

A new war has been dropped on America's doorstep in the form of another September attack. Only this time the outcome is even more catastrophic than before. When all hell breaks loose, inmate Aaron Dean finds himself on the outside with no law except morality and human decency. Will he choose freedom or constrain himself to something greater?

Where Loyalty Lies

By Edward Belton

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EDWARD BELTON

WHERE LOYALTY LIES



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Prologue

The voices woke him from his rest.

It was amazing that after all his captors had put him through, he was still able to retain his bearings enough to recognize the changing of the guard outside his cell door. Just hearing them speak told him that another shift rotation had been made.

The two soldiers posted by his door would remain for three days, and then the two others would return. There were about two-dozen men in all who rotated twelve-man shifts every seventy-two hours. He knew that because his visitor had told him. —

He also knew that he was the only prisoner, and the bunker he was being held in was small, remote, and mostly underground. His visitor had told him that, too.

They had almost broken him. The countless hours of sleep-deprivation, interrogation and beatings he had endured had taken their toll. There were no clocks on the walls or windows anywhere that he had seen, and he had no idea if it was day or night, or how long he had even been there. The torture and questioning had been endless, bringing him to the brink of death on more than one occasion.

Upon arrival, he had been immediately stripped down to his bare skin. For four days, he had been totally nude, freezing and constantly degraded by the Americans who had captured him.

Those four days had felt to him like much longer, but his visitor had confirmed the time-line. Every question he had asked, in fact, about his surroundings and those who held him there were answered without pause.

When the Americans had finally allowed him a simple tunic-style garment to cover himself with, he had been shivering beyond control while lying on the floor of his tiny cell.

The small room he was kept in consisted of concrete. Plain, gray, and smooth were the walls, floor, and ceiling. There was no bed or sleeping mat, no table or chair-nothing. He had only his solitude inside a cold, hard box. There was a small hole in the middle of the floor for him to do his business in. Sometimes the guards would flush the waste from outside his cell, and other times they would not. What food and water he received were slid through a thin steel trap at the bottom of his solid-steel door.

What seemed like years passed, his incoherent state of mind ever getting worse. The confusion and pain mingled together and fused his consciousness with the dream-like state of his extreme fatigue. They'd given him drugs to keep him alive, and combined with his frail health and mental instability, he wasn't sure if some of the conversations they'd tried to have with him were real or mere delusion.

Had he told them things during those times of his most vulnerable episodes? He thought perhaps that he had. Yes. His visitor had even told him as much. But he

did not want to believe it. He could not accept that they had really succeeded in forcing him to talk. Not about the really important details.

Or had they?

It was when he really almost lost it, when his will to go on had almost been taken, that his visitor had arrived for the first time. That was day one-seventy-one according to his visitor.

He was unsure of how many days it had been since their first meeting. He could ask, but it wasn't relevant. Not anymore.

There had been several meetings with his visitor since the first, each one just a little more in-depth and hopeful than the last.

At first, he had been surprised to see that someone of his visitor's stature would personally be there to interrogate him. He knew of the man well and understood his military background, so maybe it was not that strange after all, he had thought.

But then the man had started talking. The conversations he wanted to have were stunningly contradictory to what they should have been, under the circumstances; under any circumstances, for that matter. The man was speaking of betraying his country in unimaginable ways. What someone in his position was planning was very difficult to accept or believe as genuine.

After the man's second visit, though, he had allowed himself to lower his defenses somewhat. After all, his treatment by the other guards had improved ever so slightly between the first and second visits. And he could not help but notice that when they met it was always in private. Not even so much as armed men posted outside the door.

Still, he had not trusted him.

Then came the third visit, and the fourth. He began to realize that the man was serious.

And so he tested him-giving him certain low-level access codes and phone numbers to call and acquire information from his counterparts in Iraq and Pakistan. The knowledge the man came back with was always authentic.

Before long, the man was receiving and delivering messages to and from his men overseas without incident. Favors were done to prove his commitment, and it became obvious that it was not a game the man was playing. It was no attempt to mislead or deceive. He was truly prepared to carry out an act of treason on his own country.

There was an agenda, of course. What the man had asked for in return was understandable. In fact, their newly formed alliance would satisfy all that they both wanted to accomplish.

He wanted revenge, and the American understood that. More importantly, his visitor understood the benefits of the agreements they had made. He understood

the need for compromise, the necessity in sharing one's control and personal power. It was a privilege that American leaders throughout history had abused and coveted selfishly for themselves only. Their streets had run with blood before, and they would again. The American understood that as well. He even welcomed it.

Sometimes it took only a spark to ignite the fire needed to burn a new course in history.

And sometimes the path had to be cleared with the fury of an all-consuming blaze.

He was that fury. And one of America's own had just helped relight the flame.

A sound just outside his door stirred him further. The heavy latch fell into place, unlocking the door. The solid door squeaked open, allowing light from the hallway to fall across his bruised face.

"On your feet, asshole."

He was not handcuffed or shackled-there was no need. Any attempts of violence towards the soldiers were futile, and besides, he thought he might know where they were taking him. His visits with the American traitor had been much more frequent lately, and he suspected it was another of those meetings in which he was headed now.

He was right.

It was always the same room. Never did he see this room except for his sessions with the man he was soon to meet here again. The walls and the ceiling were the same smooth concrete of his cell. However, the floor was covered with a plush brown carpet, which he appreciated once again as he was led in.

The door was closed and locked behind him, leaving him alone to wait for his visitor. He immediately took the opportunity and sat on one of the two black leather couches that took up most of the space available. The room was bigger than his small cell, but not by much.

Other than the two couches, the room was empty. His body ached beyond belief, and so he stretched out and lay down, allowing the comfort of the furniture to absorb his broken and beaten physical form. His mental, meantime, focused on what he hoped to hear soon.

He had just dozed off when the familiar unlatching sounds of the door's locking mechanisms roused him. His visitor stepped into the room and greeted him with a nod, silently closing the heavy door behind him.

"I have news," the traitor said, smiling.

PART I

No king is saved by the size of his army...

– Psalm 33:16 (NIV)

Chapter 1

President Ronald James O'Reilly was a democrat through and through. Halfway into his first term, the fifty-six-year-old former Governor of Virginia had already fought tooth and nail with republicans at every turn over all aspects of assistance for the poor and middle class. He'd promised a lot to America while on the campaign trail, and he had every intention of following through with those promises to the best of his ability. Health care, Social Security, and unemployment were three of the most serious issues plaguing society, and the President understood all too well the affects those problems had on the average American family. His own parents, he often remembered fondly, had been Irish immigrants themselves, arriving in the States shortly before he was born. Mr. and Mrs. Glendall O'Reilly had borne plenty of their own blood, sweat, and tears while trying to provide another American dream for themselves and their only child. It never ceased to amaze the President how someone of his pedigree had ever won the White House. It'd been a tough and brutal election. His republican opponent had been seeking a second term that most thought was going to be extremely difficult for anyone to challenge. The former fortune five-hundred CEO had three times the financial backing and sponsorship than O'Reilly. In the end, however, the people of the United States had just seen more in the home- grown Irish kid from Virginia they could relate to.

Standing at six-feet and two inches tall, with a weight of one-hundred and eighty-five pounds, President O'Reilly was a slim man, but fit. He still had a full head of hair, and his clean-shaven face enjoyed the youthful appearance of very few wrinkles. The slight gray that blended with his darker hair only accentuated his features more, and brought out the darkness of his eyes.

Had it really been two years since the election? O'Reilly thought to himself. As he stood behind his desk in the Oval Office and gazed at the reflection staring back at him through the darkness that lingered in the early morning hours outside, the President suddenly felt very old.

Two years ago seemed like another life, and as the words he was hearing penetrated his consciousness, he knew that if he had any reservations about being around for another term, or even another two years, he would need to solve this problem quickly. Not since the attacks of 9/11 had his beloved America been at such great risk as she was now, and if something was not done immediately, she may just be headed for a war unlike any other she had ever seen. And this time, just as the last, no one but a select few would ever see it coming.

"What do you mean he's escaped?" The President, calmly controlling his anger, asked his Chief of Staff, William Randolph. It was after three A.M. in Washington D.C., and the leader of the free world was in no mood for excuses.

"He's gone, sir. And right now there are just a hell of a lot more questions than we have answers for."

Bill Randolph had a look on his face of half drowsiness and half disbelief. Unlike the President, the Chief of Staff was nowhere near fit or in shape. His short stature only added to the roundness his excess weight caused to his appearance. He was red-flushed, from his chin to his bald spot, which was like a peninsula, partly surrounded by his thinning, white hair. Only five years the President's senior, but he seemed much older. His pale blue eyes peered at his Commander-in-Chief and longtime friend, searching for direction.

"Have a seat, Bill. My God, you look as if we're totally helpless. This was never supposed to happen; there's no protocol for it, either. We just have to gather all the Intel as quickly as possible, and figure out what the hell happened. The man didn't just get up and waltz his ass out of there himself. He had some help, Bill, and dammit, I want answers."

The President sank his slim and weary frame into the chair behind his desk, and began to ponder his next move. The desk he now sat behind-how many other of the country's leaders before him had been where he was now, possibly evaluating similar threats and dangers no one but they could ever truly comprehend? "How... how could anyone have escaped from there?"

"I'm not sure, sir, but we have to assume that some form of retaliation is imminent."

"Precautions need to be made. Have all the right people been notified?"

"Major Reynolds and the remainder of his squad are on the scene now. He contacted me as soon as the alarm was sounded. I then immediately came straight here, calling you on the way. It would be best, sir, I believe, if it were you who got everyone else apprised and brought up to speed. I'm sure the Major will be in touch within the hour with any headway on tracking down those responsible, along with SILVER DOLLAR."

