

VINCE
FLYNN

OATH OF
LOYALTY

A MITCH RAPP NOVEL
BY KYLE MILLS

EMILY BESTLER BOOKS
—
ATRIA

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

PRELUDÉ

SOUTHWESTERN UGANDA

RAPP nodded, though he doubted the subtle movement would be visible in the moonlight. Mike Nash had managed to get their SUV through the river but then bogged down on the muddy bank only a few yards from dry land. The former Marine was still in the driver's seat, bathed in the glow of the dashboard gauges and dangling a winch remote control through the window.

Beyond that, everything was still. Even the breeze had died, leaving nothing but the hum of insects beneath the idling motor. What little evidence of humanity that existed in this part of Uganda had been left behind a good hour ago when rolling farmland had given way to empty wilderness. Above, the Milky Way was smeared across the sky, creating a false sense of peace and anonymity.

In his younger days, Rapp wouldn't have given his surroundings much thought beyond analyzing their tactical nuances. He'd have obsessed over identifying potential ambushes and escape routes, judging the speed with which he could run across the unpredictable surface, and staying outside the beam of the headlights. Now, though, he could

almost trick himself into believing it was a safe moment to take a breath.

"Mitch! What are you doing, man? Irene's waiting."

With no trees available, they were having to use a ground anchor to secure the winch. Rapp looked around and found a patch of dirt soft enough to drive the shovel-like blade into. When the hook was sufficiently buried, he raised a hand and Nash started taking in cable. By the time it went taut, Rapp had retreated another twenty feet into the darkness.

He watched his old friend feather the accelerator while working the remote, breaking the tires' suction while being careful not to put too much pressure on the anchor. Satisfied that Nash would soon have the vehicle back on terra firma, Rapp returned his attention to the sky.

Six weeks ago, Irene Kennedy had asked him to take a job protecting Nicholas Ward, history's first trillionaire. Someone with high-level access to the CIA's mainframe had downloaded sensitive information on him and prompted a desperate mole hunt that only five people in the world were privy to. Since then, the situation had gone steadily downhill. The stolen information had found its way into the hands of the Saudis, who had used it to try to kill Ward, a man whose work in alternative energy threatened to make their oil reserves worthless. Rapp had thwarted their attempt, but in a way that made it appear that the Saudis had succeeded. At that moment, the world believed that Ward was in the hands of one of history's most brutal terrorists and that Rapp, Scott Coleman, and most of his team were dead.

It was an all-or-nothing strategy that had been enough to shake the major economies but not enough to identify their mole. With a little luck, though, that would soon change. Ward was using his international telecommunications holdings to track the burner phones utilized by the mole to communicate with his Saudi masters. It was only a matter of time before he came up with a name.

Without that name, though, they still had no idea how deep the

mole was burrowed into the Agency's communications. Because of that, Irene Kennedy had sent Mike Nash to Uganda so that he and Rapp could meet face-to-face in order to coordinate their next move. Simple, low-tech, and secure.

Or so he'd thought.

When Nash arrived, he'd handed over a password-protected tablet that contained a video of Kennedy saying that the plot against Ward went much higher than the Saudi royal family. Apparently, the risks were significant enough that, unknown to Nash, she had come to Uganda to talk to Rapp personally. The video ended with directions to a rendezvous point that was about as close to the middle of nowhere as you could get.

The sound of the SUV's engine grew in volume, and Rapp turned his attention back to the man behind the wheel. He was unquestionably courageous, patriotic, and smart as hell. But was he loyal? Yesterday, that would have been an easy question to answer, but a text Rapp had received a few hours ago made him wonder.

Paranoia? Probably. In fact, almost certainly. But no one had ever died from being too paranoid.

"Which way?" Nash said.

The predicted two hours had been turned into a five-hour ordeal that included two more river crossings and one more opportunity to test the winch. Finally, they'd dead-ended into a paved road.

"Right. We're back on track. This is the same road we turned off of after the gas station."

By the time they passed through a small village that was their last landmark, it was late morning. Rapp reached over and reset the vehicle's odometer. "In twenty-seven point three kilometers there'll be a dirt road on the right. Easy to miss in the dark, but we should be okay now that the sun's up."

According to Kennedy's video, that dirt track would take them to a wooded area too steep and rocky to be useful to the farms that once

again surrounded them. A clearing near the middle was where she'd be waiting.

As expected, the turn was obvious, and they began climbing a rough track that penetrated the forest. After a few more hard-won miles, Rapp pointed to a small break in the foliage. "There."

Nash pulled in and stopped. "This is it?"

Rapp responded by opening his door and stepping out. Nash did the same, using a hand to shield his eyes from the sun's glare. The clearing was roughly a hundred yards in diameter and ringed by densely packed trees. The ground rolled a bit, broken by a few rocky outcroppings, but was otherwise unremarkable.

Rapp stayed near the vehicle while Nash walked away from it, finally turning when there was about twenty yards between them.

"Care to tell me what we're doing here, Mitch?"

"We're supposed to meet Irene."

"Irene? What the hell are you talking about?"

Rapp came out from behind the vehicle and began moving away from it. "The message on that tablet was to meet her here."

Nash's expression turned skeptical with just a hint of caution. "I left her looking pretty comfortable in her office, Mitch. And why would she send me if she was planning on coming herself? Is there something you're not telling me?"

Rapp didn't have time to answer before the men appeared from the trees. Three of them, covered head to toe in camo, eyes invisible behind goggles, assault weapons in hand. Their positions were perfect, allowing them to keep their guns trained while avoiding any potential crossfire.

Rapp stopped and watched the way they moved for a moment but didn't reach for the Glock hanging beneath his right arm.

