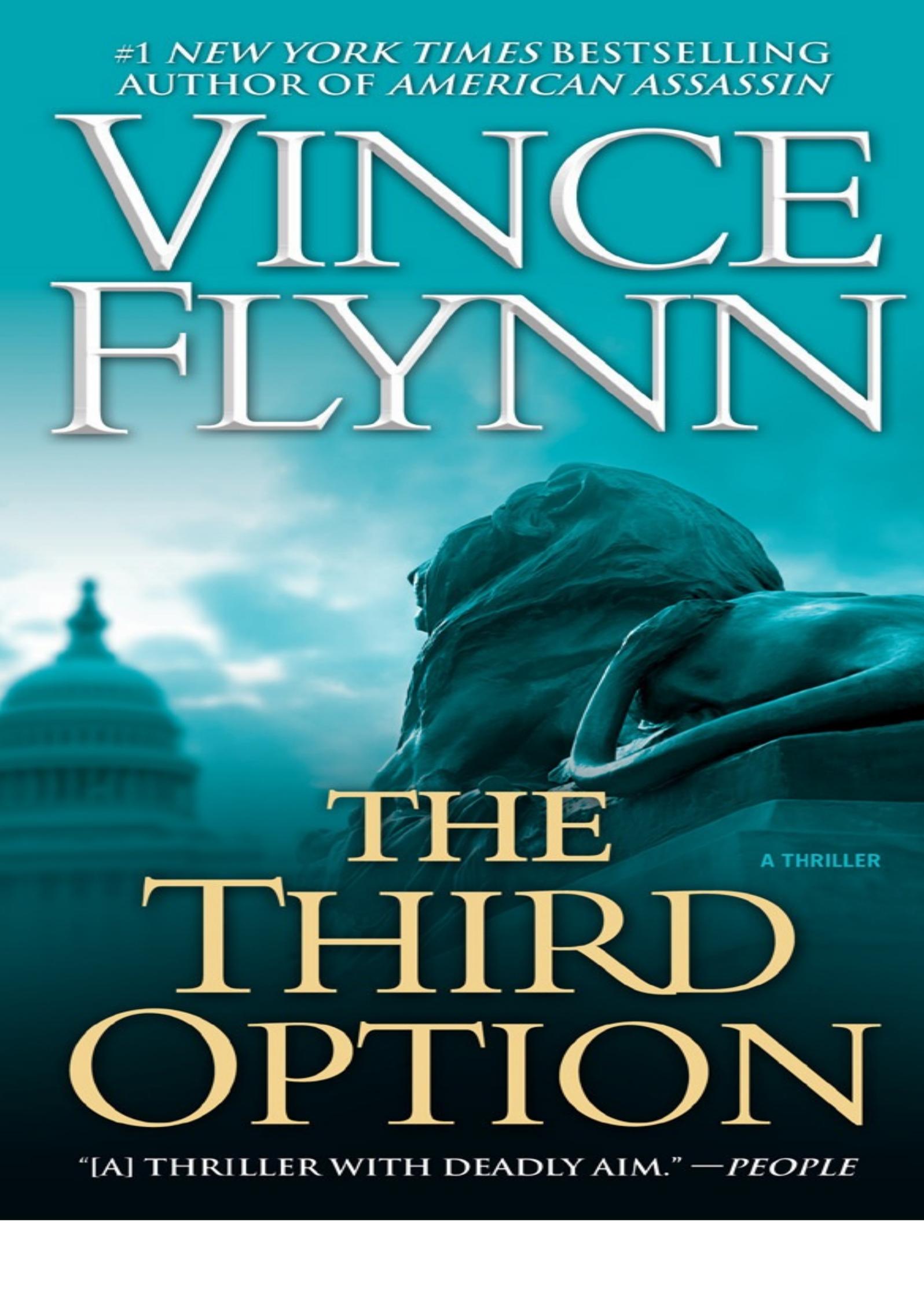


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THE
THIRD
OPTION

A THRILLER

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VINCE FLYNN

THE THIRD OPTION



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THE THIRD OPTION

PRELUDE

There exists in America a silent and invisible order made up of former soldiers, intelligence officers, and diplomats. In Washington, they are everywhere and they are nowhere. The average person never sees them, never pauses to think about them, never notices the hand they may have had in a seeming ordinary death. Most people never stop to think twice about the drug overdose of a lobbyist reported on page B-2 of the *Washington Post's* Metro section, or the suicide of a colonel in the United States Army, or the fatal mugging of a White House staffer.

Average Americans are too busy living their lives to look beyond the headlines and wonder what secrets these people may have taken to their graves. Among those in the know, eyebrows are raised and even a few quiet questions asked, but ultimately a blind eye is turned, and life goes on. To seek answers from this dark community is a very dangerous thing. It is the world of covert operations, a very real but unseen part of our government's foreign and sometimes domestic policy. It is bigger than any one person. It is *the third option*, and it is one that is not always used by wise and honorable men.