Silver Dollar. The operation's code name. The two randomly chosen words put together and assigned to their recently escaped prize. O'Reilly knew the operation, in its secrecy alone, was a risk of monumental proportions. However, he also understood that possessing such secrets was the nature of how the game of national security was played. Always had been. Despite knowing that, operation SILVER DOLLAR had just never really sat right with him to begin with, and was now on the verge of blowing up, perhaps literally, in all of their faces.

With most of the world believing their recently departed guest to be dead-killed during a military attempt to capture-the implications of foreign, as well as domestic backlash, were at the forefront of the President's mind. Not to mention personal revenge. And there had to be another country backing, and possibly orchestrating the escape. But... how did they know?

O'Reilly's mind spun with the possibilities. Someone had to have betrayed them.

"SILVER DOLLAR, Bill. How many had clearance?" That list had to be narrowed down immediately.

“Including trusted aides and advisors? Twenty, Twenty-five people?”

Damn.

The President stood and walked over to sit in front of his Chief-of-Staff. It was strange, but suddenly he felt he needed to speak a little more quietly. He looked at his watch. Three forty- five A.M. He needed more caffeine, but it would have to wait.

“How many of the Major’s men survived the attack?”

Bill sighed. “All twelve men on duty at the time were killed, sir. Major Reynolds and his remaining twelve are all who’s left from his unit. Come to think of it, the estimate I gave earlier of all who know could very well be thirty-five to forty people, including the Major and the remainder of his men. Minus a dozen now, of course.”

“But those were all solid men,” O’Reilly objected. “Hand-picked by the Secretary of Defense himself. They were all brave and exceptional soldiers who would rather have died than betray their honor and country. And God rest their souls, some of them did.”

“Mr. President, we may need to bring others in on this.”

“Maybe, but not yet.”

“Sir, if we-”

“This is no longer a situation, Bill. This is a crisis. And what makes it even worse is that technically it can’t even exist because he’s not alive, remember?”

“That’s exactly why we need to get in front of it now.”

“If we get in front of it now and bring others in, I’ll be impeached and you’ll go down, too. We all will.”

“Sir, we have people on our side who will understand the significance of the operation and sympathize with what we have done.”

“Maybe. For now, though, let’s just focus on devoting all of our efforts into acquiring some sort of stability and Intel into this problem so that, when the time comes, we’ll have something concrete to support our agenda where SILVER DOLLAR is concerned. Then we’ll know better how to proceed.”

The President got up, went back to his desk and ordered coffee for the two of them. He would have to bring everyone else who was involved up to speed, soon. He just had a couple of more things to discuss first with his old friend.

“How did they know where he was, Bill? Who came to get him?”

“I’m not sure, sir, unless SILVER DOLLAR was perhaps equipped with some type of tracking device, implanted in his body. It’s possible we wouldn’t have been able to detect it. There have been rumors of other terrorist leaders having similar surgeries.”

Where Loyalty Lies

“And what,” the President answered, “they were just waiting until now to come and get him? No. The idea of a tracking device is bullshit, and you know it.” O’Reilly finished his thought in an angry whisper. “We have a rat in the house.”

“It’s what I’m afraid of, too, sir. I just didn’t want to be the one to have to say it.”

Just then the big mahogany door to the Oval Office opened, and two freshly-brewed pots of coffee arrived, along with sliced wheat toast, strawberry jam, and two bowls of assorted fruits.

It was time. Major Reynolds had yet to get in touch with the President, so O’Reilly was going to have to reach out to him first and find out exactly what he knew. He was sure the Major had not been on the scene long enough to have all the answers, but he had better have some.

He picked up his phone and began dialing.

Aaron Gabriel Dean, inmate number 031302, was much the same as many of the other prisoners he knew who had been sentenced to serve time in the North Carolina Department of Corrections. At least the person he used to be was. The man he was now, though, separated him from many others around him. A-R, as Aaron was known by on the yard, was truly a changed man. He had grown up and matured a great deal, controlled more by humility now than by anger. He had never considered himself to be a bad guy, really, just too hot-tempered at times, and somewhat disinclined to respect authority. Ten years in of his twenty-five-year sentence, though, and Aaron was just tired of it all: tired of bucking the system, tired of screwing up, and just tired of being angry.

He had been only twenty-one years old at the time he was arrested, and had left the streets with a troubled reputation. To the utter surprise and sometimes disbelief of those who knew him before, Aaron’s newfound humility and good nature were actually what he was now known for. This was a fact he was extremely proud of. He was beginning to find in himself a peace not known since he was a kid. Although he was not quite there yet, Aaron knew he was well on his way back to the roots of his upbringing.

Trisha and Earl Dean had raised Aaron and his three siblings to be loving, God-fearing, and church-going people. And being the eldest, Aaron was expected to set the proper example for his two younger brothers and baby sister. Like so many others tangled in the web of adolescence and rebellion, however, he had just seemed to somehow lose his way.

Well, he thought, maybe, just maybe he was finally on track to reestablish that direction.

Aaron was a thinker. That was what he did—he thought. And he pondered. And he analyzed, and then over-analyzed. Often inside of his own head too much, he often heard. He could not help it, though. It was just how he was wired. Like the way people breathe, or blink, or experience a pulse without asking. It was his solace, his comfort while caged. Sometimes he articulated it all in to words of poetry or other writings, and other times he would just allow his mind to do as it was now, and simply reminisce.

It was mid-September, and the temperature was comfortable outside, as it was most of the time in North Carolina around this time of year. Aaron was off to himself, as he often was, and enjoying the late afternoon weather. Perched atop one of the sets of metal bleachers overlooking the yard, he was thinking heavily about his family. Though he knew they would never admit it, he was sure they were disappointed in him. For thirty-five years, his parents had enjoyed a successful marriage, as well as very prosperous professional lives. Present company excluded, their children were all living up to every expectation.

And he had, too, for awhile.

Then he had met her. Katie Marie Jones, or “Kat” as he liked to call her. Kat had not changed Aaron; she had just come along roughly around the same time he began to stray from his parents’ path. Those two forces intertwined in time, and as a result, Kat Jones would forever be linked in Aaron’s mind to that part of his life when everything had changed.

He thought a lot of her, too, Kat. Thought of her too much, probably, even dreaming of her still after all these years. Was that not crazy? He had been gone for ten years, and Kat had been out of the picture for at least nine of them. “Twenty-five years is just too long to wait,” she had told him. *No shit. It was a long time for him to wait, too.* Could he really blame her, though? It was not like they had a lot of success at being together when he was out. They would breakup and get back together fifty times a week, it seemed. There was just an undeniable physical attraction between Kat and Aaron that made it impossible for them to be apart. From the moment he had first seen her in that black dress, with her long blonde hair and gorgeous brown eyes, he knew he would be forever empty without her. He often wondered to himself how long she would have waited had he been sentenced differently. Five years? Two? Six months? Probably not long. Kat Jones was not the type to be alone.

Out of it all, however, arose the most amazing gift Aaron Dean had ever received. Less than thirty days after his imprisonment, he had become a dad for the first time. And despite all the separation and time apart, Aaron and Xavier Dean, now ten years old, were as close as any father and son. It was as if Aaron had been remade through his son, “Zay”. Spitting image of his dad, everyone said. Every bit the boy his father had been at that age. And nothing in the world made Aaron more proud.

As always, those thoughts led to Aaron's guilt of not being a free man for one single minute of his little boy's life. Kat had been eight months pregnant when it had happened. "It"- the single most defining moment of his life. "It" had changed everything, including him. "It" had humbled him. "It" had hurt a lot of people. And "It", Aaron reminded himself, was all his fault.

"Hey white boy, looks like you could use a friend," came a familiar voice, impeding his thoughts.

Aaron grinned, glad for the interruption. "You're not much darker than I am, Red."

Anthony "Red" Morris and Aaron had been friends so long it was as if they were brothers. They were the same age, with A-R being a few months older. "Respect your elders, Red," he would tell him. Both had arrived in the same processing unit days apart to begin their sentences. Red transferred out first to the medium-custody facility they were both still housed at now, then Aaron a couple of weeks later. They had been close ever since.

Red climbed up the bleachers and sat next to his friend, smiling from ear-to-ear. Red always smiled. The only guy Aaron knew with a twenty-year sentence that always found something to smile about. He guessed it was one of the reasons he liked him so much.

"Why you all the time smiling, man?" Aaron asked him.

"Why you all the time use such bad grammar?" Red jabbed back. "Pick up a book, man. Aren't you the one always playing SCRABBLE?"

"Never was much on proper English, though."

"You're just lazy when you speak. Your writings and your poetry are hot, my dude."

"What's the name of that poem you just won the talent show with?"

"American Me?"

"Yeah. I like that one."

"Thanks."

His question still had not been answered. "Red? What are you smiling about?"

"Can't a brother just be happy?"

"I suppose. Your mom's white, though, so technically you're just half a 'brother'."

Red was the type of guy who was impossible not to like. Real easy-going and humorous. Today, though, it was more than that, and Aaron was pretty sure he knew what, or rather "who", had put that classic smile across his buddy's face.

“You got some mail today, didn’t you?”

Red nodded. “Yeah, man, I did. Lawyer said he’s gonna take my case.”

There are few things more precious to those in prison than visits, phone calls, and mail. Especially when said mail arrives in the form of an attorney who has, in all of their legal expertise, identified some aspect of the case they believe can be challenged. It is a hope many cling to, but few ever have the good fortune to experience. In Aaron’s case, the legal consensus was that twenty-five years was the best it could ever be. Still, though, he was genuinely happy for Red, and shared in his enthusiasm.

Aaron put his arm around him. “That’s what’s up, homeboy. You know I’m praying for you.”

“Thanks, bruh. He said he’s coming to see me as soon as Dad sends him the retainer fee, plus hourly fees for the trip down here.”

“How much?”

“About thirty-thousand in all. My dad and step-mom had to get a second mortgage, plus sell Dad’s truck.”

“The Chevy?”

“Yep. Man, he loved that truck, too.”

