued to descend.

"You told me it was something you did constantly on mission."

"Oh yeah - an out. If we need to abort or touch and go, egress will be to the south to avoid the mountains."

As a leader, Reece had constantly played the "what if" game on patrol, anticipating his actions and calls if his SEAL element were hit at that precise moment. Flying was no different. Well, it was different in that no one was shooting at them.

"Reducing power to eighteen inches MP," Reece said, referring to the manifold pressure gauge, which indicated the engine's current operating power.

"Good. You've got this Reece."

"Nose down. Reducing power to 12 inches MP. Wings level."

"Great work. Don't rush it. This plane knows what to do. Hold attitude and wait."

As Reece continued to descend, he briefly turned his attention to the house and dock expecting to see Katie watching his first water landing. He didn't expect to see another figure standing next to her.

Reece shifted focus from the water, his mind switching gears.

“Reece!” Liz said, the urgency apparent in her tone.

Instead of looking at his instructor, Reece turned to the rifle in the back seat.

“Reece, your rate of descent is too fast. *Reece!*”

*Katie, I’ve got to protect Katie.*

“Reece, slow your rate of descent!” Liz ordered.

But Reece wasn’t there.

“Take it,” he said, looking back out the window at the two people on the dock and reaching into the backseat for his rifle.

“I’ve got the controls,” Liz said.

“You’ve got it,” Reece whispered as he edged back on the charging handle to confirm that there was a round in the chamber. He had remembered the procedure for triple confirmation of positive control when turning over control of an aircraft but forgot the visual check to ensure the person next to him was actually flying the plane.

“It’s my airplane,” Liz said, completing the third step in the process and expertly bringing the amphibious aircraft into a picture-perfect water landing.

Ever the professional, Liz slowly put the throttle into idle while easing forward on the yoke, relaxing backpressure, and bringing the plane off step.

“Well, that was *fucking* western,” Liz said, turning to face her student. “What the hell happened?”

“Just get me to the dock,” Reece said, looking down at the rifle. Thinking better of it, he set it back on the seat behind him. His hand then went to the grip of the Grayguns Bruiser SIG Sauer P210 in the leather Alessi holster behind his right hip.

“Reece, what are you doing?”

“Just be ready,” Reece said, his eyes scanning the shoreline.

Liz maneuvered the plane toward the dock, approaching from the west to ensure that the wind was directly on the nose. She shut the engine down and told Reece to put out bumpers.

Reece pushed the left gull wing door open and unfastened his seatbelt.

He recognized the man standing with Katie.

It was a man from the CIA.

A man Reece knew well.

Reece stood, stepped onto the nose of what was now essentially a boat, and then leapt to the dock, a line attached to a cleat on the nose of the plane in his hand.

“Make yourself useful, Vic,” Reece said, handing the man the line and stepping between him and Katie to attach a separate line to the left wing float. He then secured it to another cleat on the dock, head on a swivel in search of threats.

“It’s good to see you too, Reece,” Vic said, pulling the line taut and kneeling to attach it to a cleat at his feet.

Victor Rodriguez was the director of the Agency’s Special Activities Center and was responsible for the darkest of CIA operations around the globe. He stood back up and nodded at Liz who now leaned against the open cockpit.

“Ms. Riley,” he said.

“Mr. Rodriguez,” she acknowledged.

"You are a hard man to get ahold of," Vic said, directing his attention back to Reece.

"That's obviously by design," Reece responded, his eyes piercing past the Agency man to the hillside behind the house, noting that Raife and Jonathan Hastings stood watch on the back deck.

"I didn't give them much warning," Vic said. "I'm alone."

"Maybe call next time," Reece offered.

"It would help if you got a phone."

"What do you want, Vic?" Reece asked, putting his arm protectively around Katie.

"We need to talk."

"About what?"

"We need to talk about Alice."

## Chapter 2

### *Sacramento, California*

Congresswoman Christine Harding hated Sacramento. Thank God the Golden State had San Francisco and Los Angeles. The future of the nation couldn't be trusted to farmers.

