Chapter 1 - The Snatch

Midtown Manhattan, 11:01 A.M. — Donovan focused on the table in front of him as though it were the last thing he would ever see. His concentration was admirable.

“This is taking longer than expected,” his Japanese assistant Mo said quietly.

“Perfection takes time,” Donovan grinned.

While most people conducting this procedure would be sweating bullets, Donovan wasn’t—even though she wiped his brow every few minutes.

“You good?” she asked, already knowing the answer.

“Very.”

“Nervous?”

“Never.”

Maiko “Mo” Wang had been Donovan’s assistant and girlfriend for the past ten years. She knew him well, and could tell when he was bluffing. Today, however, she wasn’t sure. She watched him carefully, admiring the skill with which his hands worked. And the effortless way the razor sharp tool sliced through tender skin.

“Have you decided what pattern you’d use?” she asked.

“What?”

“Pattern, you know—”

He nodded. “Three loop pulley.”

She nodded in return, saying nothing.

The temperature in the warehouse had lowered considerably, and had to be in order to keep the meat fresh and the surgeon sharp. The area doubled as a temporary refrigeration station for a nearby restaurant. Being underground also helped keep noise and interruptions at bay.

“High tensile strength, less gap. Prevents ripping,” he quietly said.

“Of course.”

As the blade glistened from the bright overhead lights, Donovan caught himself staring at the angelic face of the child on his operating table—marveling at her porcelain skin and golden, soft hair.

It was a sharp contrast to what lay in front of them.

“This is certainly one of your more…” Mo hesitated—not sure his mood. “Different scenarios.”

“Drastic times. Drastic measures.”

Making a last deep cut, he was careful not to lacerate internal organs. He likewise wanted to keep the scar minimal, although he knew the girl would be reminded of this moment—and the maniac performing the procedure, for years to come.

Donovan whistled, keeping his spirits up and nerves down.

THREE HOURS EARLIER —
Young Abigail Burton was strolling through Central Park with her Nanny—French-born Stephanie Marcheaux, just as they did every weekday. Having just left the Zoo, the two were making their way to the Dairy Visitor Center & Gift Shop, when the distance between them stretched.

“Abigail, stay close!” Stephanie shouted, as the nine year old ran toward balloon artists who were busily making free souvenirs for a large gaggle of children.

“Oui, oui, Miss Stephanie,” Abigail giggled, as she ran to join the other children who were likewise mesmerized by the colorful and animated clowns. Abigail is the only child of New York Mayor, Lukas S. Burton—one of the most admired leaders of New York, and perhaps in the entire country. He has been commended for dramatically lowering both crime and tax rates for three years in a row, and rumors say he is considering running for President of the United States.

Summer had arrived early in Manhattan. The flowers were in full bloom and people were out in droves. That made for a packed park, thanks to a 5K race for Breast Cancer Awareness. The race was to begin in the middle of the park—where 65th Transverse intersects Center Drive, and would end a city block north of the Columbus Circle entrance—where 59th meets Central Park West.

Stephanie was completely engrossed in her cell phone, when she glanced up just in time to panic when she didn’t see Abigail.

“Abi?” she screamed, whipping her head around in all directions.

“Over here,” Abigail shouted, waving goodbye to her friends, as she ran toward her nanny. Stephanie’s shoulders relaxed just as a woman approached from behind, pulling on Stephanie’s sleeve.

“Please help me. I’ve lost my little girl,” the woman cried first in French, then in English. Distracted by the hysteria, but pulled in by the stranger’s familiar accent, Stephanie first checked to see that Abigail was just feet away, where she had stopped to join several children pet a large rabbit which was being held by a tall circus clown with yellow-hair and a red-nose.

“Please help,” the stranger continued shouting, pulling at Stephanie’s sweater. “My little girl has run off and…”

“Where did you see her last?” Stephanie said before abruptly stopping, as the eyes of the hysterical woman suddenly shifted from terror to neutrality.

Confused, Stephanie whipped back toward Abigail.

Stephanie gasped aloud, as her eyes desperately scanned the crowd. Suddenly, there was no clown.

No rabbit.

No Abigail.

Shocked and distracted by the continual pulling at her sleeve, Stephanie spun back around to the hysterical stranger. But instead, she found a blind man wearing sunglasses and holding a cane. He appeared disoriented.
“Putain de merde!” Stephanie screamed in French, frantically fumbling for her cellphone, while scanning the park for help. Seeing a police officer in the distance, she felt momentarily hopeful.

Turning back to the second stranger, the blind man was gone.

As tears turned to sobs, her head buzzed and her heart sank. Standing there amidst a throng of runners and sun-worshipping strangers, the Mayor’s number one employee of the past dozen years became paralyzed with fear—worrying she would either be fired, or even murdered then dumped in the East River. Either solution would be better than being responsible for the loss of Abigail Renee Burton.

As his daughter was being snatched from Central Park, Mayor Burton was hosting a televised conference about a new super train he was promoting which would run the distance of Long Island, while Abigail's socialite mother, Clare Marie, was hosting a fundraising event atop the elegant Frick Museum on the upper-crusty East Side.

Simultaneously, Donovan’s other assistant and second girlfriend, Margo “Hysterical Mother” Wheeler, and Donovan’s bodyguard Ken “Park Clown” Dawson, along with computer geek Sean “Blind Man” Combs, were racing down the Westside Highway in an all black SUV adorned with police license plates, strobing lights, and a stuttering siren.

By the time the nanny had cleared enough headspace to call 911, they were in the underbelly of a subterranean warehouse, in the Chelsea district of Midtown—disappearing without a trace.

Donovan Blair, known in dark corners of the world as Scorpion, never tired of thinking of inventive ways of getting his products from lines of impasse to lanes of progress. With a life packed with determination and drive, he was a man of clarity and focus—wanting nothing more than to make enormous amounts of money which would give him massive amounts of control. The passion to be rich superseded anything else and represented what few genuinely knew: Freedom. Power was a close second. And Donovan made certain nothing stood in the way of his achieving both.

“What’s her BP?” he quietly asked Mo.

“110 over 60.”

“Perfect,” he smiled.

The rogue surgeon had worked diligently for hours. Carefully slicing Abigail from sternum to abdomen, he had opened her stomach cavity—pushing aside internal organs, only to place several small balloons of synthetic explosives inside the healthy and delicate body. She was being perfectly monitored, as to remove any potential infections or complications.

“Roll another one, will ya?” Donovan smirked, motioning for Mo to fill another balloon.

“I’ve got a bit more space.”

Mo tapped a small glass vial of explosives into a balloon, careful to keep the material from contaminating the area. Or risking possible devastation.
Taking the last tube of destruction from her steady hands, he filled a remaining space and whispered, “Nicely done.” Admiring her precision, he added, “Now, let’s see how my seam work goes.”

Years earlier, Donovan’s original synthetic mixture of explosives was called K5. Similar to C4—which was a popular product for dropping buildings in cities nationwide, or destroying enemies in battle around the globe, he had developed the deadly concoction for his construction business. The difference between C4 and Blair’s latest proprietary material was its lower toxicity, yet higher combustibility factors. Terrorists had made headlines in Brussels by using a similar product in the form of TATP, a crystalline power. Nightmare Dust, as authorities had come to call it, was quickly becoming the new method to wreak havoc.

While Donovan’s usual fare of mayhem included kidnapping, drug trafficking and murder, his latest endeavor would gain higher access, using lower resources, reaching into deeper pockets, for shallower reasons.