The intercom on the yard barked: “Yard closed, gentlemen. Yard is closed. Everyone report to your assigned housing units at this time. Yard closed. Yard...is...closed.”

“Hey man, I think the yard’s closed,” Aaron said mockingly.

Of course Red was laughing. “I know, right. Seems like they’d tell us at least once, though.”

When they stepped down off the bleachers, Aaron noticed that the sun was setting, and it reminded him of how he and his mom used to sit on the front porch at home and watch it sink into the horizon that same way.

As they parted ways, Red gave Aaron a fist-bump. “Be good, bruh. I’ll see you .”

“You too,” Aaron replied, as oblivious as just about everyone else to the impending events on the horizon.

Chapter 2

It was just after one in the afternoon and the attack on SILVER DOLLAR's bunker was just barely thirty-six hours old. To President O'Reilly, though, it seemed like an eternity. There had been absolutely no word on the escaped terrorist's whereabouts, or any information on who may have assisted with the raid. Whoever had betrayed them was also still out there, and right now that individual, or individuals, needed to be identified and located.

The President had spoken to Major Reynolds several times since the escape and he and his remaining men had still not been able to piece together a single lead. It was as if SILVER DOLLAR had mysteriously slipped into thin air and simply vanished. With no tire tracks in the area unaccounted for, the assumption was that the enemy extraction team must have come in by air. But how was that possible? The small but state-of-the-art facility had been safely hidden and tucked away, dead center inside fifty-square miles of restricted air space. And once they somehow arrived, how did they gain entrance? The Major's unit was the only one assigned at post there, and they were the only ones with access.

O'Reilly could feel the anxiety building in his gut ever more with each minute that went by. He knew the Intel-recovery methods, as they were so casually called, that had been used as interrogation tools on their prisoner. Some of those procedures had shaken the President's resolve, bringing into question his own morality. Had it been worth it? Had the penny been worth the punch, as his mom used to say? Sure, there had been some success with gaining tactical advantage and information from SILVER DOLLAR. The past few months had netted them the deaths and capture of several more terrorists and terrorist cells (two of them taken down had been on the FBI's top ten most wanted list, in fact). But now their not-so-secret-any-more source of private tortured-information was out there again somewhere with what possibly was a very dangerous agenda, and with what seemed to be major player support. No way was this going to end well. So, with the cat now out of the bag, no-no way this penny would ever be worth the punch.

Gazing around the room, the President took in the faces of those around him. Having canceled every other obligation for the day, he had surrounded himself with those closest to operation SILVER DOLLAR who, aside from the handful of those out scrambling for Intel, were mostly all present and accounted for. Included in that mix of those still out there was the Vice President, who had basically quarterbacked the entire operation from its very inception. After meeting with a source of his inside the Pentagon, he was supposed to be on his way, scheduled to arrive any minute with news that he claimed was a huge break in the investigation.

Vice President of the United States of America, Duane Garry, had been alongside O'Reilly since before the President's campaign had begun. It had never been a secret who the former Governor would choose as his running mate. Garry

had been a real rising star in the Senate when he had hitched a ride with O'Reilly on the way to the White House. Being a seasoned Vietnam vet with a ton of experience and likability, as Senator he had worked his way through the ranks and bumped elbows on Capitol Hill with Washington's most elite, and had done so with enough class and gumption to earn him the reputation of being a real mover and shaker across party lines. Having his name on the ticket had just made sense. It was instant credibility for a man who, quite honestly, was a real long shot to be elected.

Taking note of the television as he waited, O'Reilly saw that it was tuned to the CNN twenty-four-hour news network. He watched for a few minutes, but there was no breaking news reports concerning any Lazarus-type terrorist leaders coming back from the dead, so he knew that wherever SILVER DOLLAR was at, he was, for now, remaining underground.

Meanwhile, across the room, the Commander in Chief's Secretary of Defense was growing impatient and had his usual self-assured demeanor on display.

"Every second that we waste sitting here with our thumbs up our asses is another second we could've spent hunting that bastard down!" Harry Blanchard exclaimed.

"We'll begin once the Vice President gets here," Bill told him. "Not before." He and Harry always had their pissing matches, and right now that was the last thing the President needed.

"Mr. President, if I may," Harry began, but before he could finish his statement, the door to the Oval Office opened and in stepped the man they had all been waiting for.

"We have him," Duane told everyone as he entered. "We found the rat."

As talks in D.C. were heating up, a few hundred miles to the South it was just another day for the inmates of Blue River Correctional.

Everything in prison is a hustle-a game. Some guy has this or that for sale, and so he walks the yard till he finds a buyer. Hagglng is as common as the act of the sale, and often times leads to a trade or some other exchange before the deal is over. Gangs exploit their dominance and stake claim to certain card games; prison-yard surrogates for the casino bosses on the outside. Actual money is rarely seen, and is considered contraband on most facility grounds.

Items purchased from an inmate's personal account, via an identification card with a credit-card style design, facilitates the source for many of those transactions. Instead of folding dollars, commissary items such as stamps and honey buns are the currency. Drugs, pornography, cell phones, tobacco, and other desirables trade

hands seamlessly amongst those with the proper payments-not unlike any other network of business. One person has one and wants the other, and so goes the merry-go-round of penitentiary economics.

Prison is a world in and of itself, a truly whole other environment, and to watch all of its intangibles intertwine and intermingle was a pass-time Aaron and Red got a kick out of. “People-watching” they called it. And sometimes—most of the time—it was better than television.

Neither of them used drugs or hustled, and other than “people-watching,” their only other outdoor activity was weight lifting.

The two friends were back atop their bleacher spot, overlooking the other inmates on the yard. Some were doing their gambling and hustling, some were coming and going to and from the canteen or working out, and others were just standing around, talking to one another. It was one of those nice, end-of-summer days, and it seemed most of the population was outside, soaking it all in.

Aaron was looking at a couple of men, probably in their sixties, doing laps around the track. “I don’t want to be some old-ass man still in prison,” he said dishearteningly.

Red had seen that daze in his friend’s countenance before. “Get out of your damn head, bruh. That’s not gonna be you,” he told him, while pointing with his chin at the two senior citizens who were walking. “Or me. Worse come to worse and things don’t change, we’ll only be in our forties when we get out, and that ain’t old. And besides, things can change—for both of us. Aren’t you the one always telling me to stay prayed up?”

“Yeah.”

“Alright, well that’s what you need to do, too.”

“I do. It’s different for me, though. I’ve got at least fifteen more years to go, regardless.”

Red looked straight at him, and challenged, “Who says?”

“They say.”

“And who are they?”

Aaron knew where he was going with this and had no choice but to relent: “They are not God.”

“That’s right.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Red slapped him on the shoulder and pointed at the weight pile. “Come on,” he said. “It’s clearing out. Let’s go over there and get a few sets in.”

The Secretary of Defense could not believe it-would not have believed it no matter how many times Duane repeated himself. But the evidence before him was hard to ignore. The contents of the folder they had all seen in the Vice President's hand as he had walked in was all anyone needed to see. The evidence was clear in the coroner's report, and combined with what Duane had collected at the Pentagon, the truth was plain. One of his very own had not only betrayed his country, but the soldier had done so in such a way as to perilously jeopardize national security, as well as thousands of American lives.

"Where was he from, Duane?" the President asked. "What would make him want to do something like this?"

The Vice President began flipping through the pages of the file, searching for the answer to the President's questions, when Harry spoke up first. The Defense Secretary did not need any sheet of paper to inform anyone of what needed to be known where one of his own soldiers was concerned. These had been an elite group, personally chosen and evaluated by him, and he knew each one of those men better than they knew themselves (or at least he thought he had). He knew every name, rank, and life history by heart. If one of those men had so much as pissed sideways since middle school, he could tell you which way the wind had been blowing when it happened.

"Captain Jordan B. Edwards, United States Marine Corps," Harry began. His words were slow, almost monotone, like he was reading from some distant memo he had memorized. "Born and raised on the North side of Chicago. Tough kid. Very intelligent. Graduated top of his class. Joined the JROTC his freshman year, and later earned a full-ride scholarship from Uncle Sam. Talked about wanting to be an officer since high school."

"Family history?" asked the President.

"His mother was of Turkish descent, but there wasn't anything there that gave me any cause for concern. No red flags. His dad was a police officer, for Pete's sake; shot down on duty and murdered when Edwards was only nine years old. After that, it was just him and his mom, until she passed away about two years ago."

"Perhaps that event was the catalyst," Duane responded. "As I said when I began, the evidence acquired from his personal laptop at the scene points toward lots of anti-American and extremist views, with over a thousand hits on those types of sites over the past twelve months alone. Operation SILVER DOLLAR, unfortunately for us, seems to have come along at just the right time to give the Captain his opportunity."

"Yes, but to this extent?" asked Bill.

“Apparently so,” Duane answered. “And in the end, all he received for his efforts was the same fate he helped seal for those he betrayed at the facility.”

The Vice President flipped through the file pages from the Pentagon until he found another portion he wanted to read. He continued: “At approximately oh-one-hundred hours East Coast time yesterday morning, Captain Edwards’ key-card was logged in as he returned to his security post after a thirty-minute reprieve. His break time, most likely. He was shift leader at the time, and in charge of the compound. He would’ve had sole control of all movements, inside, as well as outside the facility.”

The Defense Secretary interrupted him there. “But what Captain Edwards didn’t have was sole control of perimeter and front-entrance security, which is where the attack began.”

“I’m getting to that,” Duane patiently answered. “Please, Harry, allow me to finish.” He turned another page and went on reading. “Chief Warrant Officer Nathaniel D. Stevens was the second in command and the only other one assigned to the control room with the Captain. And it was Stevens who had the perimeter and front-entrance controls.” He paused, hesitating, before what had to be said next.

“Just read the damn report,” retorted Harry, ready to get it over with. Whatever the Vice President had to tell them, he wished he would just get it done already.