Through the darkness the man moved from tree to tree, working his way toward the large house. The nineteenth-century estate, forty miles south of Hamburg, Germany, spanned one hundred and twelve acres of beautiful rolling forest and farmland and was designed after the Grand Trianon at Versailles in France. It had been commissioned by Heinrich Hagenmiller in 1872 to win further favor with William of Prussia, the newly crowned German emperor. Portions of it had been sold off over the years as it became too expensive to maintain so much land.

The man walking silently through the woods had already studied hundreds of photographs of the property and its owner. Some of the photos were snapped from satellites orbiting the earth thousands of miles up, but most were taken by the surveillance team that had been in place for the last week.

The assassin had arrived from America only this afternoon and wanted to see with his own eyes what he was up against. Photographs were a good start, but they were no substitute for being there in person. The collar of his black leather jacket was flipped up around his neck to ward off the bite of the cold fall evening. The temperature had dropped twenty degrees since sunset.

For the second time since leaving the cottage, he stopped dead in his tracks and listened. He thought he had heard something behind him. The narrow path he trod was covered with a fresh bed of golden pine needles. It was a cloudy night, and with the thick canopy above, very little light reached the place where he stood. He moved to the path's edge and slowly looked back. Without his night-vision scope, he could see no more than ten feet.

Mitch Rapp had been trying not to use the scope. He wanted to make sure he could find his way down the path without it, but something was telling him he wasn't alone. Rapp extracted a 9-mm Glock automatic from his pocket and quietly screwed a suppresser onto the end of it. Then he grabbed a four-inch tubular pocket scope, flipped the operating switch on, and held it up to his right eye. The path before him was instantly illuminated with a strange green light. Rapp scanned the area, checking not only the path but his flanks. The pocket scope penetrated the dark shadows that his eyes could not. He paid particular attention to the base of the trees that bordered the path. He was looking for the telltale shoe of someone who was seeking to conceal himself.

After five minutes of patiently waiting, Rapp began to wonder if it wasn't a deer or some other creature that had made the noise. After five more minutes, he reluctantly gave in to the conclusion that he had heard an animal of the four-legged variety rather than two. Rapp put the pocket scope away but decided to keep his gun out. He had not made it to the ripe old age of thirty-two by being careless and sloppy. Like any true professional, he knew when the time was right to take chances and when to cut and run.

Rapp continued down the path for another quarter of a mile. He could see the lights of the house up ahead and decided to go the rest of the way through the underbrush. Silently, he maneuvered through the thickets, bending branches out of his way and ducking under others. As he approached the edge of the forest, he heard the snap of a twig under his foot and quickly moved to his left, placing a tree directly between himself and the house. A kennel of hunting dogs, not more than a hundred yards away, erupted in alarm. Rapp silently swore at himself and remained perfectly still. This was why he needed to check things out on his own. Amazingly, no one had told him that there were dogs. The canines grew louder, their barks turning to howls, and then a door opened. A deep voice yelled in German for the beasts to be quiet. The man repeated himself two more times, and finally the dogs settled.

Rapp slid an eye out from behind the tree and looked at the kennel. The hunting dogs were wire ~~pacing back and forth. They would be a problem. Not as bad as trained guard dogs, but their sens~~ were still naturally keen. He stood at the edge of the forest listening and watching, taking everything in. He didn't like what he saw. There was a lot of open space between the forest and the house. There were some gardens that he could weave his way through, but it would be hard to stay silent on the paths of crushed rock. The dogs would make approaching from the south very difficult. Surveillance cameras covered the other avenues, and there was twice the open space to traverse. The only good news was that there were no pressure pads, microwave beams, or motion sensors to deal with.

Officially, Mitch Rapp had nothing to do with the U.S. government. Unofficially, he had been working for the CIA since graduating from Syracuse University more than a decade ago. Rapp had been selected to join a highly secretive counterterrorism group known as the Orion Team. The CIA had honed Rapp's raw athleticism and intelligence into a lethal efficiency. The few people he allowed to get close to him knew him as a successful entrepreneur who had started a small computer consulting business that required frequent travel. To keep things legitimate, Rapp often did conduct business while abroad, but not on this trip. He had been sent to kill a man. A man who had already been warned twice.

Rapp studied the area for almost thirty minutes. When he had seen enough, he started back, but not down the path. If someone was in the woods, there was no sense in walking right into a trap. Rapp quietly picked his way through the underbrush for several hundred yards to the south. He stopped three times and checked his compass to make sure he was headed in the right direction. From the intelligence summary, he knew there was another footpath due south of the one he had come in on. Both paths entered the estate from a narrow dirt road and ran roughly parallel to each other.

Rapp almost missed the second footpath. It appeared less frequented than the first one and was overgrown. From there he worked his way back to the curving dirt road. When he reached it, he knelt down and extracted his pocket scope. For several minutes he scanned the road and listened. When he was sure no one else was about, he began walking south.

Rapp had been doing this for almost ten years, and he was ready to get out. In fact, this probably would be his last job. He had met the right woman the previous spring, and it was time to settle down. The CIA did not want to let him go, but that was tough. He had already given enough. Ten years of doing what he did for a living was a lifetime. He was lucky to be getting out in one piece and with a marginally sound mind.

