

CHAPTER 1

It had all gone incredibly wrong. Agents from the National Security Branch of the FBI were knocking at his door, ready to brand him as a traitor. A traitor! John Thomas Simpson, holder of the Purple Heart and the Medal of Honor, a former adviser to the President of the United States, was about to be forcibly removed from his home in handcuffs. He would be disgraced. A criminal to be paraded in front of the press as an example of why warrantless domestic wiretapping of US citizens is necessary for the security of the country—his country.

He had already made up his mind not to answer the door. If they wanted him, they would have to come in and get him—use a battering ram—let the American public see what fascist brutes were running the nation. He was convinced that the goons outside his home had no clue—no understanding of what he'd been through—certain that they would have acted the same way if it had been one of their own, their wife, or their daughter.

The tears welling up in his eyes blurred his vision as he glanced around his home office. The mementos, accumulated during thirty-five years of loyal service to his country, which hung proudly on the walls and took places of honor on the shelves, meant nothing today. His life had been wasted. He had discredited his career, put his family in danger and perhaps, cost thousands of innocent people their lives.

His cell phone, set to vibrate, buzzed as it lay on the glass protecting the top of the antique solid mahogany desk. It was announcing the call he was expecting. He flipped it open and placed it against his ear. “Mr. Simpson, this is Special Agent Steve Woodward with the NSB, we have a team outside your home. Please come outside and surrender peacefully.”

Simpson gathered up his courage and responded in the only way he knew how: “Screw you!” He snapped the phone closed, tossed it across the room, and watched as it shattered the glass of the shadow box that displayed his Medal of Honor. The phone, still in one piece, dropped to the floor. It started to buzz again. He ignored it. The phone on his desk started to ring, and he tried to ignore that one too.

From his chair, he watched as agents with rifles, vests, and helmets took “at ready” positions on the rooftops of the surrounding buildings. Within minutes of the first knock on his front door, every window and doorway of his home had fallen under the watchful eyes of an experienced marksman.

The phone on his desk continued to ring unabated. He silenced the phone by yanking the cord violently out of the wall socket. The ringing continued to resonate throughout the house. He closed the heavy oak office door, muffling the cacophony from the other phones. The cell phone buzzed annoyingly on the floor. John walked over and stomped on it with his size thirteen Oxfords. The buzzing stopped. The room was quiet once again. John Thomas Simpson returned

to his desk, sat casually back in his chair, and placed his hands palms down on his desk. In front of him, between his hands lay a loaded revolver. John stared at the gun.

Is it a brave man who puts a gun to his head and pulls the trigger or is it an act of a coward? He had been contemplating this dilemma for several days. In ancient Japan, the only way to restore one's honor after an unbearable shame was to commit Hari Kari. John took for granted that the instantaneous death brought on by a bullet did not compare with the incredibly painful act of disemboweling oneself with a sword. The result would be the same, so why in this society would he, by pulling the trigger, be considered a coward who was not prepared to face the consequences of his actions? John's head ached with the indecision brought on by the dichotomy of the two thoughts.

Just under a mile away, on the tenth-floor balcony of an apartment building, a lone sniper steadied his weapon. He took note of the flags blowing in the breeze, using them to judge the wind speed, and watched carefully for any slight change in direction. At this range he needed to take everything into account, wind, humidity, temperature, along with the thickness of the glass and the angle the bullet would strike the window. He could leave nothing to chance, and there was only one opportunity for this and it had to be exact.

The sniper took one last look at the flags and adjusted his aim slightly, almost imperceptibly, a quarter millimeter to the right. He held his breath and squeezed gently on the trigger. The double pane window of John's office imploded as the first bullet shattered the glass. The shot caught him in the left side of his back, between the third and fourth rib, ripping directly through his heart before exiting his chest. John's body slumped forward. The second shot, its trajectory and speed pure now that the glass no longer posed a deflective barrier, tore the majority of the flesh and bone that had once formed John Simpson's head, savagely off his body.

Steve Woodward's baritone voice boomed through the hand held radios: "Hold your fire! What the hell just happened? Who fired? I want station reports now!"

