

**DAVID  
BALDACCI**



**The  
Target**

MACMILLAN

## CHAPTER

# I

FOUR HUNDRED MEN LIVED HERE, most for the rest of their time on earth.

And then hell would get them for the rest of eternity.

The walls were thick concrete and their interior sides were layered with repulsive graffiti that spared virtually nothing in its collective depravity. And each year more filth was grafted onto the walls like sludge building up in a sewer. The steel bars were nicked and scarred, but still impossible to break by human hands. There had been escapes from here, but none for more than thirty years—once outside the walls there was no place to go. The people living on the outside around here weren't any friendlier than the ones on the inside.

And they actually had more guns.

The old man had another severe coughing fit and spit up blood, which was as much evidence of his terminal condition as any expert medical pronouncement. He knew he was dying; the only question was when. He had to hang on, though. He had something left to do, and he would not get a second chance to do it.

Earl Fontaine was large but had once been larger still. His body had imploded as the metastatic cancer ate him from the inside out. His face was heavily wrinkled, savaged by time, four packs of menthols a day, a poor diet, and most of all a bitter sense of injustice. His skin was thin and pasty from decades inside this place where the sun did not reach.

With a struggle he sat up in his bed and looked around at the other occupants of the ward. There were only seven of them, none

as bad off as he was. They might leave this place upright. He was beyond that. Yet despite his dire condition, he smiled.

Another inmate from across the floor saw Earl's happy expression and called out, "What in the hell do you have to smile about, Earl? Let us in on the joke, why don't you."

Earl let the grin ease all the way across his broad face. He managed to do so despite the pain in his bones that was akin to someone cutting through them with a brittle-bladed saw. "Gettin' outta here, Junior," Earl said.

"Bullshit," said the other inmate, who was known as Junior inside these walls for no apparent reason. He had raped and killed five women across three counties simply because they had been unfortunate enough to cross his path. The authorities were working like mad to treat his current illness so he could keep his official execution date in two months.

Earl nodded. "Out of here."

"How?"

"Coffin is how, Junior, just like your scrawny ass." Earl cackled while Junior shook his head and turned back to stare glumly at his IV lines. They were similar to the ones that would carry the lethal chemicals that would end his life in Alabama's death chamber. He finally looked away, closed his eyes, and went swiftly to sleep as though practicing for the deepest of all slumbers in exactly sixty days.

Earl lay back and rattled the chain attached to the cuff around his right wrist, which in turn was hooked to a stout though rusted iron ring set into the wall.

"I'm getting away," he bellowed. "Better send the coon dogs come get me." Then he went into another coughing spell that lasted until a nurse came over and gave him some water, a pill, and a hard slap on the back. Then he helped Earl sit up straighter.

The nurse probably didn't know why Earl had been sent to prison and probably wouldn't have cared if he did know. Every inmate in this max prison had done something so appallingly horrific that every guard and worker here was completely desensitized to it.

“Now, just settle down, Earl,” said the nurse. “You’ll only make things worse.”

Earl calmed, sat back against his pillow, and then eyed the nurse steadily. “Can they be? Worse is what I mean.”

The nurse shrugged. “Guess anything can be worse. And maybe you should’ve thought of that before you got to this place.”

With a burst of energy Earl said, “Hey, kid, can you get me a smoke? Just slip it twixt my fingers and light me up. Won’t tell nobody you done it. Cross and swear and all that crap though I ain’t no God-fearing man.”

The nurse blanched at the very idea of doing such a thing. “Uh, yeah, maybe if it were 1970. You’re hooked up to oxygen, for God’s sake. It’s explosive, Earl, as in *boom*.”

Earl grinned, revealing discolored teeth and many gaps in between. “Hell, I’ll take blowing up over being eaten alive from this crap inside me.”

“Yeah? But the rest of us wouldn’t. See, that’s most people’s problem, only thinking of themselves.”

“Just one cig, kid. I like the Winstons. You got Winstons? It’s my dying wish. Got to abide by it. Like my last supper. It’s the damn law.” He rattled his chain. “Last smoke. Gotta gimme it.” He rattled his chain louder. “Gimme it.”

The nurse said, “You’re dying of lung cancer, Earl. Now, how do you think you got that? Here’s a clue. They call ’em *cancer sticks* for a damn good reason. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! With that kinda stupidity you can thank the good Lord you lived long as you have.”

“Gimme the smoke, you little prick.”