“The Medical Examiner’s report states,” Duane said, “that there were seven gunshot wounds across the torso and upper body of Chief Warrant Officer Stevens, all from an AK, and all of them postmortem. The kill-shot came beforehand. A nine-millimeter to the back of the head, execution style. The bullet’s trajectory suggests that Stevens was probably still sitting at his computer, and never saw it coming. Captain Edwards must’ve then switched off the security system and opened the gates. It’s assumed that he then shot Stevens again during the rampage in an attempt to cover his tracks, not realizing he was about to be murdered, too.”

“What about the noise?” O’Reilly questioned. “A nine-millimeter handgun in close quarters like that would’ve been deafening. It would’ve had to alert someone.”

The Vice President grabbed another page from the file and passed it over. “Inventory sheets containing what each soldier’s body had on them upon arrival at the M.E.’s office,” he said. “Note Captain Edwards’.”

The President read aloud from the inventory report: “One Browning nine-millimeter, not government issued, with a noise suppressor.”

“I’m certain that once the whole report is in, we’ll discover that ballistics will match the handgun he had on his person with the bullet in the back of Stevens’ head,” Duane said. “I’m sorry, Harry.”

Having listened to Duane pour over more and more damaging evidence, Harry Blanchard could not refute the claims, as nauseating as they were. "But then what?" he heard himself say. "Was Captain Edwards supposed to be the lone survivor? He had to know that evidence at the scene would lead directly to his involvement in the attack."

"He may have planned to leave with them," Duane said. "But right now, we just don't have those answers. Perhaps, after his dad was murdered, the Captain's course of life took a turn that wasn't even evident to him at the time. He had no family remaining except his mother, and they were very close-you said so yourself. After her death, he may have taken that turn even further. Who's to say what he had planned?"

"There's no security footage, so what about Edwards' laptop?" O'Reilly asked. "Was there any evidence there of who he may have been working with? Any indication that there were any other countries or governments involved? There's no way the terrorists could've pulled this off alone."

"I'm sorry, Mr. President, but so far there isn't anything else," replied Duane. "I took the liberty, however, and contacted Tabatha about what was discovered. She has a team en-route to the Captain's residence now."

"How could whoever did this have actually gotten to the facility in the first place?" Harry wondered. "Even with whatever assistance they had gaining entry, if they came in by air, how in the hell did they enter that restricted air space without being detected?"

O'Reilly had been wondering that exact same thing, and shared an idea he had with the others: "Perhaps they were detected, and that's what Stevens was looking into when...when he was shot." He was about to say when Edwards shot him, but for Blanchard's sake decided against it. "But we could even be wrong about that," he added. "There are just too many unknowns. They could have used ATVs most of the way, and hiked in the last mile or so, for all we know."

Right then all O'Reilly really knew was that he had to act and assemble a preemptive strategy. As much as he did not want to, he knew, like it or not, they were going to have to bring others in if they were to have any chance of preparing for whatever SILVER DOLLAR may or may not be planning. Capturing him again would probably never happen-would not be the option next time anyway, if there even were a next time for him. O'Reilly knew that once this failure was made known to the world, his tenure could very well be over. He had become more aware of that with every hour that had passed since the escape. Thinking of himself, though, had taken a backseat to his instinctual passion to protect his country and her citizens. That was all that mattered now, and as long as he sat behind that desk of many decisions then he would continue to do whatever it took to ensure that safety.

“Bill?”

“Yes, Mr. President.”

“Contact Tabatha at Langley and have her bring us up to speed. I want every resource available digging into Captain Edwards’ background, if it isn’t already. We have to figure out who all is involved. When we find that out, we’ll know better what to expect next.

“Mr. Secretary?”

“Sir?”

“Have Major Reynolds and his men at the facility do another sweep of the area. Tell them to look for anything that may point to how our guest fled.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And Harry?”

“Yeah?”

“Once they’re sure they’ve gotten every piece of possible evidence and Intel from that facility...bury that place so as if it never existed.”

Blanchard nodded. “I’ll notify him now, sir.”

O’Reilly then looked to Bill and asked, “Have the soldiers’ families been notified?”

“Not yet, no. Official reports will be that it was a training accident, though.”

“What should we tell the remaining men of the unit about Captain Edwards, sir?” asked the Vice President.

“Harry?” O’Reilly would leave that up to him.

“I’ll have to discuss it with Major Reynolds. For now, let’s just worry about our sympathy and respect for all the families. And let’s find that son-of-a-bitch.”

“Anything else?” Bill asked the President.

“Yes. Have General Mankis and Admiral Collins online for a joint conference with me in ten minutes. And contact Paula from counter-terrorism and have her meet me right here in an hour. Everyone else, report back to me the second you have anything new.”

Once everyone had finally left the room, the President’s thoughts drifted. All he had wanted to do was protect his country. There were rules and regulations, however, and often as those guidelines were deviated from, there was always the outside possibility of it all going completely to shit. It was a difficult line to toe, and if that line were crossed too far or too often, then how much better were they than those they sought to overcome? Terrorists, though, were not restricted or

confined by the same laws of justice and ethical beliefs. And so, in order to score some points for the home-team every once in a while, exceptions had to be made.

America's citizens slept under a blanket of protection most never even realized existed, and in order to maintain that veil of security, operations such as SILVER DOLLAR were sometimes necessary. It was impossible for the nation to fully enjoy her freedoms any other way. O'Reilly understood that, just as every President before him had, and just as everyone that follows him will. They must.

A few minutes longer and Bill poked his head in from around the door to the adjacent conference room. "General Mankis and Admiral Collins are ready for you, sir."

They too would understand, O'Reilly told himself. They had to.

"Thanks Bill. I'll be right in." And with that, the President took a deep breath and stood, collecting himself for the meeting awaiting him.

There was much to discuss.

In another room, not far from where the President was spilling his guts to General Mankis and Admiral Collins, there was another call being placed.

Click...Click...Click... The connection was taking forever, as usual. The familiar buzz and static on the line reminded him of just how deep into the mountains of Western Asia his calls were traveling.

Then at last, an answer. "Yes?" No matter what time of night or day he had ever dialed this number, the same voice was always the one he spoke with. And the conversations, if that was what you wanted to call them, were always brief. Today, though, after all he had done for them, he expected there to be more. He expected a little courtesy and respect.

"Has he arrived?" the caller wanted to know.

A reply: "He is safe." But nothing more.

"I would like to speak with him."

"I am afraid that is not possible."

But what had he expected, really? To just be put on hold while being connected to one of the most feared terrorists in modern history? No. To them, he would always be nothing more than an American, regardless of what his efforts had benefitted them. No matter. As long as they fulfilled their end of the bargain, he would continue to come through with his. After all, hadn't he been the one to orchestrate the initial contact?

The voice spoke again. Not rude or condescending, just very matter-of-fact and professional. “Are we still on schedule?”

“The time-line will have to be accelerated,” admitted the caller. “It seems the President has found some direction on his moral compass after all. He is on a conference call, as we speak, with two of his military leaders. Suffice it to say, he’s come to grips with facing responsibility for the failed operation, and isn’t waiting around for his Presidency to be challenged because of it. He’s meeting it head-on now and preparing our defenses in the event of some form of attack.”

“He knows something is coming?”

“He senses it, yes.”

The phone line popped and crackled in the silence, as the voice pondered this new development. Then: “We can have our military assistance prepared to move within seventy-two hours. And as for our cells already implanted in your country, they shall be notified and instructed to begin their preparations immediately. Allah’s will be done. This will not be a problem.”

Once again, the line went quiet but for the static while the caller reflected on the severity of what was at hand. Millions of American lives were at stake. The nation would be forever changed. What he was about to set in motion-no, had already set in motion-was an act of treason of historical proportion. But so had been the drafting and signing of the Declaration of Independence, had it not? Like him, those brave men had been visionaries. They saw, just as he did, a need for a better way of life. He had asked himself a thousand times if he could really go through with it, and a thousand times, he had told himself yes. He loved his country, but it was time she be taken down a notch-for her own good. And if that meant lives had to be lost, then wasn’t that just the cost to be paid? One hundred years from now, in the new America-his America-his vision would be seen as revolutionary. He would be idolized for it, the same as those who penned their names all those years ago while secretly meeting in that room in Pennsylvania. It was his appointed time-no, his anointed time. He was untouchable, and must accomplish the divinely ordained task set before him. It was his destiny to be...

The voice was in his ear again: “Are you still there?”

“Yes. Yes, I’m here. Sorry.”

“Are you certain you are prepared to see this through?”

“Of course.”

“Very well, then. I trust that once this begins, the shipping ports we discussed will remain clear after our attacks.”

“As long as the hackers you’ve arranged for do their job, then government security efforts will be temporarily scrambling and disabled. And with our military

already on its heels trying to piece together how to repair the glitch while dealing with the attacks, Kim's troops should arrive unimpeded. It will be a very narrow window, however, as America will regain her balance and strike back very quickly."

"It is to be expected. By that time, however, chaos will have already erupted throughout the streets, and we will have struck first. Soldiers will be in place, with more on the way, and your country will experience the turmoil and anguish of our war ripping across the heart of her cities and towns."

And there it was, all on the line. The caller had envisioned many times what the mayhem would be like: buildings reduced to rubble; homes and entire neighborhoods turned into fiery ash; the lives lost; the level of destruction and the devastation to infrastructure. But then, like a phoenix, she would rise again, better than ever. A new country...with a new leader.

Yes, it would be his time soon.

"The havoc soon to befall my country is nothing more than the medicine she needs in order that she may be healed and delivered from the sickness she harbors," the caller said. "And it is I who have been chosen to be her patriarch."

Chosen? The terrorist to whom the caller spoke had often questioned the sanity of any man who would go to such lengths to betray his own. But he had always believed it to be the American's natural-born corruption manifesting itself for the will of Allah. Before this day, he had not spoken in depth with the caller, and was not concerned with the man's motives. Now, though, he could hear that his actions were the result of a disturbed mind-an extremely intelligent and successful psychopath, able to function in society at the highest level. And to think, the American had come to them. What fortune. Allah had indeed delivered this traitorous lunatic to them for the ultimate glory.