Each of the NSB agents reported in matter-of-factly: "Station one negative, no rounds discharged." "Station two negative, wasn't us either." until all the government marksmen and their rounds were accounted for. Steve barked into the radio. "Where's Simpson? What's his status?"

One of the marksmen from the rooftop responded. "Sir, Simpson's dead." Steve froze. Across the street, a melee of reporters from every major news outlet stood waiting for the arrest—running live feed—their presence brought on by a tip from the agency itself. Steve's Blackberry vibrated in his pocket. He ignored it.

"Are you sure?"

The agent's response sent chills down Steve's spine. "Yes Sir. We're going to need to send in the bio-hazard squad. It's a mess in there."

The Blackberry vibrated again. Steve pulled the annoying phone out of his pocket, ready to turn it off. He made the mistake of looking at the screen before pressing the little red button that would shut it down. The name displayed on the tiny screen made him wince. The last thing he wanted to deal with right now was a call from Andrew Brisbane Director of the FBI, but prior experience had proven that it would be unwise to ignore his boss's boss. He reluctantly answered the call.

“Yes Sir.”

“What in the hell is going on there Woodward? CNN is reporting the sound of glass shattering and possible shots fired.”

Steve quickly ran through his response options and chose the most-appropriate course of action for the moment. He lied. “Sir, I'm not sure what CNN are basing their report on. What I can tell you at this point is that we have lost contact with Simpson and we are trying to re-establish the connection.”

“Call me back as soon as you have him. I'm ten minutes away and want to be there to make a statement when you bring him out.”

“Yes Sir.” Steve's response barely made it through his tightly clenched jaws. Simpson would be coming out in a body bag and he was certain that Andrew Brisbane would not want to be standing in front of the press when that happened.

Yusuf Al Aswar packed the rifle into the black classic Fender deluxe guitar case and rode the elevator to the ground floor lobby. Apartment 1005 would be found in exactly the same condition as he had found it—not a trace would remain to indicate his presence there. Eventually, the crime scene investigators would figure out that the shots had been fired from the balcony, and the young couple who had paid a premium for the impressive view from the tenth floor would be shocked when the agents arrived at their door with a search warrant. Yusuf smiled as he stepped off the elevator thinking about the hours—perhaps days—the young couple would spend in intensive interrogation before the NSB figured out they had nothing to do with the shooting.

Yusuf caught a glimpse of his reflection in the mirrored column of the lobby and paused for a moment. He found it difficult to equate the clean shaven young man staring back at him with the devote Muslim that lived within the skin. He thanked Allah that his work here was done and that he could stop shaving once again. In spite of what the local Mullah had told him—that he was a good Muslim fighting for the cause and that Allah would ignore this slight transgression—the act of dragging that blade across his face every morning over the past month and offending Allah had made him cringe. Yusuf was anxious to get back to his home, back to wearing his flowing cotton dishdashah and out of the uncomfortable clothing of the infidels. He rubbed his face with his hand. In seven days, his beard should be thick enough to please Allah, and more importantly to satisfy the Mutaween, the religious police of his village, who enforced

their own strict interpretation of Sharia law. Only then, when the smooth skin of his face was no longer exposed, would he be able to venture back to his birthplace.

The bell announcing the arrival of the elevator jarred him out of his daze, reminding him that he was wasting time and increasing his risk of being seen. The longer he lingered, the more obvious his presence would become. An old couple shuffled out of the elevator, and Yusuf stepped behind the column out of their line of sight. He waited impatiently as they left the building, frustrated by their slow, agonizing display of age. Yusuf wondered if he would live to be old like that; Insha'Allah he whispered to himself—if it is God's will—however he knew in his heart that Allah had much different plans for him.

Yusuf exited the lobby, walked casually down the street and spoke one simple phrase into a disposable cell phone. “Ytm Dhk”—it is done. Without waiting for a reply, he tossed the cell phone into the back of a garbage truck as it turned the corner in front of him. The air was filled with of the mournful wails of emergency vehicles and the deep bass pulsations of the news helicopters as they rushed overhead. Yusuf looked up to the sky and smiled for the second time today.