Ken Dawson, Donovan’s bodyguard and ammunitions specialist, had been watching from a distance, balancing calls on two separate cellphones. He approached the table. “Hey, boss?”

“Yeah,” Donovan grunted, without looking up.

“Burton and his wife just got the news. They’re both heading to his office now.”

Donovan looked up at a bank of oversized clocks on the wall. “Perfect timing,” he said, closing the last stitch. Nodding toward a case at the end of the table, he said, “Put that next to the patient.”

Opening it, Donovan retrieved a transmitter half the size of a watch battery, and connected it to a tiny wire protruding from the stitches in Abigail’s lower abdomen.

Closing the last stitch, he nodded to Mo. “Get her dressed and upstairs.” Turning to Ken, he added, “You and me, upstairs. Time to plug in Part 2.”

Donovan had chosen to set up shop in the Meatpacking District years ago, when meat was the currency of the day and rents were affordable enough to buy entire buildings for less than six-figures. Today, things were different, as buildings were going up in months, not years, and access to and from the island was much more sophisticated than it used to be. Another selling point was the proximity to not only the Holland and Lincoln Tunnels, but a Helipad on 30th. Having those avenues of egress so close, and a Bell Ranger helicopter mere blocks away, provided him easy access to the island—getting him wherever he needed. Donovan capitalized on the accessibility, as well as his expertise in military warfare. All that combined to provide him the control and power he so desperately craved.

Upstairs, Abigail was being filled with a variety of antibiotics and vitamins to keep her body functioning as normally as was possible. Mo was administering a buffet of calculated drugs; one to wake her, another to control her, and yet another to erase her memory.

Donovan leaned against a wall of floor-to-ceiling glass, admiring the High Line revitalization below. The location of his Hell’s Kitchen tower afforded him a panoramic 360-degree view—allowing him to keep an eye on an enormous portion of Manhattan. The live-work building was a fortress of steel and glass, with the best of security.
“This is your best plan yet, babe,” Margo whispered in Donovan’s ear. He leaned into her, allowing a kiss on his neck. “Feels wickedly good,” he smiled, kissing her cheek.

Entering the office barefoot and quiet, Mo said, “I expect her to wake up in about 20.” Quiet before the storm, he thought, waving her close. He kissed Mo, then Margo, as the three shared a warm embrace.

Ken and Sean entered the room, taking a seat at an enormous marble dining room table. Rubbing his hands together, he said, “Okay, kids. Let’s go over the plan once more before our surprise package wakes up. With so many pieces to our puzzle, everything must come together perfectly.”

Young Abigail would soon be part mule and part incendiary device—a dangerous conduit aimed at bringing down a prominent political leader in the most powerful city in the world: a family man who crossed a mad man one too many times.

Scorpion would soon attack with an explosive sting Manhattan would never forget.
Chapter 2 - The Prep

Donovan had the attention of his crew who were watching their leader pace like an expectant father. Periodically scanning mid-town Manhattan, his eyes shifted from the city, to his team. The constant motion was not nerves, but energy. Staying fit with daily exercise kept him at the front of the pack. In every situation. His confidence, plus the drive to win at any cost, had always made him one of the elite in any of his former units. But his days of military service had run off the rails, evolving into a new mission.

His current squadron included Mo Wang—a woman he had known the longest. She was expert in computers and electronic surveillance. Besides being one of his two girlfriends, she was the only person he trusted with his life.

Another he trusted nearly as well was Ken Dawson—a comrade of twenty years. They had grown up together in their old Brooklyn neighborhood. That was before one turned to the military, and the other to law enforcement. Ken became Donovan's bodyguard about seven years ago, when Donovan found himself in the wrong place at the wrong time; something that didn't happen often. Ken was there to save his ass. It also became the tipping point where Ken exchanged his “life of Blue” for a life of crime.

When Donovan showed Ken his future could be infinitely more lucrative if he helped get his pal out of a tight spot, it was Game Over. Their secret sauce was how they had managed for Ken to keep one foot in the blue camp and the other working for Team Scorpion.

“It won't be long,” Donovan said, checking his Tag Heuer, "Before the shit hits the fan.”

“But you've planned meticulously,” Mo smiled. “As always.”

“She's right, Donovan,” Margo added. "We've gone over the mechanics a dozen times. The snatch was flawless.”

Sean nodded. “Copy that, boss. I'd beg anyone to put a bead on us.”

“That's not my concern. You all performed perfectly. It’s the unknown I’m always overly cautious about.”

Donovan wanted his team always happy and ever loyal. Which is why he spared no expense in providing luxurious homes with a state-of-the-art fitness center and pool on the penthouse level of the building the entire team occupied. Add to that handsome salaries, huge bonuses, and all the toys one could want, and it was a win-win.

_Avalon Tower_ was a glass and steel tower that skyrocketed toward the sky, passing all surrounding high-rises by dozens of stories. Among the best in the city, it offered modern construction, European amenities like a full-blown concierge service. The 1,225 foot residential tower placed it among the five tallest buildings in New York City—in between the Empire State Building and Bank of America tower. The only taller residential tower was 425 Park Avenue, climbing nearly as high as One World Trade—the proud replacement to the two World Trade Center buildings that collapsed on 9-11, which rose to 1,776 feet.

It was nearly five years ago when Donovan and his investors began erecting the modern structure on Eleventh Avenue. Being located in the heart of Hell’s Kitchen, it practically sat atop
the Lincoln Tunnel, had instant access to Air Pegasus heliport on 30th, was within minutes of Penn Station, and not much further from Grand Central Station. The location, and more specifically Donovan’s penthouse, provided perfect visibility of the George Washington Bridge to the north, the Holland Tunnel and Brooklyn Bridge to the South, and both the Queensboro Bridge and Midtown Tunnel to the East.

Having a bird’s eye view of the island was not only a luxury, but a necessity. The office, and home to their underground labs, sat directly across the street in a nondescript eight-story brick building. Built in 1905, Donovan had purchased it a decade ago when his drug business was young and prosperous. The building had remained unchanged, with one exception. The building maestro had created construction magic by leaving alone all the office units which faced Eleventh and 45th Avenue, while the two sides which faced neighboring buildings were retrofitted like a Hollywood backlot, showing what appeared to be a live office. Lights turned on and off all hours of the day and night which provided a perfect cover for his underground business.

The center of the building had been cut out like an enormous tube, extending from the basement to the roof’s skylights. This allowed any airborne byproducts to filter from the basement before dissipating through the roof. Thanks to advanced filtering systems, it called no attention. The subterranean warehouse was three stories deep, underneath two parking decks, and apart from hiding a monstrous drug lab, the depth of the building masked tremendous technology for all the monitoring that happened in Donovan’s penthouse.

“This is why I chose you guys long ago. And why we’re working together today,” Donovan said, looking at each of his team.

“And we will see this through, just as we have from the start,” Mo said quietly.

Taking a remote, he aimed it at a large piece of art on the wall. A panel quietly lifted into a pocket in the ceiling, as a bank of tall doors quietly opened and seamlessly pivoted before disappearing into the wall. All eyes were on a wall of TV screens which were monitoring most of the major intersections in Manhattan.

The team clapped as though he just dropped a winning putt. The technology, along with an enormous arsenal of weapons, made for one of the most expensive bank of toys Donovan had ever created.

When Donovan’s underground lab at the former Nuclear Power Plant outside Havana was demolished—thanks to misplaced operatives who got embedded with a business partner of his, he needed an alternate place to expand his business, without having to travel overseas. Plus, the hometown boy wanted to make his mark in his own backyard.