A little more than a mile down the road, Rapp came upon a small cottage. The shades were drawn and smoke drifted from the chimney. He approached the door, knocked twice, paused for a second, and then knocked three more times. It opened two inches, and an eye appeared. When the man saw that it was Rapp, he opened the door all the way. Mitch stepped into the sparsely furnished room and began unbuttoning his leather jacket. The man who had let him in locked the door behind him.

The cottage had knotty pine walls that had been painted white and three-inch plank floorboards that were covered with shiny green paint. Brightly colored oval throw rugs were scattered about the floor, and the furniture was old and solid. The walls were adorned with local folk art and some old black-and-white photographs. Under normal circumstances it would be a great place to spend a cozy fall weekend reading a good book by the fire and taking long walks through the forest.

At the kitchen table a woman sat wearing headphones. On the table in front of her was about a quarter of a million dollars in high-tech surveillance equipment. All of the gear was contained in two beat-up black Samsonite suitcases. If anyone were to stop by the cottage, the cases could be closed and moved off the table in seconds.

Rapp had never met the man and woman before. He knew them only as Tom and Jane Hoffman.

They were in their mid-forties, and as far as Rapp could tell, they were married. The Hoffmans had ~~stopped in two countries before arriving in Frankfurt. Their tickets had been purchased under assumed~~ names with matching credit cards and passports provided by their contact. They were also given the standard fee of ten thousand dollars for a week's work, paid up-front in cash. They were told someone would be joining them and, as always, not to ask any questions.

All of their equipment was waiting for them when they arrived at the cottage, and they started right in on the surveillance of the estate and its owner. Several days after arriving at the cottage, they were paid a visit by a man known to them only as the professor. They were given an additional twenty-five thousand dollars and were told they would receive another twenty-five thousand dollars when they completed the mission. He had given them a quick briefing on the man who would be joining them. He did not tell them the man's real name, only that he was extremely competent.

Tom Hoffman poured Rapp a cup of coffee and brought it to him by the roaring fieldstone fireplace. "So, what'd ya think?"

Rapp shrugged his shoulders and looked at Hoffman's face. His complexion was neutral, not flushed like Rapp's from being out in the cold night air. In response to the question, he said, "It's not going to be easy." Rapp had already checked the woman's face and shoes. Neither of these people had been outside. It must have been a deer that he had heard in the woods.

"It rarely is," noted the stocky Hoffman, who took a drink from his own mug once again while trying to get a read on the stranger before him. The six-foot-one muscular man whom he knew only as Cameron moved like a big cat—soft on his feet. There was nothing clumsy about him. His face was tanned and lined from long hours spent outdoors. His jet-black hair was thick and just starting to gray around the temples, and there was a thin scar on his cheek that ran from his ear down to his jaw.

Rapp looked away from Hoffman and into the fire. He knew he was being sized up. Mitch had already done the same with both of them and would continue to do so up until the moment they parted. He looked back into the fire and focused on the plan. He knew the tendency in these situations was to try to come up with something that was truly ingenious—a plan that would bypass all of the security and get him in and out without being noticed. This was not necessarily a bad path to take if you had enough time to prepare, but as of right now they had about twenty-three hours to draw the whole thing up and pull it off. With that in mind, Rapp had already begun thinking of a strategy.

Turning away from the fire, he asked the woman, "Jane, how many people are invited to this party tomorrow night?"

"About fifty."

Rapp ran a hand through his black hair, grabbed the back of his neck, and squeezed. After staring into the fire for a long moment, he announced, "I have an idea."

THE FIRST SIGNS of morning were showing in the east. The black sky was turning gray, and patches of fog wafted from ponds as the cool fall air mixed with summer's leftover warmth. The pristine Maryland morning was interrupted by a dull thumping noise in the distance. Two Marines walking patrol on the Jeep road by the west fence instinctively searched for the source of the sound. With M-16s slung over their shoulders, they craned their necks skyward, both knowing what was approaching without having to see it. Within seconds they also knew it wasn't a military bird. The telltale thumping was far too quiet. The white helicopter buzzed in over the trees and headed for the interior of the camp. The Marines followed it for a second and then continued with their patrol, both assuming the civilian bird was delivering one of the president's golf partners.

The Bell JetRanger continued on an easterly heading toward the camp's water tower. Just in front of

the tower was a clearing with a cement landing pad. The bird slowed and floated smoothly toward the ground, its struts coming to rest right on the mark. The pilot shut the turbine engine down, and the rotors began to lose momentum. A black Suburban was parked on the nearby road, and several men in dark suits and ties stood by watching as the visitor stepped out of the helicopter.

Dr. Irene Kennedy grabbed her briefcase and headed for the truck. Her shoulder-length brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail, and she was wearing a crisp blue shirt. Kennedy clutched the lapels of her tan suit against the cool air. When she reached the Suburban, an army officer extended his hand. “Welcome to Camp David, Dr. Kennedy.”