The nurse was obviously done dealing with Earl. “Look, I got a lot of patients to take care of. Let’s have a quiet day, what do you say, old man? I don’t want to have to call a guard. Albert’s on ward duty now and Albert is not known for his TLC. He’ll put a baton to your skull, sick and dying or not, and then lie in his report and not one person will dispute it. Dude’s scary and he don’t give a shit. You know that.”

Before the nurse turned away Earl said, "You know why I'm here?"

The nurse smirked. "Let's see. 'Cause you're dying and the state of Alabama won't release someone like you to secure hospice even if you are costing them a ton of money in medical bills?"

"No, not this here hospital ward. I'm talking prison," said Earl, his voice low and throaty. "Gimme some more water, will ya? I can get me water in this gol-damn place, can't I?"

The nurse poured a cup and Earl greedily drank it down, wiped his face dry, and said with pent-up energy, "Got behind bars over twenty years ago. First, just for life in a federal cage. But then they got me on the death penalty thing. Sons-a-bitches lawyers. And the state done took ahold of my ass. Feds let 'em. Just let 'em. I got rights? Hell, I got *nuthin'* if they can do that. See what I'm saying? Just 'cause I killed her. Had a nice bed in the fed place. Now look at me. Bet I got me the cancer 'cause of this here place. Know I did. In the air. Lucky for me I ain't never got that AIDS shit." He raised his eyebrows and lowered his voice. "You *know* they got that kind in here."

"Uh-huh," said the nurse, who was checking the file of another patient on his laptop. It was set on a rolling cart that had locked compartments where meds were kept.

Earl said, "That's two decades plus almost two years now. Long damn time."

"Yep, you know your math all right, Earl," the nurse said absently.

"The first Bush was still president but that boy from Arkansas done beat him in the election. Saw it on the TV when I got here. Year was 1992. What was his name again? They say he's part colored."

"Bill Clinton. And he's not part black. He just played the saxophone and went to the African-American churches sometimes."

"That's right. Him. Been here since then."

"I was seven."

"What?" barked Earl, squinting his eyes to see better. He rubbed absently at the pain in his belly.

The nurse said, "I was seven when Clinton was elected. My momma and daddy were conflicted. They were Republicans, of course, but he was a southern boy all right. I think they voted for him, but wouldn't admit to it. Didn't matter none. This *is* Alabama, after all. A liberal wins here hell freezes over. Am I right?"

"Sweet home Alabama," said Earl, nodding. "Lived here a long time. Had a family here. But I'm from Georgia, son. I'm a Georgia peach, see? Not no Alabama boy."

"Okay."

"But I got sent to this here prison 'cause of what I *done* in Alabama."

"Sure you did. Not that much difference, though. Georgia, Alabama. Kissing cousins. Not like they were taking your ass up to New York or Massachusetts. Foreign countries up there for shit sure."

"'Cause of what I done," said Earl breathlessly, still rubbing at his belly. "Can't stand Jews, coloreds, and Catholics. Don't much care for Presbyterians neither."

The nurse looked at him and said in an amused tone, "Presbyterians? What the hell they ever done to you, Earl? That's like hating the Amish."

"Squealed like hogs getting butchered, swear to God they did. Jews and coloreds mostly." He shrugged and absently wiped sweat from his brow using his sheet. "Hell, truth is, I never killed me no Presbyterian. They just don't stand out, see, but I woulda if I got the chance." His smile deepened, reaching all the way to his eyes. And in that look it was easy to see that despite age and illness Earl Fontaine was a killer. Was *still* a killer. Would always be a killer until the day he died, which couldn't come soon enough for lawful-minded citizens.

The nurse unlocked a drawer on his cart and took out some meds. "Now, why'd you want to go and do something like that? Them folks done nothing to you, I bet."

Earl coughed up some phlegm and spit it into his cup. He said grimly, "They was breathing. That was good enough for me."

“Guess that’s why you’re in here all right. But you got to set it right with God, Earl. They’re all God’s children. Got to set it right. You’ll be seeing him soon.”

Earl laughed till he choked. Then he calmed and his features seemed to clear.

“I got people coming to see me.”

“That’s nice, Earl,” said the nurse as he administered a painkiller to the inmate in the next bed. “Family?”

“No. I done killed my family.”

“Why’d you do that? Were they Jews or Presbyterians or coloreds?”

“Folks coming to see me,” said Earl. “I ain’t done yet, see?”