“Is that the Governor’s—” Sean began.

“Mansion? Yes,” Donovan grinned. “And the Mayor’s home,” he said, pointing at another screen. “Over here is the home of our esteemed Chief of Police.” Pointing to another screen, he added, “And just outside the secret entrance to the United Nations,” Donovan said, crossing the room, “Is the Federal Reserve Bank. Oh, and we can’t leave out the Central Park Zoo.”

“Looks familiar, right kids?” Margo joked, punching Sean in the shoulder.
“And Times Square, One World Trade, The Stock Exchange, Penn Station, Grand Central,” he continued clicking screens, “And all the tunnel and bridges, with entrances and exits.”

“Talking about Big Brother,” Mo chuckled. “Jesus.”

“Nah,” Donovan grinned, “You can just call me Scorpion.”
Mayor Lukas S. Burton and his entire security entourage completely commandeered the front of the New York Mayor’s Office of Operations. The long line of black SUVs stretched the length of the building along Broadway, wrapping around to Murray. The parade of vehicles resembled a funeral procession. Burton’s heart sank at the thought of that being an omen. A random gaggle of press had followed the pack of politicos from Long Island—wondering where the fire was.

Pushing aside the fear, he stormed down the hallway toward his office, having multiple and simultaneous conversations with members of his staff along the way. Staff who were not in attendance at the Super Train media circus on Long Island joined others in preparation for an impending media conference. The press was already a pack of salivating dogs awaiting a meal of gossip. Burton could only imagine how the news had spread so quickly.

“Where in the hell is my wife?” Burton barked to his small pack of personnel.

“She’s in your office, sir,” Margaret Childress, his secretary of two terms answered. “She arrived within minutes of being notified by your Nanny that—”

“And where in God’s name is that moron!” he shouted. “I want her in my office now and I—”

Childress pulled up close to the Mayor’s ear, lowering her voice and nodding to the security director.

“Sir, might I suggest that Ms. Marcheaux wait in your private lobby?” Margaret interrupted.

Mayor Burton slowed his pace and taking her by the arm quietly said, “Yes, good idea. Otherwise, I’ll kill for—”

Knowing everything he said was being monitored, he stopped and planted a smile across his face. “Thank you, Ms. Childress, that’s fine. I’ll be in my office, talking to…” He stopped in mid-sentence, catching the piercing look of his Chief of Police crossing the expanse of marbled hallway.

Red-faced and overweight, Chief Jacob Davis looked petrified. He had been elected to the office two years before the Mayor was elected, and while they hadn’t started as friends, both had grown to respect one another. Burton was known to be a bear—demanding complete loyalty from his staff, and Davis could be a dick—disregarding his staff when he wasn’t revered. Both understood one another’s need for loyalty. Their heads had butted a dozen times along the way; that was until Burton found Davis’ soft spot. Cash.

“What’s up, Jake?” Burton asked, likely knowing the results—judging from the man’s expression.

“Not good, Mayor,” Chief Davis said, nodding toward the office where they were heading.

“Right,” Burton said, taking a deep breath and pushing the nightmare down as far as his mind would allow. He handed Margaret his briefcase. “Can you take this, brew a pot, and give
me…” he hesitated, looking to The Chief who held up five fingers. “Five minutes. No, make that ten. I gotta pee. The drive on the L.I.E. shook my kidneys into my back pocket.”

Relieving himself at the urinal, the Mayor listened to his Chief rattle on.
“First, I’m sorry, Luke. Seriously. Oh my god, I wouldn’t know what…” he stumbled, shaking his head. “Anyway, we have no idea where she is. I mean, I’ve been drilling your nanny downstairs for the past half hour and all I’ve got outta that fuckin’ immigrant is…” He took a deep breath, checking the Mayor’s reaction. “Sorry, but she’s fuckin’ hysterical and I can’t for the life of me figure it out. I mean…”

Zipping his pants, Burton crossed to the sink, holding up a hand for Davis to slow down. “I get it. She’s an idiot. And trust me…” he looked around the stalls. “If you, I mean if WE don’t find my daughter inside the next 24 hours, you will make that fuckin’ moron disappear. Hear me?”

Davis nodded, handing the Mayor a paper towel.
“What else?” Burton barked. “There’s got to be something.”
Davis shook his head.
“No clues?”
“Nothing.”
“Ransom note?”
“Zilch,” Davis answered.
“Fuck!” Mayor shouted, staring at himself in the mirror, adjusting his tie.
“We’re on it, though. Full force. We’ll find these pricks.”
They shared a look, as Davis growled, “You and I’ve been in some tight places, Sir. I’ve never let you down. And I won’t this time.”

Opening the door, Burton waved him through and, just before bumping into a half-dozen staffers, said, “We had better, or heads will roll. Get it?”
“Got it.”
“Good, now let’s get to it.”

Clare Marie Burton was the quintessential socialite: perfectly coiffed, demurely outfitted, and elegantly poised in every situation. However, today the First Lady was anything but poised. In fact, she had become unraveled, and having a difficult time not showing it.
“What in God’s name is happening, Lukas?” Clare whimpered; however, sounded more like a growl.
Mayor Burton took his wife by both shoulders and kissed her cheek. “We are doing everything possible to find our little girl,” he said softly.
Her heavy breathing slowed just enough to feel calmed by his words.
“And trust me, love, we will find the perpetrators of this heinous crime and prosecute them to the fullest extent of the law.”
“Prosecute?” she spat a nervous laugh. “How about permanently disfigure? Or even—”
He took her arm and moved to the window—knowing ears would enjoy taking statements like that, under duress or not, and whip them into a rumor-spinning headline. “Can I get you some water?” Burton asked, looking to Margaret, who practically sprinted across the room in response.

“I want my baby!” Clare began to sob, grabbing Lukas’ arm before melting into a chair. As Margaret handed Clare the glass, Chief Davis entered the room, holding his hat in his hands. “Mrs. Burton, we have the very best minds on this. We will find your daughter. And we’ll find her soon. You have my word.”

Clare smiled as sincerely as possible. Holding his stare, she said, “I certainly hope so, Jacob.”

He didn’t budge. “Yes, ma’am.” Nodding to Lukas, he left the room.

“Dear, I’ve got to meet with my team to design a message we can release in order to get this moving, okay?”

Finally regaining some composure, she gave a tiny nod.

“Now, why don’t you go home and get some—”

“What? Not on your life, Lukas. I’m not moving an inch from this office until—”

“Hon, trust me when I say that we’re going to be doing everything in our power to find her, but your being here won’t do either of us any good.”

“Lukas Burton, I’m not moving until you can assure me.”

“Clare, listen to me,” he began, turning to Margaret and nodding toward to the door.

Margaret offered a smile, squeezing Clare’s hand, then gathered the team and quietly left.

As the door closed, Clare let out a deep sigh. “Of course you’re right. I’ll get home and… pray.”

Lukas looked at her and said, “That’s my girl. And that’s a good idea.”

Sharing an embrace, she whispered in his ear. “You’re right. You have a great deal of pressure, and, well, I’ll be fine.”

He kissed her cheek, as she whispered, “Luke, I don’t care what must be done, but I’m sure you’ll do everything possible to get our girl back.”

“Everything,” he smiled.

“Okay, I’m leaving. Call me the instant you have anything.”

“Of course.”