The forty-year-old employee of the Central Intelligence Agency took the officer’s hand and said, “Thank you, Colonel.”

Kennedy’s official role was as director of the CIA’s Counterterrorism Center. Unofficially, she headed up the Orion Team, an organization born in secrecy out of a need to go on the offensive against terrorism. In the early eighties the United States was stung hard by a slew of terrorist attacks, most notably the bombing of the U.S. embassy and Marine barracks in Beirut. Despite the millions of dollars and assets allocated to fight terrorism, after the attacks, things only got worse. The decade ended with the downing of Pan Am Flight 103 and the deaths of hundreds of innocent civilians. The Lockerbie disaster moved some of the most powerful individuals in Washington to take drastic measures. They agreed it was time to take the war to the terrorists. The first option of diplomacy wasn’t doing the job and the second option of military force was ill suited to fight an enemy that lived and worked among innocent civilians, so America’s leaders were left with only one choice: the third option. Covert action would be taken. Money would be funneled into black operations that would never see the light of day, much less congressional oversight or the scrutiny of the press. A clandestine war would be mounted, and the hunters would become the hunted.

The ride took just a few minutes, and no one spoke. When they arrived at Aspen Lodge, Kennedy got out and walked up the porch steps, past two Secret Service agents, and into the president’s quarters. The colonel escorted Kennedy down the hall to the president’s study and knocked on the open door frame.

“Mr. President, Dr. Kennedy is here.”

President Robert Xavier Hayes sat behind his desk sipping a cup of coffee and reading Friday morning’s edition of the *Washington Post*. A pair of black-rimmed reading spectacles sat perched on the end of his nose, and when Kennedy entered he looked up from the print and over the top of his cheater. Hayes immediately closed the paper and said, “Thank you, Colonel.” He then rose from his chair and walked over to a small circular table where he gestured for Kennedy to sit.

Hayes was dressed for his morning golf match, wearing a pair of khaki pants, a plain blue golf shirt, and a pullover vest. He set his mug down on the table and poured a second cup for Kennedy. After placing it in front of her, he sat and asked, “How is Director Stansfield?”

“He’s ...” Kennedy grasped to come up with the appropriate word to describe her boss’s failing health “as well as could be expected.”

Hayes nodded. Thomas Stansfield was a very private man. He had been with the CIA from its very inception, and it appeared he would be with it to the very end of his own life. The seventy-nine-year-old spymaster had just been diagnosed with cancer, and the doctors were giving him less than six months.

The president turned his attention to the more immediate matter. “How are things proceeding in Germany?”

“On track. Mitch arrived last night and gave me a full report before I left this morning.”

When Kennedy had briefed the president on the operation earlier in the week, the one thing Hayes had made crystal-clear was that there would be no green light unless Rapp was involved. The close

meeting between the president and Kennedy was one of many they had had in the last five months, all an effort to harass, frustrate, destabilize, and, if possible, kill one person. That fortunate individual was Saddam Hussein.

Long before President Hayes had taken office, Saddam was a source of irritation to the West, but more recently he had done something that directly affected the fifty-eight-year-old president of the United States. The previous spring, a group of terrorists had attacked the White House and killed dozens of Secret Service agents and several civilians. In the midst of the attack, President Hayes was evacuated to his underground bunker, where he sat for the next three days, cut off from the rest of his government. The siege was ended, thanks to the bold actions of Mitch Rapp and a few select members of the intelligence, law enforcement, and Special Forces communities.

After the attack the United States was left with two pieces of information that pointed to the Iraqi leader. There was a problem, however, with bringing this information to the United Nations or the international courts. The first piece of evidence was obtained from a foreign intelligence service that was none too eager to have its methods exposed to international scrutiny, and the second was gathered through the use of covert action—the third option. How that information was extracted would be deemed reprehensible by all but a few.

In short, they had some very reliable information that Saddam had funded the terrorists, but they could never make the facts public because that would expose their own methods. And as President Hayes had already noted to an inner circle of advisors, there was no guarantee the UN would do anything once it was confronted with the facts. After intense debate by President Hayes, Director Stansfield of the CIA, and General Flood, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the three had decided they had little choice but to go after Saddam on a covert level. At its core, that's what this meeting was all about.

President Hayes leaned forward and placed his coffee mug on the table. He was eager to hear Rapp take on the situation in Germany. Hayes had discovered that where others failed, Rapp had a way of making things happen. "What does Mitch think?"

"He thinks that given the short notice and the security around the target, we would be better off opting for a more direct approach." Kennedy went on to give the president a brief overview of the plan.

When she was finished Hayes sat back and folded his arms across his chest, his expression thoughtful. Kennedy watched him and kept her own expression neutral, just as her boss would do.

Hayes mulled things over for another ten seconds and then said, "What if they did it ...?" The president stopped because Kennedy was already shaking her head.

"Mitch doesn't respond well to advice given from three thousand miles away."