*Qu'ils mangent de la brioche.*

As a life-long political animal, she understood why Alec Christensen had chosen that bitch Gale Olsen as his running mate. She was younger, not unattractive, and an Army veteran, even if she was just a JAG. She was also of Cuban descent, but more importantly she represented Florida's 9<sup>th</sup> District. California's 54 electoral votes were already going to Christensen. He had needed Florida to win, and he got it. Olsen had beaten her to the White House, even if she wasn't at the top of the ticket.

The party was slow to understand the power of the technologies that Alec Christensen used to build and solidify his base, and by the time they realized it he already had unstoppable momentum. He could not be bought, as he didn't need money, and his background could not have been more ideally suited for the highest office in the land. When he announced Gale Olsen as his running mate, the party begrudgingly got behind them. They were the golden ticket, and as nervous as the establishment was about two relatively young candidates outside their control, the other side could not be allowed to win.

The media talked endlessly of a return to Camelot. *What nonsense.* The press had a hard time letting go of that period in American history. *Nostalgia.* Harding did not suffer from that affliction. John F. Kennedy was dead, as was his brother. Harding had been young, just twelve years old, when Kennedy was shot. But she remembered. She remembered her parents glued to the television. She could feel their grief. She felt the country's grief.

And now she was in position to occupy the very office as had Kennedy, an opportunity to sit at the same *Resolute* Desk. In one of the closest elections on record, he had won by the narrowest of margins over Nixon in November of 1960. She remembered her parent's that night too, their hope and optimism. She was old enough to understand their generation had been shaped by the Great Depression and the Second World War, and how the looming shadow

of the Soviet Union threatened not just America but the entire world. Kennedy represented a brighter future. And then he was shot down, not unlike President Christensen. Camelot was dead. There was no going back. The world had changed, and if you didn't change with it, you'd be as dead as those former presidents. Harding looked to the future. A global future. "America first" was a punchline.

With the election of President Christensen and Vice President Olsen, it appeared that Harding was out of contention. The appetite for an older president had faded. She had missed her window. Her political career would continue in the legislative branch. She had been so close.

But then the field shifted. President Christensen had been killed in that tragic bombing. IEDs? EFPs, if she remembered correctly. She didn't know exactly how they worked, but apparently even presidential armored motorcade vehicles were no match for them. That assassination had propelled Gale Olsen into the Oval Office; the first female president in United States history. But she had assumed the office by default. She had not been elected president. Not really. The auspices under which she had taken the oath would hand over her presidency. Not until she was officially elected president by the voting public with her at the top of the ticket could she emerge from Christensen's shadow. Unfortunately for Harding, who watched the polls like a hawk, that election looked promising. The congresswoman had thought all hope was lost until Olsen made the surprise announcement that she would not be running for reelection.

A scandal was brewing. Harding could smell it a mile away. If there was anything that Americans liked more than an underdog story, it was scandal and a fall from grace.

The rumors had been swirling for years, even before Christensen named Olsen as his running mate. It wasn't her husband's philandering that would sink her; the liberal media ignored it, and, aside from a few AM radio hosts and podcasters, the conservative media didn't touch it. It wasn't his failure as an attorney or even his career as an opioid lobbyist which made him inherently unlikable and slimy across the board. Rather it was the influence peddling. Almost everyone, without exception, in Washington D.C. was involved in influence peddling in one way or another to varying degrees. It was baked into the fabric of the culture. Why did people think that powerful people and huge corporations and industries, domestic and foreign, spent so much money there? And it wasn't just the in city on the Potomac. It was the way of the world. Harding was going to take it to the next level. Discreetly.

*Discretion.*

That was the attribute lacking in Olsen's husband.