Stepping out through a private exit, Clare was joined by her two waiting assistants. At the door, she turned to blow a kiss to Lukas, and as she left, Chief Davis stepped in.

“Okay,” Burton said, taking a deep breath. “Let’s prepare a statement.”

Clare rode in silence on her way to Gracie Mansion, the old Federal homestead that had been home to New York City Mayors and their families for nearly seventy years. She enjoyed living on the East side. This part of Manhattan had a certain civility she admired—not to mention shopping along the rich Park Avenue corridor. But right now, all she could focus on was her little Abigail. Her mind rapidly shifted with images of where she might be, of who would have
abducted her, and what condition she could be in. As tears streaked her cheeks, her heart raced and she was having a hard time breathing.

Her driver Jerry kept checking on her—his eyes shifting back and forth from the East Side Highway to her. “Are you okay, First Lady?”

Fighting tears, she nodded. They rode in silence for most of the journey. Then, as her fears began to slowly subside, her emotions gave way to anger, and in minutes, she was simmering, as her imagination ran a dark course.

Reaching into her purse for a silk handkerchief, something grabbed her attention. She stopped—getting lost in thought for several long minutes, before snapping out of it and looking to the driver.

“Jerry, would you please close the window? I’ve got a private call to make.”

“Of course, Ma’am.”

As the window between them began to close, she said, “And I don’t want to be disturbed. For any reason.”

She waited a moment, before taking two cell phones from her purse. One was silver and decorated with a New York City emblem. The other was black and nondescript. She laid the silver one aside, and pressed a single button on the other. After a series of tones, she entered a four-digit pin and waited for the connection.

A voice answered. “I wondered how long it would take before you called.”

Smiling, she started to speak, before the voice continued. “Okay, now leave a message and I’ll get back to you. When I feel like it.”

She hesitated, then hung up smiling.
Chapter 4 - The Plan

Donovan knew this was destined to be one of those once-in-a-lifetime moments. He relished holding something his longtime adversary wanted, and possessed the one thing his opponent could not have. For right now. As he momentarily owned the very apple of her father’s eye, the Scorpion’s adversary couldn’t do a damned thing about it.

Young Abigail sat in a large chair between Donovan’s legs. Her back was to him, as he brushed her hair with all the tenderness of a loving father. He smiled the entire time, combing and smoothing each strand, as though preparing her for a young beauty pageant. His crew had never seen this side of him. Both Mo and Margo were moved, but wondered how long the tender moment would last. Ken and Sean also watched, respecting the way he could be ruthless and dangerous at one moment, and at another, as gentle as a new father.

“How are you feeling, Abigail?” Donovan asked.
Still groggy from the operation, she batted her eyes in slow motion. “Fine, I guess.”
“Are you hungry? Or thirsty?”
“I’m kinda thirsty,” she whispered.

Margot looked to Donovan for approval, got a nod, then went to the kitchen, while Mo leaned forward and took Abigail’s hand.

“Abigail, my name is Mo. Short for…Maureen,” she smiled.
“Hi, Mo. You have pretty hair,” Abigail returned the smile.
“Thank you. Would you like to feel it?” Taking it down from a ponytail, she shook it loose.
Abigail looked to Donovan. “Sure, Abigail, go ahead.”
Abigail softly stroked her hair. “Wow, it’s soft. And dark.”
“I’m Japanese. We all have black hair.”
Twirling a strand between her fingers, she said, “Mine’s blonde. Mommy calls it strawberry blonde ’cause it’s kinda pink.”

Margo arrived with a glass of water. Abigail drank slowly.
Mo and Margo leaned close, as instructed by Donovan—to bond with her. It was important for the entire team to make Abigail feel comfortable, like family.

Donovan was no psychologist, but his training had taught him how in high stress situations it was better to focus on the client with such gentle attention to detail that they’re distracted from thinking anything to the contrary.

Taking the glass from her, he didn’t want her stomach to expand any more than necessary. The stitches—while strong and internally sewn, needed more time to heal. The numbing agent she had been given would prevent her from feeling much of anything.

“Abigail, do you know why you’re here?” he asked.
She shook her head.
“Do you remember when you and Margo were playing in the park—with your nanny?”
“Sure, you were with a big happy clown,” Margo said, glancing toward Ken. “He was making you a balloon.”
She began to smile.

“And Ms. Marcheaux wanted you to go play with some new friends,” Mo said.

As Abigail frowned, Donovan motioned to give her a second. Her frown slowly morphed back into a smile.

“I like the park. And clowns and—” she looked around.

Sean took a balloon from behind a chair, and her face brightened.

“Your nanny is taking a vacation and wanted you to visit with us a little while before we take you back home to Mommy and Daddy. Okay?” Donovan asked gently.

“Sure. You have a nice house, Mr. Smith,” she said, looking around. “I know Daddy would like it.”

“Yes, he would. I built this. And I build buildings for lots of people. Maybe I can build you and Daddy and Mommy one...some day.”

“That would be nice,” she said, looking around. “There are so many windows.”

“Yes there are,” Margo said. “And that’s because—”

“Why are the curtains closed?” Abigail asked Margo.

Curtains had been drawn before Abigail entered so she wouldn’t be tempted to look out.

Future questions would help reveal their location.

“It’s pouring down rain and well, rain makes me sleepy,” Margo snickered, waiting to see the little girls reaction.

As Abigail yawned, Donovan looked to Margot and nods. She stretched, faking a yawn and said, “Abigail, I need to take a nap. Would you like to read me a story?”

“Okay.”

Margot stood, took her by the hand, and crossed the enormous room to an adjacent bedroom.

“Bye Abigail. We’ll see you in a little bit, okay honey?” Donovan waved.

Looking over her shoulder, she said, “Okay, Mr. Smith.”

Looking up to Margot, she said, “I have some favorite stories Mommy reads me.”

“Like what?”

“Where is Mommy?”

“She’s at the beauty parlor, getting pretty for you and Daddy. She’ll be here real soon and we’ll go back to the park to play. How’s that sound?”

Donovan waited until they were out of range before he said, “Cute kid.”

“And not nervous at all,” Sean said.

“No kidding. Sitting on your lap, for crap sake,” Ken added.

Grinning, Donovan stood and motioned for Sean, Ken and Mo to join him in the kitchen.

“Simple psychology. If only the buffoons we’re up against would be so docile, huh?”

Without waiting for a response, he took a sparkling vitamin water from the fridge and emptied it before continuing.

“It’s a waiting game now,” Ken said, walking to the sliding doors. Touching a button, the wall of window treatments quietly lifted into the tall ceiling. He looked at the pool below.
“But not for long,” Donovan said. “Too much on the line. Anybody in this racket knows if you don’t find someone inside the first 48 to 72 hours, the chances of finding them decreased.”

“How long?” Sean asked.

“Soon,” Margot said, without even thinking.

Donovan grinned. “Yeah, what she said. Always trying to run the ship, huh?” he said, grabbing her arm and spinning her around. He placed her in a body lock.

“Hey!” she said, not entirely sure if he was serious.

“Relax, I’m playing,” Donovan said, letting her go. “And you’re right. Like I said earlier…” he stopped to frown at Sean. “If someone was listening…”

“I know, I know… I was just anxious,” Sean said.

Donovan checked his watch. “Let’s give ‘em an hour or two. Hit at cocktail hour. They’ll still be getting adjusted to the initial shock. Next, they’ll hit anger. Then, it shouldn’t take long before they pull together the troops.”