The president nodded. After the White House incident the previous spring, Hayes had read up on Rapp. It was almost always his way or the highway, and while this could be a concern, one could hardly argue with the man's record of success. He had a history of getting the job done, often when no one else even dared to take it. Hayes suppressed his urge to be an armchair quarterback and instead decided to remind Kennedy of what was at stake.

"Do Mitch and the others know they are on their own?"

Kennedy nodded.

"I mean really on their own. If anything goes wrong, we will deny any knowledge of the situation and of who they are. We have to. Our relationship with Germany could not withstand something like this, nor, for that matter, could my presidency."

Kennedy nodded understandingly. "Sir, Mitch is good. He'll have all of his backups in place by the evening, and if things get too tight, he knows not to force it."

The president stared at her for a moment and then nodded. "All right. You have my authority to go ahead with this, but you know where we stand, Irene. If it blows up, we never had this meeting, and we didn't have the five or six meetings before, either. You had no knowledge of these events, and neither did anyone else at the Agency." Hayes shook his head. "I hate to do this to Mitch, but there's no choice. He is way out there working without a net, and if he falls, we can't do a thing to help him."

Rapp had taken a five-mile run around noon, but other than that he had stayed in the cottage the entire day. He needed the jog to stay loose, to take the edge off of all the coffee he had consumed. He had communicated directly with Irene Kennedy several times via a STU III, MX3030 Comsat. The voice secure satellite phone was his only direct link to Washington. No one else knew he and the Hoffmans were in Germany, and no one could. If the mission went off without a hitch, his masters would need complete deniability, and if the mission fell apart, they would need it even more.

Rapp's plan for the evening had required certain purchases. Earlier in the day Tom Hoffman had driven into Hamburg with a shopping list. Hoffman had been very careful about where he bought the various items, never buying more than one thing in the same neighborhood and always avoiding store surveillance cameras.

Night had arrived, and Rapp was sitting at the kitchen table with the Hoffmans going over each detail for what seemed like the hundredth time. The Hoffmans were very thorough in this regard. They had come up with a concise tactical operation order, clearly defining the mission down to the last detail. Rapp had worked with enough Special Forces types that he could tell that one or both of them had been with one of the military's elite units.

All notes would be burned before they left the cottage. The primary, secondary, and third radio frequencies all had to be memorized; the same went for the escape and evasion routes, passwords, and codes. Maps could be carried, but no markings could be made on them. All of their fake credentials were placed in flash bags. If things went really wrong, all they had to do was pull a string on the bag and the contents would be incinerated. Weapons were checked, rechecked, and checked again.

Rapp had a hard time putting his finger on it, but he didn't have a good feeling about this one. He reminded himself that there had been a mission early in his career about which he had felt great, and before all was said and done, a dozen U.S. commandos were dead. Ever since then he rarely felt confident about any mission, but there was something unusual that was gnawing at him about this one. Rapp could sense that he was losing a little bit of his edge. He had been an angry man for so many years, and he had always used that anger to sharpen his focus.

That anger was born in the aftermath of the Pan Am Lockerbie disaster. At the time, Rapp was attending Syracuse University. Thirty-five of his fellow students had died in the terrorist attack, and one of them was his girlfriend. During this period of intense grieving, Rapp was approached by the CIA. The Agency had dangled the prospect of revenge in Rapp's face, and he had jumped. The target of that revenge became Rafique Aziz, the person behind the terrorist attack on Pan Am Flight 103. Rapp had spent the last decade hunting the terrorist and had finally come face to face with him the previous spring. Aziz was now dead, and the anger was gone.

It had been replaced with something very different—an emotion Rapp didn't know he could still feel. Anna Rielly was now his focus, and what he felt for her was the opposite of hatred. She was one in a million. The type of woman who made you want to be a better man, and Rapp desperately wanted to be a better man. He wanted to put his life with the CIA behind him and move on.

Jane Hoffman removed her headphones and announced, "The first guests have arrived."

Rapp looked at his watch. It was five minutes to eight, about two and a half hours before show time. It was time to check in with Kennedy one more time. Rapp grabbed the COMSAT mobile phone by the handle and carried it to the bedroom.

IF DR. IRENE Kennedy had bothered to look out the window of her seventh-floor office, she would have noticed that the fall colors of the Potomac River Valley were at their peak. Unfortunately, there hadn't been much time of late to stop and take in life's little pleasures. Langley was on shaky ground—under assault from both external and internal forces. Word had leaked that Thomas Stansfield, the director of the CIA, was in poor health. The critics on Capitol Hill smelled blood and were on the move, and from within the Agency, massive egos were maneuvering for the directorship. Kennedy, never one to get involved in politics, was doing her best to stay out of the line of fire, but it was proving almost impossible. It was no secret that she and the director were very close.