"I would like to ask how you were able to divert your President's attention. Surely, he must have concluded that there was a source close to him aiding in the escape."

"It was taken care of," the caller answered. "However, the President will eventually discover inconsistencies if things with him aren't soon taken care of. Even though it was an authentic access code that allowed your men entry into the facility, if anyone cares to double-check the autopsy reports, the wrinkle I added to mislead them will be easily noticed. The President has ordered the facility to be destroyed, but the hard drives being collected could still hold clues to my involvement if your men weren't successful in destroying the mainframes in the control room, where I called and talked those two idiots into believing I was the one arriving by helicopter."

"Kim's men orchestrated the assault perfectly, and carried it out exactly as you had it planned."

“I still say it’s imperative we move forward now, and give my colleagues something far more serious to think about.”

“And we shall,” the voice answered. “But one more thing?”

“What is it?”

“You have this number, and we expect you to use it. Communication must be maintained throughout this ordeal. Then, once your President is dead and you gain control of the government, we will move forward with the treaties we have agreed upon. We will have our shares from the profits of your country’s clean energy, the Koreans will have their nuclear trade deals, and you, my friend, will be the hero who saved the day, having reversed the course of chaos ripping apart your country.”

“And your emir shall have his vengeance,” the caller added.

“Yes, while that may be true, our great emir also appreciates the far more lasting implications this opportunity provides.”

“Yes,” Duane Garry said, “I suppose he does.” And with that, the Vice President ended the call.

Chapter 3

Two days had passed since the President's joint conference call with General Mankis and Admiral Collins, and still there were no leads on SILVER DOLLAR. Director of the CIA, Tabatha Johnson had pulled together every resource at her disposal and had managed to piece together enough information to surmise that another government had indeed jumped in the sack with the recently escaped terrorist leader and his organization. And to O'Reilly's dread, but not his surprise, it seemed in all likelihood the guilty party was none other than North Korea.

"It has to be them, sir," Tabatha said. She, the President, Vice President, and Secretary of Defense all sat around a boardroom style table in a rarely used conference room along the West Wing, discussing her findings. The three men all listened intently as she continued to rundown her take on how their communist enemy appeared to be tied together with the terrorists.

There was obviously a concerted effort with everyone involved to find a solution to the failed operation, but to the President's wonder, no one had yet to challenge him on the decision to carry out the secretive mission. He knew, though, that it was only a matter of time.

"I agree with Tabatha," Blanchard said. "With America standing up against Kim's nuclear program, we've been a thorn in North Korea's side for a long time. I'm sure they couldn't wait for an opportunity like this to come along."

The President stood, having already removed his jacket, and loosened his tie. He found strange humor in how doing so reminded him of the Southern Baptist preachers his mom would drag him to see on Sundays when he was young.

Now, if only I were sweating profusely.

"I've got the military on alert for any anomalies or other strange behavior," he said. "But first we need to know what the North Koreans' involvement in this means, and if they're an imminent threat to us."

Harry leaned up in his chair and clasped his hands together while resting his forearms on the table. "Of course, the North Korean Government will deny any involvement or possible ties to international terrorism."

"And to even imply such would be tipping our hand that we're on to them," Duane said.

"What we do know, sir, is that this secret will soon get out, and better it be from your own lips than from other sources."

"Duane's right," Tabatha said. "Besides, what will our allies think once this news is announced? Our own citizens may sympathize-as long as it doesn't get out of hand," she was quick to add. "But other world leaders—friends or not—are not

going to be so forgiving once they realize the wool was pulled over their eyes. We must especially consider those nations whose citizens were in jeopardy until they believed SILVER DOLLAR to be dead. They'll once again feel threatened and in danger, and will not doubt blame this administration."

Harry chimed in, "Not to mention NATO, sir. International relations could become a nightmare as a result of this. I'm sorry, but regardless of how this all plays out, you may be asked to step down, or—and I'm praying this doesn't happen—there may be some who will call for your Presidency to be brought under review."

They're right, O'Reilly told himself. He knew they were. Bill had been telling him much of the same thing. In fact, everyone he trusted had expressed to him similar sentiments.

He walked over and picked up the telephone and rang the desk outside his office. "Yes, Mr. President."

"Kathy, have Bill meet me in my office in half an hour." He paused, then: "Any word from Director Tenner or the CTU?"

"No, sir. Not since this morning." She too paused. "I'll contact the Chief of Staff for you now, sir."

"Thanks, Kathy."

With a sigh and seemingly the weight of the world on his shoulders, the President gently placed the phone back in its cradle, grabbed his jacket and headed for the door.

"I'm going to give it until eight A.M. tomorrow," he said. "If there are still no concrete leads to proceed with, I'll have no choice but to hold a news conference and plead with the American people for their support, while apprising the public of the situation. I owe them that much, at least.

"In the meantime, I'm also going to arrange discussions with some of our allies and plead with them as well for their support. I still expect each of you, however, to continue what you've been doing with the utmost diligence."

Feeling exhausted and beaten, the President then excused himself in order to prepare for the many difficult conversations and questions that, barring any miracles, lay ahead. It had not been his operation alone that had failed, but it was his to wear. He understood and accepted that. What he prayed, though, was that the backlash from it all would not be at the expense of innocent American lives.

"Come on, Red; just a few more reps," Aaron was saying, encouraging his workout partner on his last set. The two friends were completing their exercises

underneath a cloudy sky that kept on promising rain it still had not delivered. Despite the darkening skies, the air was still warm in the way that September could often remind you that summer was still hanging on. The workout had been intense and both men were shirtless and sweating from the exertion.

Hands on knees, Aaron continued to verbally assist Red with what breath he had left. “Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten! Good set. Now rack it and let’s get some laps in before the yard closes.”

Red put the three-hundred and fifty pounds he had been doing squats with back in the rack, and he and Aaron began clearing the steel plates, placing them back on the weight tree. The two then grabbed their T-shirts and water bottles and made towards the track.

“Good workout,” Red said.

Aaron wiped the sweat from his eyes with his shirt. “Yeah, that’s still one of my favorite leg routines I remember from college. Coach Nelson used to drag our asses with that one, and then have us do wind sprints for thirty minutes afterwards.”

At thirty-one years old, Aaron was still in excellent shape. But even standing at six feet four inches tall, and weighing in at a solid two-hundred and fifteen pounds, he was a lot lighter than he had been in college. He kept his brown hair cut close, as he had since high school, and other than the weariness that showed so evident around his piercing blue eyes, most people would tell you that he could pass for twenty-one, any day. Life, though, had dealt him some tough times over the past ten years, aging him greatly in other ways.

What Aaron wished more than anything was that he could go back to the time when he had Coach Nelson screaming at him, pushing him hard to excel. Back even before then, when his high school coach, Coach Brisson, had recognized his potential and gone out of his way to help cultivate it. He wished he could go back to before it had all fallen apart, when sports had been his passion, and football had him on his way to the bright lights and the big time.

By his senior year in high school, Aaron Dean’s name had become as synonymous with football in Charlotte as their own NFL team, the Carolina Panthers. Scholarship offers from more schools than he could consider came in from all over the country. He knew, though, that there was only one school that he wanted to play middle linebacker for, and when the coach from the University of Alabama arrived at his house to meet him and his parents, Aaron made the verbal commitment that day.

His first season as a member of the Crimson Tide had gone by in a blur, as he set six new school records-four for a true freshman, and two over all. ESPN was already questioning whether or not he would leave early for the NFL, once he was

eligible. His weight was up to two-hundred and forty pounds, and he was looking for a few more.

He had also met Kat that year.

Katie Jones was the sexiest girl he had ever seen. They had hit off immediately, talking one night after a party they had both attended, celebrating an Alabama victory over rival LSU. He had asked afterwards if he could see her again, and she had said yes. And after two weeks, they were inseparable.

Kat's parents were always skeptical of the relationship, as they had always preferred their daughter date someone more refined in the ways of their upper-class, social standings. But their indifference toward Aaron had only driven their baby girl deeper into his arms.

It was toward the end of Aaron's freshman academic year, however, when things got different. He had begun to give in, drinking heavily and partying a lot with some of the other, non-athletic, college crowds. There had even been some fights off campus and rumors of drug use.

That summer, Aaron was arrested at a bar one night on numerous offenses. The school's athletic director met with him afterward, warning him that such behavior would not be tolerated. And so, with his scholarship and football career on the line, he had decided to take heed to the AD's advice and get back to focusing on football.

It did not last.

By the time his sophomore season was wrapping up, Aaron's behavior had taken a turn for the worse again. Consumed with pride and an unresolved anger he could not identify, he had begun drinking more, smoking marijuana, and even experimenting with cocaine. To make up for his lack of enthusiasm on the field, he had also resorted to using illegal growth hormone supplements which, combined with the other drugs he abused, had a devastating effect on his overall health.

The drug tests came, and by Thanksgiving break an indefinite suspension from the University. His scholarship was voided, and just like that, it was all over. By Christmastime, all the major sports networks had stopped even mentioning his name or speaking about the huge disappointment and "waste of talent" he had become.

Aaron had hung around long enough for Kat to finish out her sophomore year, then the two of them had moved back to Charlotte together, where Kat transferred to the local university, and he worked construction after a failed stint on a junior college team.

The following year had been rocky and complicated for the young couple, made no easier when Aaron turned twenty-one, then soon discovered he was about to become a father. He was tirelessly working at a job he was not paid well at, and

Kat was constantly running back to her mom and dad whenever there was an argument between them-and there were lots of arguments between them-and it was all just happening too fast. He was in the real world and just trying to make it like everyone else. His football dreams were gone, times were hard, and money was short. Kat was constantly ranting and raving about something or another, and his parents were too. And on top of everything else, his dependence upon alcohol and drugs had reached new heights as he attempted to cope with everything.