Walking back to the kitchen bar, he pressed a button to make a cappuccino. “We’ll send out the first message then.” Donovan was enjoying this. Waiting for the coffee to brew, he pulled Mo close, giving her a deep and passionate kiss.

As she moaned, the guys shifted their attention to the pool.

“Of course. Now, are we 100% tight on the message boards in midtown?” Donovan asked, waving the men to join the discussion.

“One hundred and one percent,” she rubbed her fingers together. “My boys are golden. We’ve set up…” She air-quoted, “A glitch to hit thirty seconds before we go live. That will be our visual trigger for all hands on deck to be prepared to push their respective buttons… or whatever means of launch that may be.”

“Good.”

“I’ll be with my pal from the 13th Precinct flying over 42nd in his Ranger—” Ken said.

“Wait, there’s only 8 official birds in town, how’d you manage—” Donovan interrupted.

“Boss, you worry about your shit. I’ll worry about mine,” Ken smirked.

“Like I said,” he continued, “We’ll be just outside of the epicenter at that time, but close enough to allow Mo to send a feed to me, we’ll scramble and bounce it to our boy, Sean, back to the office on 11th.”

Donovan nods, sipping another coffee.

Mo waved the conversation back to herself.

“When the first images appear, they’ll think it’s a commercial. It looks like one. The few guys at any of the boards will assume it’s a takeover from an outside source. However, we’ve installed a switch to an inside source on several of the program centers.

“More details,” Donovan mumbled.

“Sure,” she nods. “There are 17 primary screens on 42nd and I won’t bore you with all the deets—and we can’t control all of them, but suffice it to say we have control, or at the very least, partial control of more than half of them.”

“Like?” Donovan asked, waving her to continue. “Details give me a boner.”
She rolled her eyes. “We have the biggest three: The ABC *SuperSign*—thanks to my former broadcast connections. Couldn’t get the Fox screen, though; bitch wouldn’t help. Second biggest, the Walmart screen. I’ve managed some chaos during their shift change, and the third biggest, the *SilverCast*, is smack dab in the middle—covering the whole block.”

“That’s it?” Donovan made a face.

“Are you kidding?”

“Kinda. But you have more than three, right?”

She reaches over to punch his arm. “Yes, we have three more. The one next to MTV—that was the easiest; more on that later. Also, the Clear Channel; cashed in favors from my radio days. And last but not least, we have the one on Broadway, known as the *Express*. Super impressive. Seven screens, 8,500 square feet and the highest-resolution screen of most of them. You can see this screen from space!”

“What about the Reuters Ribbon and the NASDAQ tube,” Donovan said with a straight face.

“Are you high? What we have is awesome. Besides, the *security* on those bitches—”

He held up both hands. “Okay. All good. I’m busting your nuts. Really. I’m impressed.”

She stared at him. “We’ve been putting these deals together for months, Donovan. I mean, *months*. It takes a lot—”

“I got it. So, run me down—real quick like, the rest of the process.”

Taking a deep breath, she continued. “That relay we talked about will kick to our primary source. The firewall is tight, the connections are solid. And the signal is redundant to, oh about… *forty-five* times. So, try as they may, they’ll never be able to trace it. Certainly, not in the amount of time we’ll be *live*, anyway.”

“Which is…” Donovan leaned forward, waving a finger in circles.

“About one-minute-forty-five seconds. That’s from the time the slate starts, followed by the shot of her…until the *clown* is out of the picture.” She looked to Ken.

“Don’t look at me, I’ll be in the air,” he laughed.

“The beauty of pre-record,” Donovan smirked.

“Anyhow…” she continued, “The *glitch* kicks back off just shy of the two-minute limit. It’s a safety valve of sorts, put into place for something exactly like this.” She smiles.

“About?”

“No. *Exactly* at one-minute-forty-five seconds, we dump the feed,” Mo confirmed with a smile.

Ken interjects, “It will take most anyone about thirty seconds to fully comprehend what’s happening. This way, the meat of the message—nearly a full minute, will be seen…while they scramble to *pull the plug*.”

“Nice,” Donovan said with a slow nod.

“Perfectly choreographed. And untraceable,” she said.

“Audio?”
“Yes,” Mo high-fived Margo. “While there isn’t usually audio, we’re providing a wireless feed to several rented speakers placed in the area—basically, a handful of windows at a variety of locations. And yes, untraceable.”

“Plus, we’re taking the signal and relaying the message via a special Wi-Fi satellite to all television screens within a square block…of every place our cameras are watching,” Margo adds.

They all looked at her.

“Hey, I’ve been quiet this whole time, letting all ‘ya swing your…” she looked to Mo, “Well, show your goods; that’s all I meant.”

She leaned over to kiss Mo. “Thank you, baby,” Mo said. “Better go check on our girl.” As Margot leaves the room, Donovan nods to Mo then turns to Ken, “How many cameras are we up to?”

“Dozens.” Ken said, looking to Sean.

“Oh, uh…last count, we have…almost 300. Okay, 291, to be exact. We’ll hit 300 inside the month and are on track to have something like 600 by fall.”

Donovan drained the last of his cappuccino and licked his lips. He liked the foam, but he was doing it to show. “Perfectly…delicious,” he smiled.

Margot returned, barefoot and smiling. “She’s still out. I put enough solution in her water to drop Ken,” she said, raising an eyebrow toward the well-built bodyguard. Then, checking her watch, added, “I’d say she’ll be out for maybe another hour. It was a good call to see her up and around; proved your handiwork was all sewn up,” Mo grinned.

“Yeah, to see if she…” Margot said, holding her index finger up so they’d wait for it, “Could…stomach the process.”

They laughed.

Sean motioned for the group to be quiet, as Donovan said, “Boy, a herd of cattle wouldn’t wake her. In fact, it’d damn near take an explosion!”

Opening his mouth and raising his eyebrows, he feigned surprise, as both girls smacked Donovan.

“Damn, I’m just f’n evil,” he sneered.
Chapter 5 - The Nanny

The interrogation room looked like it did on television; cold, bland and nondescript. The only thing that wasn’t like TV was a respectable amount of daylight—albeit partially hidden behind a small frosted window. A tired coffee-maker on a table in the corner completed the homey look.

The odor of burnt coffee hung in the air, as nanny Stephanie Marcheaux nervously fiddled with a child’s bright pink hair band. The only joy in the room appeared to be the rhinestones that encrusted the ornament. Abigail was wearing it shortly before she disappeared.

A uniformed police woman stood motionless at the door, staring at the window like she could see out. Yet, she couldn’t.

The silent room was suddenly jolted to life when the Mayor, his aide, Chief of Police Davis, and a man in an expensive suit entered.

No one spoke, as Stephanie looked at all of them—one at a time. Fear radiated from her, and she began tearing up the minute Mayor Burton sat down across from her.

He began, speaking slowly, softly and emphasizing several words. “Stephanie, don’t cry. I’m sure it was an accident. Just tell me exactly what happened. And please do not leave out a single detail. Okay?”

For effect, he patted her hands. They were clasped together so tightly it appeared she’d break the plastic band she’d been choking since she had arrived.

“Mayor Burton, I’m so sorry. Really. I had no idea what happened…” she said quietly, unsuccessfully choking back tears.

“I understand,” he whispered, looking around for tissues. “Just take a deep breath.”

His assistant grabbed a box from the table in the corner and handed the box to Stephanie.

“Thank you. Okay, here is…exactly what happened,” she said, slowly composing herself, but sat, saying nothing—attempting to catch her breath.