Washington was a town that loved drama and gossip, and no one loved it more than the politicians. With the delight of brooding Shakespearean characters, they had started their deathwatch. Several of them had gone so far as to call, feigning concern for Stansfield and his children. Kennedy wasn't naive. Stansfield had taught her well. No one on Capitol Hill liked her boss. Many of the senators and representatives respected him, but none of them liked him. The seventy-nine-year-old director had never let any of them get close enough. As the deputy director of operations and then director of Central Intelligence, Stansfield had been the keeper of Washington's secrets for more than two decades. No one knew exactly how much he knew, and no one really wanted to find out. Some people were actually worried that he had been building thick dossiers on all of Washington's elite, so that upon his death he could wreak havoc from the grave.

This was not going to happen. Stansfield's entire professional life had been centered on keeping secrets. He was not about to break with that. This, of course, was of no comfort to those in Washington who had committed the most egregious sins. It was of no comfort because they couldn't imagine possessing such valuable information and not using it.

It was painful for Kennedy to cope with the slow death of her mentor, but she had to focus on the job at hand. The Orion Team had been given the go-ahead by the president of the United States to assassinate a private citizen, and not just any private citizen. Kennedy stared at the black-and-white photograph clipped to the dossier on her desk. The man was Count Heinrich Hagenmiller V, a German industrialist and cousin to the Krupp family. The fact that President Hayes was willing to authorize the assassination of a private citizen of one of America's closest allies spoke volumes about his new commitment to fight terrorism at every level.

Hagenmiller and his companies had first landed on the CIA's radar screen back in the early nineties. At the time, Kennedy was working on a project known as the Rabta II operation. Rabta II was a worldwide effort by the Agency to prevent Muammar al-Qaddafi from building a facility capable of producing biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons. The operation received its name from the original weapons facility that Qaddafi was building in the late eighties. The plant was located in the town of Rabta in northern Libya. In 1990, just before it was to start production, President Bush threatened to use air strikes and publicly identified the European companies that had helped build the factory. One of those companies was Hagenmiller Engineering.

Rather than see his dream bombed to the ground, Qaddafi closed the plant and began searching for a new place to set up shop. In early 1992, the CIA discovered the site of his new weapons plant. The Libyan dictator was trying to build the plant deep inside a mountain. Once the facility was complete, it would be impregnable to everything except a direct strike by a nuclear war-head.

In an effort to stall the completion of the facility, the CIA launched Rabta II. They identified all the equipment, technology, and personnel that would be crucial to the construction of the facility. With the help of its allies, the United States placed an embargo on all the items on the list. But as with a

embargoes, Qaddafi and his people found ways around it. Since the inception of the operation, Hagenmiller Engineering and its subsidiaries had popped up several times. Each time they claimed they had no idea whom they were selling their goods to and walked away without even a token fine from the German government. Heinrich Hagenmiller was well connected. With Qaddafi fading from the international scene and seeming to mellow with age, the United States did not press the issue with the German government.

Kennedy flipped through the dossier, looking at a series of photos and the translated conversations that Hagenmiller had had with his newfound business associates. It was this new relationship that most concerned the CIA. Hagenmiller Engineering was, among many things, a manufacturer of high-tech lathes and other engineering components crucial to the building of a nuclear bomb.

On the next page were photos of the count's various homes. A brownstone in one of Hamburg's oldest neighborhoods, the family's estate an hour to the south, and a mountain retreat in Switzerland. Hagenmiller's family had rich royal roots and a lot of debt. Five months earlier Kennedy had consulted her counterpart in German foreign intelligence, the BFV, and he had told her the United States wasn't the only country inquiring about the count. He had recently received calls from the Israelis and the British. When questioned by the BFV just three months ago, Hagenmiller had sworn that he would personally oversee the sale of all sensitive equipment.

Kennedy didn't buy Hagenmiller's new promise and put him under the microscope. Hackers from the CIA compromised Hagenmiller Engineering's computer system and looked into the count's personal finances. A picture began to form of a man who had squandered the family's fortune. He was on his fourth wife, and the first three hadn't let him off easy. The heavy costs of maintaining the family properties and his jet-setter lifestyle had drained the nest egg.

Two weeks earlier Kennedy had sent a tactical reconnaissance team to Germany to put Hagenmiller under twenty-four-hour surveillance. The team followed the count to Switzerland, and that was where things got really interesting. Kennedy studied a series of photos taken from the woods near Hagenmiller's mountain retreat. Some of the shots were grainy, but several of them were clear enough to make out the man Hagenmiller was meeting with. He was Abdullah Khatami. Khatami was a general in the Iraqi army, the man in charge of rebuilding its nuclear weapons program. He was also Saddam Hussein's cousin, and like many of Saddam's closest followers, he had grown a thick black mustache.

There were more incriminating photos, of Hagenmiller taking a briefcase from Khatami and the two shaking hands. After their meeting was concluded, Hagenmiller drove to Geneva with his bodyguard and deposited the money in his bank. The following day the CIA's hackers got into the bank's computer system and discovered that five million dollars had been deposited in Hagenmiller's account.