Then, after several more months, it all came to a head.

Twenty-three days before the due date of his firstborn son, Aaron and some friends were at a local bar, shooting pool. They had been there most of the day, drinking and going back-and-forth to the car to snort cocaine. Several hours passed, and at about 1:00 a.m. that Saturday night/early Sunday morning, Aaron and three others all piled into his silver BMW (an illegal gift from an NFL agent during his freshman year), and sped away.

It was as if the blue, nineties-model Nissan Maxima had suddenly materialized out of nowhere. And how fast had Aaron been driving, anyway? Eighty? Ninety miles-per-hour?

The impact was violently powerful and had pushed in the driver's side of the Maxima with such force that it almost bent the four-door car in half. The sounds of shattering glass, twisting metal and screeching tires, and the smell of blood and burnt tire rubber were all still crisp in Aaron's mind.

The sole occupant of the Nissan, a twenty-seven-year-old single mother of three, had died upon impact. She had been on her way home from her job as a waitress. She was not even scheduled to work that night, but had covered a friend's shift for the extra money.

Aaron, his buddy from high school Chuck, and Chuck's roommate Brice, were all flown to Charlotte Memorial Hospital with life-threatening injuries. The only other person in the car with them died at the scene. Twenty-two-year-old Stevie McCombs, a sales rep they had just met that night, was pronounced dead ten minutes after emergency personnel arrived. They were still trying to free him from the wreckage when he took his last breath. None of the four of them had been wearing seat belts, and even though Stevie (even now, while walking the track with Red, Aaron could still hear Stevie clear as day shout "Shotgun!") as they exited the pool hall)...even though he had been in the passenger's seat, the luxury sedan's airbags could not save him. The car had literally crushed him to death as its front-end folded up and gave way from the force of the impact.

Aaron's injuries consisted of head lacerations, a concussion, a broken jaw and broken nose, a broken left leg and collarbone, four broken ribs, and a destroyed spleen. These, though, were the least of his worries. Upon awakening ten days later from the medically-induced coma in which the doctors had placed him, he

was served with warrants for his arrest on two counts of first-degree murder, and felony DUI, since the drinking and driving offense had been his second.

Both Chuck and Brice were released from the hospital within a month's time, and ended up testifying on Aaron's behalf during his sentencing. They had all been drinking and using drugs that night, they had said, and therefore had to accept some of the blame.

It took four and a half months before Aaron had been permitted to leave the hospital, and then that was only to be taken immediately to the county jail. His bond was still the same two- million dollars it had been since he was charged after the accident. But it might as well have been one hundred million, since there was no way he could post it.

Twelve months later, Aaron Dean, the former college football standout and potential NFL prospect, was sentenced to a term of imprisonment of twenty-five to thirty-three years for his actions. His recklessness had not only cost him his own future, but had eventually led to the loss of two innocent lives, as well. The guilt often ate at him like a disease, and he had wished countless times that he would have died instead of the others.

"Huh?" Red had been saying something, but Aaron only caught the end of it.

"Damn, A-R, you zoned out on me there for a minute. I was asking if you had any money left over on your card. I need to borrow me a little something to eat for tonight. Chow wasn't hittin' on too much."

"You know I got ya'."

They had been walking fast-paced for several laps and Aaron wanted to get a few more in before the yard closed. He picked up his steps to a quick jog.

"Four more laps, Red. Then we'll go to the canteen," he said over his shoulder, leaving his friend in the dust.

The familiar crackling and snapping sounds of the phone line once again traveled over the airwaves, going back and forth from the mountainous regions of Pakistan to the streets and heartland of America. This time, however, both voices originated from the same middle-eastern descent, speaking rapid-fire Arabic.

"And everything is fully prepared and in order?" The voice was asking. It was the same voice that the Vice President had spoken to, although the caller he was speaking with now was the man responsible for coordinating what was soon to be the greatest act of terrorism ever unleashed on American soil.

Holding the phone to his ear with one hand, the caller gently parted the curtains in his living room with the other. He peered at his young daughter playing in the yard with the little girl from next door.

What a sad and pathetic group they are - these Americans. He scowled with the thought. He had only to play the role of humble neighbor for a few more hours, and then he would be rid of this blasphemous nation. He had given fifteen years, hidden in plain sight amongst his enemy, living as they did, conforming to their western ways. And now, at long last, Allah would bless him well for his sacrifices and loyal commitment.

The caller let the curtains fall back in place as he turned and walked back through the house and into the kitchen. "All is in order," he said, stepping around the suitcases and luggage piled by the door.

"Is there any suspicion as to why you are leaving?"

"No. Our routines today have been the same as any other. After dinner, my wife and I will load our few belongings, and head for the airport with our daughter under the cover of night. No one will suspect us as anything but heading out possibly for a pizza or ice cream."

The phone buzzed and popped before the voice responded. "And the others?"

"Anxious to fulfill their holy vows. I have spoken to some, and have asked them to each kiss a virgin for me in the afterlife. It is time, my brother."

"Indeed. We will speak again once you arrive. And then we shall celebrate!"

"Until then, my friend."

The call ended and Ahmad stepped out onto his front porch. He took it all in, one last time. It would not be exactly the anniversary of their previous triumph in this land, but that had just been the warning, the opening act, as it were... But now they would truly witness the wrath of jihad.

Ahmad was smiling. "Come inside, Honey," he said in English. "It's getting dark."

"Okay, Daddy."

His daughter then ran towards him and hugged his leg. Seven years old was such a precious age.

His daughter's playmate—also seven, if his memory served him—ran for her own yard. Ahmad recognized the headlights of the approaching car and knew she was going to greet her own father as he arrived home from work.

The used Lexus pulled up, and his neighbor stepped out to scoop up his giggling baby girl. Looking at her in the other man's arms like that, the terrorist mastermind felt nothing akin to compassion for the other dad; only contempt.

The neighbor spoke. "Good evening, Ahmad. How are you?"

"Fine, Levi," he said, as he threw up his hand to say hello. "Was just getting ready to settle in for a little while, although we might head out later for some ice cream." His friendly demeanor perfectly in line with the facade he had kept up for so long.

"Sounds like a plan," replied Levi, taking a couple of steps into Ahmad's yard. "By the way, Melissa and I are having some friends over this weekend for a cookout, sort of an end-of- summer type thing. You guys are invited."

"Thanks. We may just see you then." Ahmad then turned and walked back in the house, ushering his little one along with him. Inside, his wife was waiting for them, standing by their suitcases, stacked beside the garage door.

"Mommy!" the little girl said, screeching, "Are we going on a trip?"

Chief Petty Officer Timothy Blankenship had decided to join the Navy not long after he graduated from North Dixon High School, deep in the "sticks" of South Carolina. College was not ever part of his plans, but with jobs scarce, it seemed his only real shot of making it out of the small farming town he had been raised in was if he joined the military. And since he loved the water, the U.S. Navy appeared to be the perfect fit. Of course, no one had informed Tim that his first six months at sea would be at the mercy of a detail that kept him buried so deep in the bowels of the ship that he would not even have an opportunity to see any water.

Being the soldier he was, however, he had toughed it out and earned for himself the rank of Chief Petty Officer in record time. His momma had been a hard worker, having two, sometimes three jobs at a time during Tim's childhood and adolescent years. She had raised him and his three sisters by herself, and that same resilience she had exhibited had trickled down and gotten into Tim's blood, as well. He was smart, young and dedicated, and the United States Navy was lucky to have him, his momma had said. She was sure of it.

With his promotion came a new ship and a new detail, and Tim was now one of the eight noncommissioned officers assigned to monitor the radar equipment for Commander Jack Richardson and the USS New York.

This morning, just as the sun was making its first appearance along the east coast of the United States, Tim was noticing some irregularities with his instruments. He and his crew were on their way back from the North Atlantic when he had detected what appeared to be several ships hovering just outside international waters. The ships would materialize, clearly marked by the accurate notations on his monitor, and then they would...simply disappear. There one minute...and then gone the next.

“Are you seeing this, Commander?” Tim asked.

Commander Richardson had been standing there, staring at the anomaly himself, ever since it began. “Lieutenant Glover,” he said, looking back over his shoulder, “get me the Pentagon.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

“Admiral Collins?”

“What is it, Charlene?”

“Sir, you’re going to want to take a look at this.”

The Admiral’s secretary had a concerned look on her face, standing in front of his desk with a sheet of paper in her hand.

“Another one?” Charlene had walked into his office a few times already, presenting him with similar reports. The day had hardly begun and already he was flooded with numerous accounts of unexplainable “glitches” with radar and sonar throughout his fleet.

“This is the sixth one, sir, in the last twenty minutes. It’s from the New York.”

Something was not right, and when the Admiral’s face turned up to meet the eyes of his secretary, her expression mirrored his own.

“Get me the President,” he told her. This was exactly what he had been warned to look out for, and now it was happening.

Dear Jesus, he silently prayed, what are we in for?

Chapter 4

Looking back, Aaron could see that he had only himself to blame for having his dreams destroyed. He knew that he should have dealt with his emotional issues better, especially in college. And the “What could have beens” still discouraged him, but he was finally learning to forgive himself and move on. The demons of his past still visited him on occasion, but not as often, thankfully, and he was pleased to admit that he was much more in control of who he was than in years past.

But one aspect of his character he still struggled with was acceptance of how he and the other inmates were oftentimes treated by the prison staff. No matter how calm or respectful some of them tried to be, there were still many of those in uniform who made it their business to continue to degrade and harass them for no other reason than because they were in prison. They never once took into account that those they felt the need to constantly belittle and antagonize were already being punished beyond anything they could ever understand. The years of separation from family and friends, from the enjoyments of everyday living that so many took for granted on the outside, from having the privilege and opportunity to plan vacations, enjoy careers, and live life—all of that was replaced by an existence of mundane nothingness. Children grow up and parents get older, and it all happens as time stands still for those on the inside. Only visits and photographs are available to mark the progression and changes. Prison life alone, with its loneliness, violence, and surrounding darkness only enhances the feelings of despair. A feeling no one on the outside could ever relate to unless they had been there, unless they had lived it.