“Don’t worry, Stephanie; you’re among friends. Take your time and collect your thoughts. This is very important. Understood?” Burton continued with the calm approach.

“Yes, of course. I took Abigail to the park, just as I do every single morning. We were minding our business, watching the ducks in the pond, we stopped by the zoo to see the panda, and…you know, just enjoying the day.”

Burton’s patience, though pushed, was holding. “Go on.”

“We had just arrived to the Dairy Visitor gift shop…after leaving the zoo. There was a race, I think…because there were a bunch of runners…and some circus type event going on. A couple of clowns were tying balloons for the kids.”

“Clowns? Like circus clowns?” Chief Davis finally spoke.

Stephanie, caught off guard, turned and stared, then regained her composure and continues.

“Yes. Circus. And that was when this stranger—a woman, came up to me. She was yelling Help me, help me…I’ve lost my little girl!”
Burton looked from one person to the other, as the Chief squinted. He appeared deep in thought, but said nothing, and let the Mayor try his method. Burton’s aide took notes, scribbling down every word.

The suit said nothing.

“I’ve lost my girl? That’s what she said?” Burton asked.

Stephanie nods.

“And where was Abigail at this time?”

“She was right in front of me,” she sniffed, wiping her nose. “Needless to say, my instincts kicked in and I turned to her attention—the woman.”

“But you were turned facing this…stranger, correct?” The Chief nearly barked.

“Yes, well, I was facing Abigail—because I was following her—”

“Wait, isn’t she usually either on her bike, or at the very least…holding your hand?”

Burton’s anxiety increased.

Startled, she said, “Oui. I mean, yes, yes, of course. But you know, often, I’ll let her stroll out in front of me.”

“How far?” Davis asked.

“How far…what?”

“How far would you ordinarily allow her to…stroll ahead of you?” Davis impatiently asked.

Burton puts up a hand to Davis and pats her hand.

“It’s okay. Just answer, Stephanie.”

“Ordinarily, I would say that she is sometimes ten or twenty…yards in front of me.”

“Okay. And how far would you say that she was…in front of you before she disappeared?”

Burton asked.

She took a moment to visualize the scene.

“Thirty, perhaps…forty yards ahead.”

Burton’s patience was thinning.

Hesitating, he said, “So, forty yards,” looking to Davis, before continuing.

“Where was your cellphone at this time?”

Looking down, she swallowed hard.

“I’m waiting,” Burton said.

“In my hand,” she practically whispered.

His nostrils flair. “Why?”

“I was…checking my…Soap Crush.”

Her head slowly lowers.

Burton slams the table with both fists. Pens flew and a cup of coffee spilled. He ignored it; his eyes didn’t budge from her.

“If I’ve told you once…I’ve told you a hundred times…you are NOT allowed to…to surf the web, check your email, or do one god-dammed thing EXCEPT…take calls from either myself OR Mrs. Burton!”
She fought hard not to burst into tears, but felt confident it wouldn’t get her any sympathy. Burton’s aide cleaned the table and was tossing the remnants in a trashcan, when her phone buzzed in her pocket.

Burton whipped his head in her direction.

Reading the screen, she said, “Sorry, sir. It’s your secretary. They’re ready for you in the press—”

“TEXT her that…” he hesitated, catching himself. “Sorry. Please text her that we’ll be there shortly. Thank you.”

Turning back to Stephanie, he worked diligently to regain his composure.

“Okay. We will forget…for the moment, that you directly disobeyed the ONE order I’ve ever given you. So, this stranger comes up to you…and screams for you to help her find her child.”

The Chief interrupts, “Sorry, Lukas. You said the stranger came up to you. Not anyone else, correct?”

Stephanie looked confused. “Um, I’m not sure. If it was just me, but…” she’s searching. “As far as I know, she was just asking me. It happened so fast. All I know is one minute Abigail and I are walking through the park, the next minute a strange woman—not that she was strange, just…anyway, she screamed hysterically that her daughter…”

Stopping, she frowned, looking at her trembling hands.

“What?” Burton barked. “What is it?”

“I can’t say for sure that it was her daughter she was screaming about…just her little girl. But the odd thing was what happened after. I turned around to see Abigail was fine.”

“What?”

“I remember turning around to see her with two or three other children. I think. They were with this clown who was twisting up balloons. But I remember the woman was pulling on my sleeve, but when I turned around, it was as though…nothing mattered.”

“What do you mean, Ms. Marchaues?” the Chief leaned forward on both elbows.

“What I mean is…when I turned back around to attend to her—knowing that Abi was fine, his expression was…innocupe. Sorry. Vacant. Her face was vacant, like suddenly, it didn’t matter.”

Burton looked to Davis and then to The Suit—who had yet to say anything.

“She looked…vacant,” Burton said with little emotion.

“Her look just suddenly said to me it doesn’t matter. That’s when I turned back around, wondering what she was looking at.”

She stopped speaking again, and nearly stopped breathing, as she stared at the band still in her hand.

“What!” Burton shouted.

She snaps back, but this time, she is spent; her lack of reaction confirms such. “When I turned back around the clown and the balloons were…gone. But Abi was coming towards me…with a pink…” She looked at the pink hair band in her hands. “A pink giraffe balloon.”
Clearly on the edge of losing all patience, Burton said, “And?”

“And as I turned back around to attend to the woman still pulling on my sleeve, she wasn’t there.”

“What? But she…was just pulling on your sleeve?” Davis asked.

“No, it was a blind man. A man with a cane and sunglasses. He was disoriented and—”

“What in the hell are you talking about, Stephanie,” Burton shouted. “A BLIND MAN…is replaced by a screaming…vacant…strange woman with…no little girl?”

The room is dumbfounded.

Standing, he barked, “What the fuck?” As he began to pace, he ran his hand through his hair and across his sweaty forehead.

“Wait,” she said, cocking her head to one side. “The blind man, I assume…came from nowhere,” she said, “I was so confused, so I turned back around and that’s when…Abigail was gone!”

Burton sat down, and just as she was about to start crying again, he tried to level the moment with a long, deep breath. “I swear to Holy God above…if you start crying, I will slap you so hard, you’ll WISH it were the clown that kidnapped you!”

Snapping his fingers, Davis said, “Wait!”

Turning to the Chief, Stephanie whispered, “Qu’est-ce que c’est?”

“We’re asking the questions,” Burton bursts, holding his hand up to her.

“I know you were just joking, Lukas, but…” he turns to her. “But let me get this straight. You said, a hysterical woman is screaming and pulling on your sleeve, you turn to see Abi—who is fine, then you turn back and she’s…nonplused. You then turn back and the clown is gone, but Abigail’s coming toward you…then, as you turn back around, you come to find a blind man…but since you’re further confused, you turn back around to see no clown…and no Abigail.”

She nods.

“So…” Burton said slowly, for emphasis. “So, when you turn back again…where is the blind man?”

Squinting, she bit her lip, trying not to cry. After a long beat, she whispered, “Gone.”
Chapter 5 - The Call

Clare is stuck—emotionally and physically. Construction on the FDR, near Roosevelt University, has traffic at a standstill. She looks through the darkened windows that separate she and the driver. His animated hands throw exclamation points to other drivers who try and cut him off. Her stomach is in knots and her heart pounds. Her hands are shaking and her head feels slow—like she’s underwater. Tears pool in her eyes and she wants to scream. Inside, she knows that while screaming won’t help, it would certainly make her feel better.

Or, would it?