Kennedy immediately ordered surveillance stepped up and went to the president with the mounting evidence. Hayes was looking for ways to fight Saddam but wanted to be absolutely sure that the count wasn't being duped. Kennedy's people found irrefutable evidence the following day. Sources had told them that at eleven o'clock this evening, Hamburg time, a staged break-in would occur at the Hagenmiller Engineering warehouse. Four computerized lathes and a variety of other equipment used in the production of highly sophisticated nuclear components would be stolen and loaded onto a waiting freighter at the German port of Cuxhaven.

Kennedy laid out the evidence before the president. Hagenmiller had already been warned twice and had promised he would personally make sure it didn't happen again. Despite the warnings and the promise, he was still willing to sell highly sensitive equipment to a person who was the world's number one sponsor of terrorism and who had sworn to wipe America off the face of the planet if given the chance. Hagenmiller had rolled the dice, and he was about to lose. President Hayes gave Kennedy the

go-ahead. He had one requirement, however. With something as delicate as this, he wanted Mitch Rapp to be on the ground calling the shots.

Kennedy's phone rang, and she picked it up.

"Everything is in place."

She recognized the voice as Rapp's. "Give me a quick update."

Rapp ran down the checklist of developments and explained the final touches they had added to the plan. Kennedy listened and asked very few questions.

When Rapp was done, he asked, "If I miss him tonight, will I get another chance?"

"I doubt it. The second TRT is in place by the warehouse. As soon as the tangos show up, they will anonymously alert the German authorities and then follow until an arrest is made. Once that happens, the cat will be out of the bag on Hagenmiller, and there will be too many eyes watching him."

"Yeah, I agree." The TRT that Kennedy was referring to was a tactical reconnaissance team. They were the ones who had discovered the theft that was to occur at eleven P.M. Rapp knew that they were in place, but they did not know that Rapp was in the country.

Rapp said, "You need to alert us if the tangos move on the warehouse before eleven. The timing of this is crucial. We can't be pulling up to Hagenmiller's at the same time the police are on the phone telling him that he's been robbed. He expects to hear from the authorities tonight, and for the element of surprise, it's best that we are the first people to contact him."

"Understood." There was a moment of silence, and then Kennedy asked, "What's your gut telling you on this one?"

Rapp gripped the handset and looked around the small bedroom, not sure if Kennedy was asking for the sake of asking or if she really wanted to know. Rapp replied tentatively. "I'm not sure. I would have liked a little more time to prep, but that's usually the case."

Rapp didn't sound like his confident self, and Kennedy picked up on it. "If it doesn't look good, don't force it."

"I know."

"No one back here is going to second-guess you."

Rapp laughed quietly. "That's never worried me before, why would it now?"

"You know what I mean. Just be careful."

"I always am." He was on autopilot.

"Anything else?" asked Kennedy.

"Yeah." Rapp paused. "This is it."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm done. This is the last one."

Kennedy knew this was coming, but now wasn't the time to talk about it. Mitch Rapp was a valuable asset, perhaps the most valuable asset on the team. It would not be easy to let him go. "We'll talk about when you get back."

In a firm tone, Rapp said, "It's not up for debate."

"We'll talk."

"I'm serious."

Kennedy sighed into the receiver. It seemed as if the walls were closing in. One more thing to worry about. "There are some things you need to know before you make that decision."

Rapp read a little too far into the comment and said, "What in the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing." Kennedy sighed. She needed some sleep, she needed to spend some time with her son, and she needed to put things in order with Stansfield before he died. The fabric was starting to fray. "I just

need to bring you up to speed on what's going on around here.”

Rapp sensed that she was a little frazzled, which for Kennedy was a rarity. “All right. We’ll talk when I get back.”

“Thank you.”

“No problem.”

“Anything else?”

Rapp tried to think if he had missed anything. “Nope.”

“All right ... good luck, and keep me in the loop.”

“You got it.” Rapp placed the handset back in the cradle and ended the call. Leaning toward the window, he pulled back the curtain and looked out into the dark night. He couldn’t shake the feeling in his stomach. Something wasn’t right.

Senator Clark picked up the gavel, almost as an afterthought, and let it fall to the wooden block. Members of his committee were already out of their chairs and headed for the door. It was very unusual for senators to be working at all on a Friday, let alone into the late afternoon. But Washington was in the midst of a fall budget battle, and everybody was putting in the extra hours to try to find a way around the impending impasse. As was often the case, the Republicans wanted a tax break and the Democrats wanted to increase spending. The president, for a change, was actually trying to broker a compromise rather than exploit the situation, but neither party was willing to budge. The town was more partisan than ever. The polarization of special interests had left little room in the middle. You were either part of the solution or part of the problem. It was no longer okay to hold certain beliefs, no matter how well thought out. If you disagreed, you were the enemy. It had become a town of absolutes, and Senator Clark didn't like it. He had got into politics because it was the next mountain to climb, not because he enjoyed stubborn, senseless partisan agendas. It was beneath him, and it wasn't worth his time.

Hank Clark had been in the United States Senate for twenty-two years. He had thrown his hat in the ring after the Nixon resignation. Trust in politicians was at an all-time low, and the people of Arizona wanted an outsider. Someone who had made a name for himself. Hank Clark was their man. The new businessman of the West. A true self-made millionaire.