It occurred to Aaron, not for the first time, the guards seemed to always be around when he didn’t want them to be, and never around when he did—which was rare.

Like now.

No matter how many times he knocked on, kicked or shook the cell block door, there was no answer. The desk outside the dorm where the officers normally sat remained empty. They had closed the yards right after breakfast and locked everyone down inside their assigned housing units. Not one uniform had been seen since, and that was over two hours ago.

Could the officers’ absence and institutional lock down have anything to do with the explosion some of them had heard about on the radio a little while ago? It had happened somewhere in Greensboro, which was not far from where Aaron was now. And wasn’t there also something about fires in Ohio? Was it Cleveland? Toledo? Or had they said both?

Aaron walked over and picked up the pay phone, but there was no dial tone. "Hey, Marty," he said, still holding the dead receiver in his hand.

"Yeah?" the heavy-set convict answered. He and some others were all taking advantage of their time off by watching a movie on HBO.

Aaron returned the phone to its cradle and gestured to the television with a nod. "Turn the TV to a local channel real quick, will ya?"

"We're watching this," Marty said, the others around him all chiming in likewise.

"It's a rerun, man. Just give me five seconds. I want to see if they're saying anything about what happened in Greensboro."

There was some grumbling, but everyone at last agreed. All any of them had heard before watching the movie was that something had caught fire at some mall. But, even they were curious to see if maybe it was something more.

Marty stood up and pressed a button on the television, changing the channel, and stopped at the local news station they all usually tuned in to at six o'clock every evening.

"...the massive inferno then spread throughout the entire building," the very attractive, yet frantic looking blonde reporter was saying. She was obviously on the scene of the catastrophe, because behind her were swarms of police and fire and medical personnel, all racing back and forth throughout the mall's crowded parking lot.

The caption at the bottom of the television screen read: Breaking News: Greensboro, North Carolina. Explosion at Tender Springs shopping complex destroys mall. Fifty-nine confirmed dead. Many more remain missing.

An aerial view was then shown from the news helicopter hovering above. While the complete look at the carnage was being displayed, the female reporter continued to speak in the background. "Authorities are not saying what may have led to the explosion, but early reports are that it was indeed an intentional act.

"If you are just joining us," she continued, "this is Miranda Stokes with Channel Fourteen News, live from the scene, where it seems an explosion has been intentionally ignited inside Tender Springs shopping mall. At this time, we are not sure how or why it was set, but almost sixty victims have already been confirmed dead, with that number expected to rise by the hour as fire fighters continue to try and contain the blaze that has engulfed close to eighty percent of this enormous complex."

The frame then switched to a split head-shot view of the reporter on the scene on the left, and her news anchor counterpart back at the station on the right.

The anchor, a clean-shaven African-American man with short hair and a slim face, spoke directly into the camera with a look of genuine concern: "Are authorities connecting this incident with the others we've been hearing about in other parts of the country?" he asked.

Miranda spoke straight into the camera: "Not yet, Kevin. As you know, however, several other tragedies such as this one have occurred this morning all across our nation, and while we are not sure of the details, we have to assume they may all be related."

As she spoke, an ambulance raced off in the distance behind her, sirens blaring. Once the sounds abated, she resumed her report. "As you can see, a number of ambulances and medical helicopters have been hard at work transporting those worst injured to nearby hospitals." She paused to remove a strand of hair from her face, tucking it behind her right ear. "Early speculations by some are that the events this morning could be terrorist related, possibly carried out by sleeper-cell units who may have been quietly living amongst us for some time. If that is the case, as frightening as it seems, they must have been extremely organized. Although everyone I have spoken with is hesitant to concede to such a notion, the evidence we are seeing and hearing about is awfully hard to ignore."

"Has there been any official correlation between the shopping center explosion and the arrests made earlier this morning at the natural gas storage facility there in the area?" Kevin asked.

The young reporter had to press the tiny speaker in her ear with her right hand, in an attempt to block out the surrounding noise. "All we are being told at this time, Kevin, is the same we reported earlier. Authorities are tight-lipped and are just repeating what they have already said, that at three this morning there was a suspicious vehicle pulled over and searched. The two occupants inside were arrested and charged with felony possession of weapons of mass destruction. Just what those weapons were, we still do not know, but after all that has transpired over the last few hours, it seems only logical to assume that the gas storage facility was also a target."

"Do we know the names of the two individuals who were apprehended?"

Shaking her head: "No. Those have not been released. What we do know, however, is that they are both being held without bond at this time. And let's not forget, Kevin, had they been successful, we would have been looking at an explosion, or series of explosions, covering an area the size of twenty-five football fields. The storage unit has over one-hundred five-hundred-gallon storage tanks, full of highly flammable gases. The potential for destruction would have been unimaginable."

Kevin nodded. "We can at least be thankful for that," he said. "Thanks Miranda. We will be checking in with you again, soon. Stay safe out there."

“I will,” she replied. “Reporting live from Greensboro, this is Miranda Stokes, Channel Fourteen News.”

The split-screen then switched to a single view of the news anchor back at the station.

“The tragedies here in North Carolina and across the country,” he continued, “have sparked nation-wide fears. These catastrophic events have taken us by storm, with no reason or cause for their senseless brutality.

“Many schools across the country have either been canceled for the day, or were let out soon after morning classes began. The stock market, too, is expected to shut down for its first unscheduled closing since nine-eleven.

“President O’Reilly had a news conference scheduled for eight this morning, which was initially pushed back, but has now been scheduled for sometime within the hour. We will keep you updated as we learn more on when the address will take place.

“All of our regularly-scheduled programs have been canceled as we plan to remain on the air as more news develops.

“For now, let’s check in with...”

The cell-block suddenly erupted with noise, and Aaron could not hear any more of the report. Nearly everyone in the dorm had made their way into the day room, and had heard what the news was. For a few minutes, they had all remained silent while taking it all in, having hung on every word the two reporters had said. Once they had gotten the gist of it, however, their fear, confusion, and disbelief exploded, resulting in a verbal onslaught of chaos.

Chapter 5

Blue River Correctional, like most prisons, was surrounded by multiple fences of razor and concertina wire, and employed two armed security vehicles to circle the perimeter on an around the clock basis. And inside, on the prison grounds, there were several different yards separated by similar type fencing. Four of these yards were for inmate housing, with each one having two buildings for residence.

Every housing unit consisted of six dorms, with twenty-two inmates in each. The dorms were sectioned off into three parts: showers, toilets, and sinks were to the left as you entered, the television and day room area to the right, and the double-bunked sleeping area straight ahead.

Each housing unit had an assigned number, with every dorm designated a letter. Aaron's housing assignment was three-C, but Red's was four-A, meaning the two of them were on the same yard but in separate buildings. Aaron was not exactly sure where all they were hearing about could lead, but his instincts told him that the uneasiness he felt in his gut was a feeling he ought to take heed of. And if things got a little crazy, he knew that neither he nor Red would rest until they were sure the other was safe. And since they were only one building apart, that would make it easier for them to get together.

Maybe...

News anchor Kevin Brennon, who had ended his correspondence with Ms. Stokes, was now speaking with a White House correspondent via satellite. Aaron, though, had no idea what the two men were saying; their voices were being drowned out by the uproar.

Several of the guys had gathered by the door and were beating the shatterproof glass, in an effort to arouse an officer's presence. Fear of what may be happening with the world outside of their locked gates had them in a frenzy. They were all concerned about their families, and were anxious for some answers as to why the prison had gone on lock down, with no one around.

Aaron could see that inmates in the other dorms were at their doors, too, reacting in much the same way. News had obviously spread, prompting panic in others, as well. And with no prison staff anywhere to be seen, their absence only intensified the situation.

To his right, Aaron noticed a younger guy in the block, Trey, trying over and over again to get an outside line on the institutional pay-phone, but without any luck. Aaron had just tried the same phone only moments before, and understood the other man's need to want to get through.

He looked around for Drew, and started his way when he spotted him. But before turning to walk back through the sleeping area, he leaned over to say a few

words to his friend, Junior. "Holler for me if they start showing anything new," he told him, gesturing to the television.

"Hey, A-R?" he asked as Aaron was about to walk off.

"Yeah?"

Junior then turned his attention from the television and looked up at him. "What do you think all this shit's really about?"

"I've got no idea, *amigo*, but I've gotta feelin' we'll find out soon. And when we do," he told him, "I'm afraid it's not gonna be good." He nodded towards the news report. "Let me know if something changes."

Drew was one of the two guys in the block who had a cell phone. As Aaron made his way towards him, he noticed Drew knelt down between two bunks, frantically pressing the screen on his Samsung Galaxy. Drew was from Greensboro, and Aaron could only imagine how worried he must be while anxiously awaiting word on his loved ones. From the looks of it, though, he wasn't getting through.

Across from Drew, sitting on the floor between two other bunks, sat the other cell phone owner—a slim guy from Burlington who everyone called B-Town. Like Drew, and Trey at the prison phone, he was also struggling to get connected.

Looking back and forth between the two men, Aaron, with a nervous but controlled worrisome contemplation, quickly evaluated the situation unfolding before him: the absence of the guards; the explosion in Greensboro; the other events across the nation; the speculations of terrorism; the cell phone service outage...could it really mean that America was under attack again? On her own soil? It had happened before, with Pearl Harbor and 9/11 being the most recent. But if what the news reports were saying had any merit, then what was happening now was much larger than either of those attacks.

Aaron thought of his family...his son. He was glad that he had not heard of any incidents near Charlotte, where they were at. But Kat's family was from Greensboro, just like Drew's.

And while they had not exactly been welcoming, they were still Zay's grandparents, and so he thought of them and hoped they were alright.