All she can think about is holding her baby. She wants her life to get back to normal and become real again. And she wants a stiff drink.

She can feel the small confines of the vehicle closing in on her—trying with all its might to suffocate her. Lightheaded, her vision was narrowing.

Get yourself together, Clare, she shouts in her head. You won’t be doing anyone any good if you lose your mind.

She tried counting to ten, wishing this heart-wrenching situation to end. Not the case.

Squeezing her eyes closed, she tried to picture happy memories. All that appeared were moments with her little girl in her arms. At the beach, playing. A birthday party.

That doesn’t help, dammit, she cried silently. This is the worse nightmare I can imagine.

Someone please wake me up!

Taking a long, deep, cleansing breath, she opened her eyes, picked up the private cellphone and dialed again.

A voice answered. “Well, hello stranger. What’s up?”

Her heart fluttered for an instant. She was surprised, yet grateful he had picked up. “I’ve rung you five times.”

“Six, actually,” he said. “I was out back. Working.”

“Chopping wood?”

“You bet. Best therapy you can get. Without babbling to a stranger on a couch.”

“No doubt.”

“You okay?”

“No,” she said, taking time to breathe and reconcile her mixed emotions. Keep yourself straight, she thought.

He let the silence pass without a push.

Finally, “Abigail is missing.”

Now, his heart skipped a beat. For an entirely different reason, because he knew what that meant. “How long?”

“A few hours.”

“Could she have wandered off?”

“Doubtful.”

“Really?”
“Certain. A mother just knows.”
“Understood.”
He reached for a smoke in his pocket, took out his Zippo and lights up.
“Maybe this call is premature,” he said, with a question in his statement.
“Maybe you’re being insensitive,” she said, meaning more than she said.
Blowing rings into the air, he absently watched them drift toward the porch roof. “Could be,” he said, after letting a dozen seconds hold her attention. “Your husband must have the best in the biz on this by now.”
“His heart’s in it—just not sure his balls are.”
They shared a small chuckle.
“Not sure I should say this,” she stuttered. “But I’m not certain he’d do…whatever it took…to find her.”
“Sure he would.”
“Not like you.”
Taking a last drag before crushing the butt, he tried to imagine what she was implying. And what he could be in for.
“Not whatever it took,” she added.
“Perhaps.”
Silence.
“What would he think if he knew you called me.”
“You mean…before giving him a chance to be the hero?”
“He’s a man. That’s his daughter. He’ll move heaven and earth—”
“But he’s also…so goddam political he’ll have to precisely measure all audience reactions and see if the data…” she trailed off.
“Clare?”
Taking a slow, deep breath, she tried desperately to keep from saying too much. Or feeling too much. “Yes?”
“He will. Maybe not as fast. But…just give him a chance.”
More silence.
She fidgets with her necklace.
He fumbles for the words.
“That doesn’t mean…I won’t help,” he paused. “Because I’d do just about anything for you.”
“Thank you.”
A horn blasted outside, and Jerry slammed the brakes, throwing up a hand to apologize to Clare. She ignored it.
“What is she now…seven?” he asked.
“Nine.”
“Geez time flies.”
“You have no idea,” she said, reaching for a cigarette from her purse. Pushing the lighter in the center console, she waited—staring for it to pop up.

“And you’ve passed the point of the itch.”

Inhaling a long drag, she enjoyed the rush. And the smile on her face. Both of which felt strange at the moment. “Cute. And maybe true,” she said, taking a second and a third drag—doing everything she could to numb her senses. “No, I’m happy. She’s wonderful,” she said, adding, “And the city’s great.”

“And Lukas?”

“Same. Scrambling for the top.”

“What’s the golden ring this time?”

“President.”

“Of the Country Club?”

She chuckled, coughed, and cleared her throat before answering. “The United States.”

He whistled. “Cheese whiz.”

“Cornball.”

“Sassy-pants.”

While they enjoyed the levity, the heft of the call continued to weigh deeply.

She sighed, “Carter, I need you.”

He stopped twirling his silver lighter. “You need…my help.”

The inference felt palpable.

“Yes. Your help.”

“Why me?”

“Don’t be coy. Why else would I call you,” she said, grinding out the cigarette. “You’re ruthless.”

“And you’re heartless.”

There’s a long sigh on the other end. “That was a summer fling,” she said, feeling a second flutter.

“It was more,” he said, feeling somewhat exposed.

“No, it wasn’t. And you weren’t going any further.”

“Maybe.”

“Doubtful.”

“True,” he said. “Probably.”

Traffic had cleared and they were nearing Gracie Mansion.

“Sorry. I shouldn’t have…” he stuttered. “I don’t even know what I was—”

“Carter, that was then. And not to be corny, but we’ll always have those memories. But right now—”

“Of course,” he interrupted. “Silly.”

“Not silly,” she returned, taking a moment to gather herself. “Okay, it took everything in me to call you…and I did. So, you have to know I wouldn’t have called you if it weren’t extremely important.” She fought to keep from crying.
“I know it did. And you wouldn’t. And I will…” he hesitates.
“Will what?”
“Do whatever I can to help.”
“I know. Thank you. And let’s keep this quiet. For the moment, anyway.”
“Of course. I’m just a call and a flight away,” he said. “And Clare?”
“Yes, Carter.”
“She’ll be fine. Trust me.”
“I do. With my life.”
The silence felt deafening, as she stopped to let that sink in. “With our lives.”
“Call me.”
“I will. Probably tonight. Certainly by tomorrow.”
“And you’ll want to let him know. Before too long. Nobody likes surprises. Especially the competition.”
She tried to ignore that. “You know how ugly this world has gotten, and how calculating this office is. As disturbing as it may be, I have to imagine the worse.”
He doesn’t have a comeback, so he left it alone.
Approaching the mansion, she saw the Press setting up along the gates, surrounding her home. “Shit,” she blurted.
“What?”
“The vultures have landed. At the house. I’ve gotta go. Thank you, Lucky.”
“You got it,” he said, listening for the phone to disconnect. Next, he let his mind fight with his heart. But only for a moment.
Chapter 7 - The Interrogation

Mayor Burton, his aide, Chief Davis, and the attorney stood huddled on the other side of the two-way mirror, while Nanny Marcheaux sweated it out in the interrogation room. Her head was in her hands.

“Can you believe this shit?” Mayor asked no one in particular.

“Not exactly,” Davis mumbled.

“Perfectly, actually,” Attorney Steven Glass added. “Classic case of too much pressure, too much information. She was sidelined. Hoodwinked.”

The four looked at one another, as Burton said to his aid, “Go help set up the press. Tell ‘em I’ll be there in five.” She disappeared with a nod.

When the door was closed, Steve Glass spoke. “Damage here’s minimal. She’ll take the fall for irresponsibility. You’ll explain it was…an orchestrated operation, not her fault, etc.”

Davis nods. “Agreed. This was well-planned. Using a crowded park, an enormous event, and some crafty acting.”

“No shit,” Burton mumbled, absently staring at the train wreck through the glass.

“A bat-shit crazy woman, a circus clown, and distracting a kid with balloons,” Davis said. “Jesus, why not add a bowl of candy and a video game?”

Burton snorted.

“That’s a trifecta, gentlemen. And stacking all that crazy inside a well-publicized and heavily attended 5K race?” Glass chuckled. “But adding the blind guy? Brilliant.”

Burton cut him a look. “Can we stop praising the assholes who dreamt this scheme up and get out and catch ‘em?”