“Uh-huh.” The nurse checked the monitor of the other inmate. “Good to make use of any time you got left, old man. Clock she is a-ticking, all right, for all of us.”

“Coming to see me today,” said Earl. “Marked it on the wall here, look.”

He pointed to the concrete wall where he had used his fingernail to chip off the paint. “They said six days and they’d be coming to see me. Got me six marks on there. Good with numbers. Mind still working and all.”

“Well, you sure tell ’em hello for me,” said the nurse as he moved away with his cart.

Later, Earl stared at the doorway to the ward, where two men had appeared. They were dressed in dark suits and white shirts and their black shoes were polished. One wore black-framed glasses. The other looked like he’d barely graduated from high school. They were both holding Bibles and sporting gentle, reverential expressions. They appeared respectable, peaceful, and law-abiding. They were actually none of those things.

Earl caught their eye. “Coming to see me,” he mumbled, his senses suddenly as clear as they had ever been. Once more he had a purpose in life. It would be right before he died, but it was still a purpose.

“Killed my family,” he said. But that wasn’t entirely accurate. He had murdered his wife and buried her body in the basement

of their home. They hadn't found it until years later. That was why he was here and had been sentenced to death. He could have found a better hiding place, he supposed, but it had not been a priority. He was busy killing others.

The federal government had let the state of Alabama try, convict, and sentence him to death for her murder. He had had a scheduled visit to Alabama's death chamber at the Holman Correctional Facility in Atmore. Since 2002, the state of Alabama officially killed you by lethal injection. But some death penalty proponents were advocating the return of "Old Sparky" to administer final justice by electrocution to those on death row.

None of that troubled Earl. His appeal had carried on for so long that he'd never be executed now. It was because of his cancer. Ironically enough, the law said an inmate had to be in good health in order to be put to death. Yet they'd only saved him from a quick, painless demise so that nature could substitute a longer, far more painful one in the form of lung cancer that had spread all over him. Some would call that sweet justice. He just called it shitty luck.

He waved over the two men in suits.

He had killed his wife, to be sure. And he'd killed many others, though exactly how many he didn't remember. Jews, coloreds, maybe some Catholics. Maybe he'd killed a Presbyterian too. Hell, he didn't know. Wasn't like they carried ID proclaiming their faith. Anybody who got in his way was someone who needed killing. And he had allowed as many people to get in his way as was humanly possible.

Now he was chained to a wall and was dying. But still, he had something left to do.

More precisely, he had one more person to kill.



## CHAPTER

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# 2

THE MEN COULD NOT HAVE looked any more tense. It was as though the weight of the world was resting on each of their shoulders.

Actually, it was.

The president of the United States sat in the seat at the end of the small table. They were in the Situation Room complex in the basement of the West Wing of the White House. Sometimes referred to as the “Woodshed,” the complex was first built during President Kennedy’s term after the Bay of Pigs fiasco. Kennedy no longer thought he could trust the military and wanted his own intelligence overseers who would parse the reports coming in from the Pentagon. The Truman bowling alley had been sacrificed to build the complex, which had later undergone major renovations in 2006.

During Kennedy’s era a single analyst from the CIA would man the Situation Room in an unbroken twenty-hour shift, sleeping there as well. Later, the place had been expanded to include the Department of Homeland Security and the White House Chief of Staff’s office. However, the National Security Council staff ran the complex. Five “Watch Teams” comprised of thirty or so carefully vetted personnel operated the Situation Room on a 24/7 basis. Its primary goal was to keep the president and his senior staff briefed each day on important issues and allow for instant and secure communications anywhere in the world. It even had a secure link to Air Force One in the event the president was traveling.

The Situation Room itself was large, with space for thirty or more participants and a large video screen on the wall. Mahogany had been the wood surface of choice before the renovation. Now the walls were composed mainly of “whisper” materials that protected against electronic surveillance.

But tonight the men were not in the main conference room. Nor were they in the president’s briefing room. They were in a small conference room that had two video screens on the wall and a row of world time clocks above. There were chairs for six people.

Only three of them were occupied.

The president’s seat allowed him to stare directly at the video screens. To his right was Josh Potter, the national security advisor. To his left was Evan Tucker, head of the CIA.

That was all. The circle of need to know was miniscule. But there would be a fourth person joining them in a moment by secure video link. The staff normally in the Situation Room had been walled off from this meeting and the coming communication. There was only one person handling the transmission. And even that person would not be privy to what was said.