Drew noticed Aaron standing there and gave him a look, shaking his head. "I can't get through to anyone. I can't even get the internet," he said, verbalizing what Aaron had already gleaned from the man's demeanor. "Every phone number I try is busy, and I've sent texts, but they're not getting through, either." There was a look of desperation and fear in his eyes.

Drew got to his feet, still holding the useless device in his hand, just as B-Town came walking their way. The young man was clutching his own cell phone so tight Aaron thought he might snap it in two any second.

“Man, this shit is crazy!” B-Town exclaimed. “No cell service, no texts, no internet—nothing!”

Aaron and Drew nodded in agreement. “We know,” they said.

Aware of the three men standing there, towards the back of the block, Trey gave up his attempts to get an outside line on the pay phone, and headed straight for them. “B-Town,” he said aloud, “let me try your cell.”

“Yeah,” someone else yelled from the front. “Let some of us use those phones y’all got. We got family out there, too, and I need to know what’s up!”

And with that, several inmates came and swarmed the trio, all of them demanding use of one of the two cell phones.

Tensions were understandably high, and the situation was quickly about to escalate and spiral out of control. A couple of the other inmates began pushing Drew and B-Town, one of them trying to snatch the phone from B-Town’s hand.

“Hey!” Aaron barked, the sudden tone in his voice causing just enough of a pause in all the ruckus to give him an opportunity to explain some things before there was an altercation over a source of communication that, at the moment at least, was as useless as the one hanging on the wall.

For their part, Drew and B-Town were firing right back at the others and arguing the point of their failed efforts. But they too had been momentarily silenced by the outburst.

Aaron’s voice was not loud when he spoke again, but it was firm. “The phones don’t work,” he said, having to hold off a couple of the guys who seemed ready to fight. “Whatever’s happening out there right now, it’s either knocked out or jammed the cell towers and the internet. All of us are locked in this block together, and we’re gonna find out what’s going on. But until then, let’s try and—”

“I’m worried about my people!” an angry inmate interrupted. It was John-John, the one who had tried to grab the phone from B-Town only a second before. He was young, about twenty-four, and a hot-head.

Aaron stared him down. “And we’re not?” he said, echoing John-John’s tone. Averting his gaze to the others around him, he continued, “These guys,” gesturing to Drew and B-Town behind him, “are going to keep trying to get through. As soon as they do, I’m sure we’ll be given a chance to call, too.” He looked back over his shoulder at Drew and B-Town, and stated, “Right?”

The two men nodded and agreed.

At last, the moment passed and the air seemed to clear as tempers settled. For how long, though, Aaron was not sure. There was a great deal of anxiety and fear amongst the inmates, and justifiably so. And the fact that they were alone and locked inside only seemed to enhance their torment.

How long would it be until someone came through and informed them of what they were supposed to do? How would they be affected if America was indeed under an attack? Maybe it was not as bad as everyone thought, Aaron said to himself. Maybe too many people are jumping to conclusions too early, me included.

Perhaps ...but he did not think so.

Of the twenty-one other inmates in the block with Aaron, there were five who were at least fifty years old. Knowing that a couple of them took certain medications, administered by in-house medical staff, gave Aaron additional cause for concern. How would some of those around him, particularly those who were older, handle the situation if it continued to get worse?

Like every other prison dorm in America, Aaron's was a melting pot of various ethnic, religious, and age groups. The majority of them were in their twenties or thirties, with about a third or more being the youngest. Those like B-Town, Trey and John-John. For the most part, it was a good block, and everyone got along. What few differences that had actually led to physical confrontations over the past couple of years had been handled between the two involved, and then forgotten.

It was like that with men sometimes, especially when combined with the pressures and struggles of being incarcerated. The testosterone built up and had to be released by ways of aggression every once in a while. Then, if all was as it should be, the incident was over and the men moved on. An open-dorm type of living arrangement with people coexisting and sleeping right next to one another was not an ideal place to hold grudges. Vindictiveness in such an environment could be a very dangerous thing.

With everyone at ease for the time being, Aaron took the opportunity and assessed the vibe of those around him.

Drew and B-Town were still making every effort to get their phones to work, while the ones who they had briefly scuffled with were still hovering around, albeit in more of an agreeable manner. Some other inmates remained at the front of the dorm, waiting for an officer, or any other prison staff member to show up, and there were also a few guys around the bunk area, sitting on their beds, listening intently to their radios for any further reports on the attacks. Most, though, were in the day room area, watching more news coverage. The air in the block was thick with nervous anticipation, and the men were on edge with worry. They all were growing tired of not being told anything by the guards, and the tension hovered

steadily right below the surface. Other than the conversations going on amongst those crowding around the two cell phones that were still not working, very few people were talking. The noise level had dropped considerably, as most everyone's individual thoughts had captivated them and lured them into silence.

One inmate Aaron knew well was a guy everyone called Radio Mike. He slept two bunks down, and was a real whiz when it came to electronics. He was relatively young, but had the soul of someone much older. Mike was a Cherokee Indian with long black hair, which he kept braided neatly down his back. Although tall and extremely thin, when asked why he didn't workout and try to build up some muscle mass, Mike would just shrug and say he didn't need to be any bigger because he always kept a sharp knife.

A sharp knife, indeed. The victim in Mike's case, a patron of a local pool hall, and a sore loser, had been sliced and diced "six ways from Sunday," Mike would happily tell anyone who asked. It was a miracle the man even survived. And for anyone wishing to test the Native American's craftsmanship now, they needed only to try; the prison shank he carried was just as sharp as any knife ever made.

Like Aaron, the Indian stayed to himself a lot. He made his hustle working on other inmates' Walkmans, headphones, and cellphones, but he and Aaron had struck up a conversation once a few months back, talking about cars-Aaron's BMW, and Mike's sixty-nine Camaro—and had gotten along great ever since.

Mike was sitting on his bunk with his headphones on, an intense look of concentration on his face, as he listened to whatever he had tuned in on his radio. He pulled the ear-bud from his ear as Aaron approached and sat down beside him.

"There's some bad shit going on out there, my friend," he said. "And it's a lot bigger than just the hit on that mall, and them boys who were arrested by that gas facility."

"Yeah, I know," Aaron responded. "There was something earlier this morning about incidents in Ohio. They even mentioned on the news just now about other parts of the country, too."

Shaking his head, Mike said, "Nah, A-R. Mark my words, bro. This shit is deeper than what the world is letting us in on right now. Damn, man, the reporters don't even know the whole story yet." With his finger, he tapped the radio in his other hand. "I've been listening to the world news station and they're talking about as many as fifty other major attacks this morning, all at around the same time. Everything from shopping centers and complexes, like in Greensboro, to business districts and power distribution centers. Some power grids have even been completely wiped out." Tapping his radio again for emphasis, he continued, "And that's just the ones we know about so far. How many more attacks were, for whatever reason, diverted by the cops or something?"

"Like the gas facility?"

“Exactly.”

“Terrorists?” Aaron wondered out loud, recalling what the pretty blonde reporter had said only few minutes before.

“It has to be,” Mike said. “National media is claiming it may have something to do with that terrorist leader we killed a few months ago.

“And,” he added, “there may even be some Korean military ships cruising our freakin’ coastlines like sharks in the water, right now. Those bastards must have teamed up with Allah and the boys.”

Mike had a heavy accent, indigenous of the Native Americans born and raised in his hometown of Paint Town, North Carolina, and it was accentuating more as he spoke.

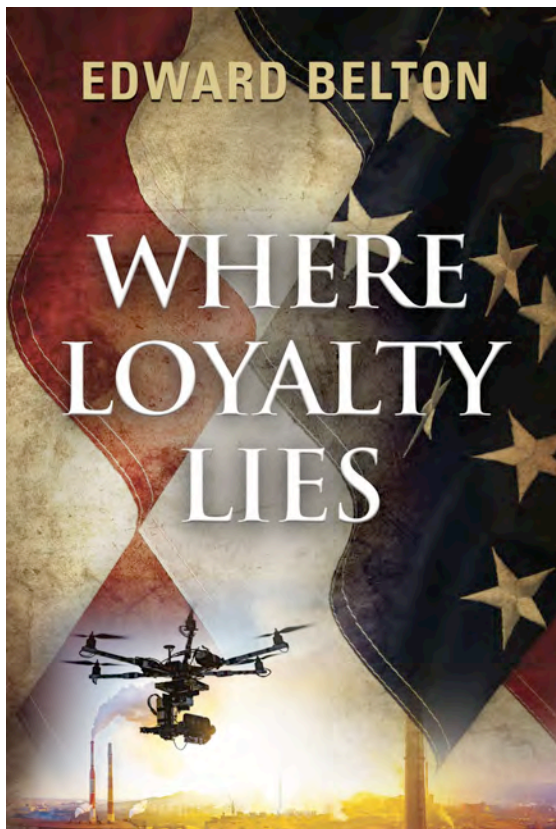
“And get this, A-R,” he laid it on, “the countries who’re supposed to be our allies aren’t even gearing up to help us out.”

“What!” Aaron could not believe what he was hearing. “Why in the hell not?” Mike only shrugged. “Nobody knows. Or if they do, they just ain’t telling us.”

About that time, Junior poked his head around the corner from the day room and yelled for Aaron. His dark brown eyes were wide with excitement as he rattled off a phrase only he and the other two Hispanic inmates in the block could understand.

“English, *hombre*, English.” Although Aaron did not speak the language, he did know at least a few words, and thought he caught a couple that anyone would recognize: *el Presidente*. The President.

“I said, ‘get your *gringo* ass in here, ‘cause the President is about to make a speech.”



A new war has been dropped on America's doorstep in the form of another September attack. Only this time the outcome is even more catastrophic than before. When all hell breaks loose, inmate Aaron Dean finds himself on the outside with no law except morality and human decency. Will he choose freedom or constrain himself to something greater?

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