If you lived within the system, you could thrive. Money was a critical component. It made that system work. It greased the wheels and made things happen. In fact, what the media termed "influence peddling" was legal in many respects. It was a gray area. A very wide one, but there were rules. Politicians, for the most part, did not take briefcases full of money from foreign agents or corporate fixers at a seedy bars. That was not how it was done. There were numerous other ways. And everyone knew it. It was entrenched in the American political ethos.

Whether they realized it or not, a deal had been struck with the citizenry. In exchange for this blatant political corruption, the people were to receive relative safety and stability. One could not thumb their nose at either the system or the American people. Working class citizens



could only tolerate so much. You had to pay them lip service. Don't be obvious and publicly sell clearly hideous artwork to party donors or foreign agents after taking an interest in painting a week earlier. Even the most ardent party apologists and loyalists had a hard time defending that one with a straight face. No, you had to be smart about it.

And Harding was smart.

The honorable Christine Harding exited the black armored SUV on 10<sup>th</sup> Street in front of the California State capitol. Her dark blue St. John Knits pant suit, the uniform of influential female politicians across the nation, perfectly tailored to exude just the right story – powerful without being bitchy, confident without being overbearing, smart without being elitist. If she was going to be elected to the highest office in the land, she would need the support of women *and* men. Politics was a delicate game, especially today.

Even though she was in her early sixties and had come of age in a time before the internet, she recognized the influence of social media. Just as JFK had leveraged the power of a new medium called television, Harding had adapted by embracing the latest apps. Going viral on TikTok with a legion of young fans had certainly helped, but she also needed to appeal to those who would actually exercise their right to vote. Her campaign was a full spectrum approach to manipulation. It was time to move closer to the middle to appeal to independents. Today was just such an opportunity.

Flanked by her secret service detail, she marched across the courtyard toward the impressive white neoclassical domed structure, its fluted Corinthian columns and arched granite base beckoning like a magnet. Tall green trees stood like sentries, lining the wide path that led to heart of California political power. The impressive structure was completed in 1874 and constructed to look like the U.S. Capitol building in D.C. Harding felt right at home.

She had requested, and been granted, early Secret Service protection by the Department of Homeland Security, not because she was actually concerned for her safety but because of the optics. Just like stopping to take questions in front of the Capitol building asked by hand selected reporters from friendly news organizations, being photographed and recorded protected by Secret Service agents arriving and departing venues in black armored SUVs; Harding looked presidential, and looking presidential was half the battle.

In what was meant to appear spontaneous but had in reality been coordinated by her public relations team, a swarm of reporters converged on her as she confidently took the steps up to the front of the capitol. Some had iPhones or DSLR cameras, while others from established news networks held microphones and were trailed by cameramen carrying large video cameras on their shoulders; even Harding had to remind herself they were now called 'camera operators,' though she couldn't recall ever seeing a camerawoman.

"One at a time," she said with a kind but confident smile over the milieu.

"Do you feel you have a lock on your party's nomination?"

"Would you support a federal moratorium on the death penalty if elected president, like we have here in California?"

"How do you reconcile your support for new taxes on guns and ammunition with your pledge to not raise taxes?"

"Would you support additional federal funding to replace police officers with social workers and mental health professionals?"

"Would you continue to support student loan forgiveness once in office?"

“Who is on your short list for VP?”

“Would you support a federal fracking ban based on the California model?”

“Will California’s 2035 goal of banning all gas-powered car production be a national initiative for your administration?”

“Will you sign an executive order to provide health care for undocumented residents country-wide?”

“Do you stand by your pledge to ban assault weapons on your first day in office?”

“Do you think the country should follow California’s example and put forward legislation to further regulate vehicle speed limits?”

She answered each question diplomatically, using the contrived opportunity to move towards more centrist positions in the leadup to November. She had momentum. This was her time.

Harding held up her hands as she finished, there was business to attend to inside.

“Thank you,” she said.

The congresswoman began to turn but then stopped and looked back to the cameras.

“And one final thing,” she said, shoulders back, tall and striking with clear eyes and just the right amount of smile. “Don’t forget to vote.”