The VP would normally have been part of such a meeting. However, if what they were planning went awry, he might be taking over the top spot because the president could very well be impeached. Thus they had to keep him out of the loop. It would be terrible for the country if the president had to leave office. It would be catastrophic if the VP were forced out too. The Constitution dictated that the top spot would then go to the Speaker of the House of Representatives. And no one wanted the head of what could very well be the most dysfunctional group in Washington to be suddenly running the country.

The president cleared his throat and said, “This could be momentous or it could be Armageddon.”

Potter nodded, as did Tucker. The president looked at the CIA chief.

“This is rock solid, Evan?”

“Rock solid, sir. In fact, not to toot our own horn, but this is the prize for nearly three years of intelligence work performed

under the most difficult conditions imaginable. It has, frankly, never been done before.”

The president nodded and looked at the clocks above the screens. He checked his own watch against them and made a small adjustment to his timepiece. It looked as though he had aged five years in the last five minutes. All American presidents had to make decisions that could shake the world. In numerous ways, the demands of the position were simply beyond the ability of a mere mortal to carry out. But the Constitution required that the position be held by only one person.

He let out a long breath and said, “This had better work.”

Potter said, “Agreed, sir.”

“It *will* work,” insisted Tucker. “And the world will be much better off for it.” He added, “I have a professional bucket list, sir, and this is number two on it, right behind Iran. And in some ways, it should be number one.”

Potter said, “Because of the nukes.”

“Of course,” said Tucker. “Iran wants nukes. These assholes already have them. With delivery capabilities that are inching closer and closer to our mainland. Now, if we pull this off, believe me, Tehran will sit up and take notice. Maybe we kill two birds with one stone.”

The president put up a hand. “I know the story, Evan. I’ve read all the briefings. I know what hangs in the balance.”

The screen flickered and a voice came over the speaker system embedded in the wall.

“Mr. President, the transmission is ready.”

The president unscrewed the top of a water bottle sitting in front of him and took a long drink. He put the bottle back down. “Do it,” he said curtly.

The screen flickered once more and then came fully to life. They were staring at a man short in stature, in his seventies, with a deeply lined and tanned face. There was a rim of white near his hairline where the cap he normally wore helped to block the sun. But he was not in uniform now. He was dressed in a gray tunic with a high, stiff collar.

He stared directly at them.

Evan Tucker said, "Thank you for agreeing to communicate with us tonight, General Pak."

Pak nodded and said, in halting but clearly enunciated English, "It is good to meet, face-to-face, as it were." He smiled, showing off highly polished veneers.

The president attempted to smile back, but his heart was not in it. He knew that Pak would lose his life if exposed. But the president had a lot to lose too.

"We appreciate the level of cooperation received," he said.

Pak nodded. "Our goals are the same, Mr. President. For too long we have been isolated. It is time for us to take our seat at the world's table. We owe it to our people."

Tucker said encouragingly, "We completely agree with that assessment, General Pak."

"Details are progressing nicely," said Pak. "Then you can commence your part in this. You must send your best operatives. Even with my help, the target is a very difficult one." Pak held up a single finger. "This will be the number of opportunities we will have. No more, no less."

The president glanced at Tucker and then back at Pak. "We would send nothing less than our very best for something of this magnitude."

Potter said, "And we are sure of both the intelligence and the support?"

Pak nodded. "Absolutely sure. We have shared that with your people and they have confirmed the same."

Potter glanced at Tucker, who nodded.

"If it is discovered," said Pak. They all became riveted to him. "If it becomes discovered, I will surely lose my life. And, America, your loss will be far greater."

He looked the president directly in the eye and took a few moments seemingly to compose his words carefully.

"It is why I asked for this video conference, Mr. President. I will be sacrificing not only my life, but the lives of my family as well. That is the way here, you see. So, I need your complete and

absolute assurance that if we move forward, we do so together and united, no matter what might happen. You must look me in the eye and tell me this is so.”

The blood seemed to drain from the face of the president. He had made many important decisions during his term, but none so stressful or potentially momentous as this one.

He didn't look at either Potter or Tucker before answering. He kept his gaze right on Pak. “You have my word,” he said in a strong, clear voice.

Pak smiled, showing off his perfect teeth again. “That is what I needed to hear. Together, then.” He saluted the president, who gave his own crisp salute in return.

Tucker hit a button on the console in front of him and the screen went black once more.