“Sorry, Lukas,” Glass said, “You’re right. And we will.” Turning to Davis, “Right, Chief?”

Davis nods.

“I don’t know what they want…and I’m sure it’s gonna hurt…but for the love of Christ, let’s not forget my girl’s out there somewhere…in the hands of a fucking maniac!”

Davis tapped the brakes. “One thing at a time. Now, all we have to do is…” He hesitated.

Burton waited.

And Glass asked, “Yes?”

Burton leaned forward. “Aaaand…”

“Okay, so clowns are out there every day at that freaking fair. It’ll be hard to identify that one, but I’ll ask about any ‘extras’ around that morning. A shouting woman and a blind guy? That’ll be tough,” Davis scratched his chin.

“Right. So, the way I see it is—” Burton began.

Davis interrupted. “We’ve got surveillance all around the park. And there has to be someone who saw something out of the ordinary. All those people? We’ll put it together,” he said with confidence.

“And we wait…for the ransom note,” Glass added.
Burton’s head whips toward Glass. “Right,” he exhaled. “There’s that.” He checked his watch. “I’ve got to get out there. The press’ll have a hey day with this.”

“And on the cusp of your running for—”

“Don’t remind me.”

“No, this is good,” Glass said. “We’ll use this to our favor. When the time comes, tug at the heart…family values ’n shit.”

“Twisted, as always, Glass.” Davis shook his head. “But true.”

“Alright…” Burton started toward the door.

Davis tapped his shoulder, nodding toward the glass. “Whadya want me to do with her? Besides the obvious.”

Burton’s hesitation and accompanying icy stare got their attention. “Tell her she can go. She needs to get home. And sit. I’ll, rather, we’ll—Clare and I…will figure it out later. Can you do that for me, Jacob?”

He said, “Sure thing,” and left.

Burton was just about out the door when Glass grabbed his arm. “No really. What about her?” he stared in Burton’s eyes.

Burton stared for a long beat before answering. “What do you think?”
Chapter 8 - The Pronouncement

Moments later, Burton and his team were on the front steps of City Hall—a usual vantage point for any number of political occasions. This time, it was an announcement the Mayor not only hated making, but one his New York family would hate to hear. As the Mayor’s only child, and a familiar face to the city, Abigail had become very special to her hometown. A sizable crowd had already collected, and cameras and lights from all the local news stations were in place. Reporters press toward the front, hoping to be the first to break the story.

Chief Davis held up both hands. “Quiet please. The Mayor will make a short announcement and then we have work to do.”

The crowd murmured, closing in.

“And there will be no questions at this time. There’s too little information thus far, but trust us…we’ll give you all the information you could possibly need…the minute we get it.”

He nods to Burton who was talking close to the ear of his aide.

“The Mayor of New York City, Lukas Burton,” Davis said, stepping aside.

“Thanks, Chief. As Chief of Police Davis just said, we have very little substantial information to report at this very moment. However, it’s become painfully clear that my daughter, Abigail…is missing. And we have to assume it’s a…kidnapping.”

The crowd erupted into instant shouts of questions. Burton held his hands up, waiting for the noise to stop.

“At approximately, 10:15 this morning—while playing in the park with our nanny, Abigail disappeared. In plain sight. Within moments, we had an entire battalion of our city’s finest, scouring Central Park and the surrounding areas. Unfortunately, inside these past…” he hesitated—not only to check his watch, but to buy the time he needed to regain his composure.

Cameras clicked furiously, catching the tearful moment that was certain to make the front page of all the local newspapers.

Clearing his throat, he continued. “Inside these past several hours, we’ve looked, we’ve asked, and we’ve set into motion…a process to locate my little girl. If anyone has any information leading to her disappearance and…assumed abduction, we want to hear from you.”

“Is there a reward?” A voice shouted from the pack of reporters.

Chief Davis expected this—as did everyone at the Mayor’s office, and as he scanned the audience, he saw the voice was a reporter from the Post. Looking at one another, Davis and Burton realized that in all the frenzy they hadn’t discussed that issue. It would be the Commissioner’s call—given he’d have to approve the deal.

“We’ll have details on that inside the hour. That’s it for now. Thank you for your time. And your prayers.”

With that, Burton was off the steps and down the hallway, leaving a crush of shouting questions behind.
Mayor Burton sat quietly at his desk, staring out the window, and trying to imagine what his little girl might be going through at that very moment, and how scared she must be. Gritting his teeth, he thought, *If anything happens to her, I will take whomever is responsible and tear them limb from limb. Then kill them.*

Having served in the United States Marine Corp, he had seen his fair share of terror. The blood, guts and travesty of warfare had scarred and numbed his sensibilities. His *modus operandi* was more about “doing what’s needed” rather than considering “doing what’s right.” That vicious tenacity had served him well in any number of situations. And he was sure the same would be available, as the opportunity arose.

He stared at a picture frame on his expansive mahogany desk. It had been sitting at that same spot since he had come to office. While he had many other photos—highlighting all sort of dignitaries who had visited his great city, this one three-paneled frame contained some of his favorite and most memorable photos.

The first displayed he and Clare’s wedding which took place in her hometown of Charleston, SC. It was a classic wedding with all the bells & whistles. He had been married before and would have been perfectly happy with a quick stop at the Justice downtown, but Clare wouldn’t hear of anything but the very biggest wedding possible. His only allowed his mind one blink back to his first wife—his high-school sweetheart, who died much too young from breast cancer.

The middle photograph was taken during a celebration of Abigail’s eighth birthday a year ago. Clare and Abi were both wearing pink tiaras and vamping for the camera. He smiled, recalling having captured that moment just before she blew out the candles on an enormous cake shaped like a giraffe—her favorite animal. It was Burton’s favorite picture of both of his girls.

The last photo was from his Marine Corps days, back in the late ’70’s and early ’80’s. His buddies, from a wide variety of backgrounds and levels of rank, were inseparable, living every day to protect one another. They were nicknamed: *Radio, Bulldog, Hollow-point, Tequila* and *Snake*—Burton’s nickname. The gunner, Hector Gonzalez, aka *Tequila*, was the only one from the crew who didn’t make it. He sat there thinking of everything he had to be grateful for. And how lucky he was to have accomplished what he had.

As he looked back at the photo of Clare and Abigail, his heart was heavy. Reaching for the phone, he dialed the Mansion. He assumed Francine, their maid, would answer.

It rang four times before Clare came on. “Hello?”

“Hon, it’s me. Are you alright…considering…everything?” he asked with a smile.

“I love, Yes, I suppose. Just waiting. The hardest part…I guess.”

They shared the safety of silence.

“Yes, it is. But we are doing *everything* in our power…” he trailed off, as his eye caught one of the six television screens which adorned the wall across the room.

“Ho-lee-shit!” he said, his eyes nearly popping out of his head.

“What?”

Page 29 of 30
Leaning forward and not fully comprehending what he was seeing, his mouth hung open, as he slowly stood.

“Lukas, is that what…” she whispered. Now, she was likely seeing the same thing that had grabbed his attention. The television at the end of her kitchen counter was on but silent. She choked back tears at the image.

She gasped, “Lukas, no!”

“Oh my God,” he whispered—the sound, crawling up from his chest like an angry dog.

The door burst open, as Chief Davis, Burton’s secretary and other personnel came pouring into the room. The look of panic on their faces expressed pure terror. Davis ran to the screens, searching for the remote.

Burton slowly approached the screen and barked, “Turn up the sound…now!”