Henry Thomas Clark was born in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in 1941. His father failed at almost every business he tried, and with each failure his mother seemed to crawl a little further into the bottle. Vodka was her preference at first, poured liberally into screwdrivers and bloody marys. When times were really rough, she would drink bad whiskey and even a little Mad Dog 20/20. While Mom drank, Dad tried his hand at every nickel-and-dime job he could get. He sold ranching equipment, vacuum cleaners, used cars, aluminum siding, even windmills at one point. He failed miserably at each and every one of them, just as he had failed as a husband and a father. When Hank was eleven, his father quit for good. He went out back, behind their rented mobile home, and blew his brains out.

In a way, young Hank was relieved. With his father gone, he went after life with a determination to succeed. Hank took every spare job he could find and spent the next seven years trying to sober up his mother and find a way out of poverty. Fortunately for Hank, he had been blessed with many of the finer qualities his father lacked. He was good with people, was a tireless worker, and had an arm that could throw a wicked curve ball. That was Hank's ticket out. After high school he accepted a full ride to play baseball for the ASU Sundevils. Hank was a three-time all-Pac 10 pitcher and would have had a shot at the big leagues if it wasn't for a car accident his senior year. After college he took a job working for a resort in Scottsdale. It was at that resort, in the booming Phoenix suburb, where Hank Clark started to meet the right people. People who had vision. People who knew how to speculate on real estate.

At twenty-four Hank left the resort and went to work as a runner for a developer he had met. He loved helping to bring the deals together. He loved watching people with focus do something with the money. And most importantly, he loved the commissions. By the age of thirty Hank had made his first million, and by thirty-five he was worth more than twenty million dollars. Big, tall Hank Clark was the toast of Phoenix. The developer with the Midas touch. He had climbed one mountain, and now it was time for another.

That next mountain was politics, and after almost a quarter of a century Clark had decided it was insurmountable by any ethical means. The way to win in politics was to gain an edge over one

opponent and to do it by any means necessary, without letting him know what you were up to. Hank Clark wanted to be president, and he had been working toward that goal since the day he arrived in Washington in 1976.

As the senator rose from his chair, one of the committee's staffers approached and whispered, "Chairman Rudin is waiting for you in the bubble."

Clark nodded and handed the man his briefing book and materials. "Please take that back to my office for me." He then worked his way toward the door, wishing his fellow senators and their staffers a good weekend as he went. Hank Clark was the chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. Most of the senators wanted to serve on the Armed Services, Appropriations, or Judiciary committee, that got a lot of attention from the press. The intelligence committee wasn't one that they fought to get on, as it did much of its work behind closed doors.

The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence and the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence were charged with the oversight of the entire U.S. intelligence community, most notably the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, and the National Reconnaissance Office. Clark was the man who kept an eye on the keepers of the secrets, and he had been methodically and quietly storing those secrets away.

Senator Clark left the committee room and started down the hall of the Hart Office Building. He smiled and nodded to the people he passed. Clark was a good politician. He made everyone feel special, even his enemies. He turned the corner, opened a door, and stepped into a small reception area. A Capitol Hill police officer was sitting on a stool next to a second door on the other side of the room. The man looked up and said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman."

Clark offered an affable smile. "How are you holding up, Roy?"

"The old back is sore, sir, but I think I can make it another hour."

"Good." Clark patted him on the shoulder and punched in his code to the cipher lock beside the door. At the sound of the lock being released, he opened the door and stepped into room SH 219. Room 219 was one of the most secure rooms on the Hill. It was entirely encased in steel, making it impossible for electromagnetic waves to enter or leave. The room itself was divided into smaller rooms, each elevated off the floor so technicians could sweep beneath for bugs.

Senator Clark continued down the hall, passing several of the glass-enclosed briefing rooms, where the senators and a few select staffers received briefings from the various intelligence agencies. Near the end of the hall he approached another door with a touch pad. Clark punched in his personal five-digit code, and the door hissed as its airtight seal relaxed. He entered the elevated room and closed the door, the gasket expanding once again to its airtight position. Black blinds covered the room's four glass walls, and a sleek black oval conference table occupied the center of the fifteen-by-twenty-five-foot space. There was a place at the table for each of the committee's fifteen members. The glass-covered table had individual reading lamps for each senator and a computer monitor mounted at an angle under the glass. The room was dark except for one lone light at the far end.

From where he was standing, Senator Clark could see the thin, bony fingers of his counterpart in the House. Congressman Albert Rudin's hands were placed on the table under the soft light of one of the fifteen modern black lamps. Clark could barely make out Rudin's profile in the shadows, but it didn't matter. He had it memorized, and that profile could belong to one of only two people: either Congressman Albert Rudin, the chairman of the House Select Committee on Intelligence, or Ichabod Crane.

Clark continued to the far end of the room. "Good afternoon, Al."

Rudin didn't respond, and Clark didn't expect him to. Al Rudin was probably the most socially

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