The president let out an audible breath and sat back against the leather of his chair. He was sweating though the room was cool. He wiped a drop of moisture off his forehead. What they were proposing to do was quite clearly illegal. An impeachable offense. And unlike the presidents impeached before him, he had no doubt the Senate would convict him.

“Into the breach rode the five hundred,” the president said in barely a whisper, but both Potter and Tucker heard it and nodded in agreement.

The president leaned forward and looked squarely at Tucker.

“There is no margin for error. None. And if there is the least hint of this coming out—”

“Sir, that will not happen. This is the first time we've ever had an asset placed that high over there. There was an attempt on the leadership last year, as you know. While he was traveling on the street in the capital. But it was botched. That was from low-level internal sources and had nothing to do with us. Our strike will be quick and clean. And it will succeed.”

“And you have your team in place?”

“Being assembled, and then they'll be vetted.”

The president looked sharply at him. “Vetted? Who the hell are you planning to use?”

“Will Robie and Jessica Reel.”

Potter sputtered, “Robie and Reel?”

“They are the absolute best we have,” said Tucker. “Look what they did with Ahmadi in Syria.”

Potter eyed Tucker closely. He knew every detail of that mission. Thus he knew that neither Reel nor Robie had been intended to survive it.

The president said slowly, “But with Reel’s background. What you allege she did. The possibility of her going—”

Tucker broke in. Normally, this would be unheard of. You let the president speak. But tonight Evan Tucker seemed to see and hear only what he wanted to.

“They are the best, sir, and the best is what we need here. As I said, with your permission, they will be vetted to ensure that their performance will be at the highest level. However, if they fail the vetting, I have another team, nearly as good, and certainly up to the task of performing the mission. But the clear preference is not the B Team.”

Potter said, “But why not simply deploy the backup team? Then this vetting process becomes unnecessary.”

Tucker looked at the president. “We really need to do it this way, sir, for a number of reasons. Reasons which I’m sure you can readily see.”

Tucker had prepared for this exact moment for weeks. He had studied the president’s history, his time as commander in chief, and even gotten his hands on an old psychological profile of the man done while he was running for Congress many years ago. The president was smart and accomplished, but not that smart, and not that accomplished. That meant he had a chip on his shoulder. Thus he was reluctant to acknowledge that he was not always the smartest, most informed person in the room. Some would see that attribute as a strength. Tucker knew it to be a serious vulnerability ripe for exploitation.

And he was exploiting it right now.

The president nodded. “Yes, yes, I can see that.”

Tucker’s face remained impassive, but inwardly he breathed a sigh of relief.

The president leaned forward. “I respect Robie *and* Reel. But again, there is no margin for error here, Evan. So you vet the hell out of them and make damn sure they are absolutely ready for this. Or you use the B Team. Are we clear?”

“Crystal,” said Tucker.

## CHAPTER

# 3

WILL ROBIE, UNABLE TO SLEEP, stared at the ceiling of his bedroom while the rain pounded away outside. His head was pounding even more, and it would not stop when the rain did. He finally rose, dressed, put on a long slicker with a hood, and set out from his apartment in Dupont Circle in Washington, D.C.

He walked for nearly an hour through the darkness. There were few people about at this hour of the morning. Unlike other major cities, D.C. did sleep. At least the part you could see. The government side, the one that existed underground and behind concrete bunkers and in innocuous-looking low-rise buildings, never slumbered. Those people were going as hard right now as they would during the daylight hours.

Three men in their early twenties approached from the other side of the street. Robie had already seen them, sized them up, and knew what they would demand of him. There were no cops around. No witnesses. He did not have time for this. He did not have the desire for this. He turned and walked directly at them.

“If I give you some money, will you leave?” he asked the tallest of the three. This one was his size, a six-footer packing about one hundred and eighty street-hardened pounds.

The man drew back his Windbreaker, revealing a black Sig nine-mil in the waistband that hung low over his hips.

“Depends on how much.”

“A hundred?”

The man looked at his two comrades. “Make it a deuce and you’re on your way, dude.”



“I don’t have a deuce.”

“So you say. Then you gonna get jacked right here.”

He went to draw the gun, but Robie had already taken it from his waistband and pulled down his pants at the same time. The man tripped over his fallen trousers.

The man on the right pulled a knife and then watched in amazement as Robie first disarmed him and then laid him out with three quick punches, two to the right kidney, one to the jaw. Robie added a kick to the head after the man smacked the pavement.

The third man did not move.

The tall man exclaimed, “Shit, you a ninja?”

Robie glanced down at the Sig he held. “It’s not balanced properly and it’s rusted. You need to take care of your weapons better or they won’t perform when you want them to.” He flicked the weapon toward them. “How many more guns?”

The third man’s hand went to his pocket.

“Drop the jacket,” ordered Robie.

“It’s raining and cold,” the man protested.

Robie put the Sig’s muzzle directly against his forehead. “Not asking again.”

The jacket came off and fell into a puddle. Robie picked it up, found the Glock.

“I see the throwaways at your ankles,” he said. “Out.”

The throwaways were handed over. Robie balled them all up in the jacket.

He eyed the tall man. “See where greed gets you? Should have taken the Benny.”

“We need our guns!”

“I need them more.” Robie kicked some water from the puddle into the unconscious man’s face and he awoke with a start, then rose on shaky legs. He did not seem to know what was going on, and probably had a concussion.

Robie flicked the gun again. “Down that way. All of you. Turn right into the alley.”

The tall man suddenly looked nervous. “Hey, dude, look, we’re

sorry, okay? But this is our turf here. We patrol it. It's our livelihood."

"You want a livelihood? Get a real job that doesn't involve putting a gun in people's faces and taking what doesn't belong to you. Now walk. Not asking again."

They turned and marched down the street. When one of the men turned to look back, Robie clipped him in the head with the butt of the Sig. "Eyes straight. Turn around again you get a third one to look through in the back of your head."

Robie could hear the men's breathing accelerate. Their legs were jelly. They believed they were walking to their execution.

"Walk faster," barked Robie.

They picked up their pace.

"Faster. But don't run."

The three men looked idiotic trying to go faster while still walking.

"Now run!"

The three men broke into a sprint. They turned left at the next intersection and were gone.

Robie turned and headed in the opposite direction. He ducked down an alley, found a Dumpster, and heaved the jacket and guns into it after clearing out all of the ammo. He dropped the bullets down a sewer grate.

He did not get many opportunities for peaceful moments and he did not like it when they were interrupted.

Robie continued his walk and reached the Potomac River. This had not been an idle sojourn. He had come here with a purpose.

He drew an object from the pocket of his slicker and looked down at it, running his finger along the polished surface.

It was a medal, the highest award that the Central Intelligence Agency gave out for heroism in the field. Robie had earned it, together with another agent, for a mission undertaken in Syria at great personal risk. They had barely made it back alive.

In fact, it was the wish of certain people at the agency that they not make it back alive. One of those persons was Evan Tucker,

and it was unlikely he was going away, because he happened to head up the CIA.

The other agent who had received the award was Jessica Reel. She was the real reason Evan Tucker had not wanted them back alive. Reel had killed members of her own agency. It had been for a very good reason, but some people didn't care about that. Certainly Evan Tucker hadn't.

Robie wondered where Reel was right now. They had parted on shaky ground. Robie had given her what he had believed was his unconditional support. Yet Reel did not seem to be capable of acknowledging such a gesture. Hence the shaky parting.

He gripped the chain like a slingshot and whirled the medal around and around. He eyed the dark surface of the Potomac. It was windy; there were a few small whitecaps. He wondered how far he could hurl the highest medal of the CIA into the depths of the river that formed one boundary of the nation's capital, separating it from the commonwealth of Virginia.

The chain twirled several times in the air. But in the end Robie didn't fling it out into the river. He returned the medal to his pocket. He wasn't sure why.

He had just started back when his phone buzzed. He took it out, glanced at the screen, and grimaced.

"Robie," he said tersely.

It was a voice he didn't recognize. "Please hold for DD Amanda Marks."

*Please hold? Since when does the world's most elite clandestine agency have its personnel say, "Please hold"?*

"Robie?"

The voice was crisp, sharp as a new blade, and in its undertone Robie could detect both immense confidence and a desire to prove oneself. That was a potentially deadly combination for him, because Robie would be the one doing this woman's bidding in the field while she safely watched from a computer screen thousands of miles away.

"Yes?"

"We need you in here ASAP."

“You’re the new DD?”

“That’s what it says on my door.”

“A mission?”

“We’ll talk when you get in here. Langley,” she added, quite necessarily because the CIA had numerous local facilities.

“You know what happened to the last two DDs?” Robie asked.

“Just get your butt in here, Robie.”