"There are four more in the trees, Mitch—all aiming at your head. Every one of them is a top operator and they know who you are. Even with superior numbers and position, I guarantee they're scared. One twitch from you and everybody's going to start shooting."

Rapp nodded, feeling a flare of rage that quickly dissipated into something much worse. Something that hinted at what he'd experienced when his wife died. A deep sense of loss accompanied by the strange feeling that nothing would ever be the same for him.

"Just keep your hands at your sides and everything will be okay."

"Why do I doubt that, Mike?"

Nash pulled his Colt and backed away another ten feet. He was a bureaucrat now, but not so far from his military roots that he'd feel comfortable putting too much trust in these men to protect him.

"This isn't personal, Mitch."

"How the fuck is this not personal? We've been friends for years. We've fought together. We've bled together. And now I'm standing here waiting to be executed by you. For what? A bunch of Saudi money? Your wife makes more than you can spend."

"Not money, Mitch. And not the Saudis. The president of the United States. It's probably hard for you to wrap your mind around this, but I don't work for you. I don't really even work for Irene. I work for the man elected to the White House."

"So, you sided with a politician? That doesn't make me feel any better."

Nash stiffened. "You think this is what I wanted? Are you fucking kidding me? You can't imagine what I've gone through to try to keep us from ending up here. Ward's people should have died in that first attack. Then it would have been over."

"What's he to you?"

"To me? Nothing. But to the Saudis, a lot. After you rescued Ward's research team, President Cook asked me to get information on him. He said he didn't want Irene to know but I didn't think that much of it. I just figured he was fishing for dirt so he could blackmail Ward into supporting him or something. But then Ward's compound gets attacked and he gets snatched. It didn't take long for me to figure out what I'd gotten myself into."

"But you didn't go to Irene."

"For what? To tell her that with my help, the president of the United States had colluded with a foreign government to get rid of the richest man in history? What would be the point?"

Sadly, he was probably right. Cook had majorities in both houses of Congress and loyalists running the National Security Agency, Secret Service, and Joint Chiefs. The current rumor was that he was about to replace the FBI director with a woman who worshipped him and after that he'd undoubtedly set his sights on the CIA. For all intents and purposes, Cook was now above the law. If he were to start shooting tourists through the White House gate, it was unlikely he'd even get impeached.

Nash started to pace. "The world we've been fighting for is gone, Mitch. We collapsed the Soviet Union and killed damn near every Islamic terrorist who's ever even looked at us sideways. The era of wars between superpowers is over—it has to be or none of us survive. Your friend Nicholas Ward thinks that's going to bring in a golden age. But you know that's bullshit even better than I do. People need hardship. They need something to struggle against. Someone to hate and feel superior to. Without those things they lose their identity and sense of purpose. And they can't handle it. Without a real enemy, they start turning on each other. That video of Irene you just watched? One of the president's people made it in less than a day with software you can get for free online. In another few years, half the videos people see on the Internet will be fake. Served up by right-wing nuts, left-wing nuts, foreign powers, and anyone else with a laptop and a sixth-grade education. If we don't take control of that, we'll end up in a civil war. But instead of the North against the South, it'll be four hundred different factions all swinging in the dark. Flat-earthers. Anti-vaxxers. Nazis. Communists. Antifa. The gluten intolerant—"

"And Cook's going to fix all that."

"I think he has a better shot than most," Nash responded. "He doesn't have any illusions about humanity. He knows that ninety-five percent of people are going to fight tooth and nail against the utopia

that all these tech gurus like Nicholas Ward want to force on them. And more important, he understands that they'll drag the other five percent down with them. Cook just wants to give people the leadership they need. He wants to make their lives simple. Focus their energy. Give them something to belong to."

"And that other five percent? I assume they get what they want, too?"

"Yeah. Wealth, power, and a nice tall wall between us and them."

"What a beautiful vision."

Nash let out a bitter laugh. "My entire career has been about fighting for America and the American dream, Mitch. But, at some point, it's time to wake up. At some point, you've got to admit that the monkeys are going to figure out a reason to throw feces at each other. The question is how much of it are you willing to let stick to you. I've spent my entire life trying to save people who don't want to be saved. Now it's time for me to save myself and my family. Twenty years from now, I want my kids to be kicking back in penthouses, not scrounging for scraps and killing each other over every conspiracy theory that comes across Facebook. The job's not stopping al-Qaeda from taking out a few people here and there. Not anymore. Now it's about stopping the mob from destroying themselves and everything people like us have built."

Rapp nodded and looked around at the men holding their weapons on him. "So, what's the plan, Mike? I don't have all day."

"The plan . . ." Nash looked down at the pistol in his hand. "The plan is to clean up as much of your mess as I can."

"My mess?"

"Yeah. Your mess. You made everyone believe that Ward and his people are dead, and they need to stay that way. If they get resurrected, it's going to be inconvenient to a lot of people who don't like being inconvenienced. I assume you've got them stashed somewhere around here with Scott? Tell me where. I'll drive over, have a couple of beers with the guys, and then tonight I'll take care of the problem and drive

out before anyone knows what happened. After that, if everyone agrees to keep their mouths shut, they can just walk away.”

“And Irene?”

“I can protect her. Cook will make me the new director and he doesn’t have any reason to pick a fight. All she has to do is fade into retirement.” He paused for a moment, finally pointing an accusatory finger at Rapp. “Like always, the problem is you. You’re the part of this shit sandwich everyone’s going to choke on.”

“And that’s why I’ll never leave here.”

“I don’t know. Maybe you do. How about I offer you the deal of the fucking century? You give me your word right now that you’ll just let this go. That you’ll forget about me, the Cooks, the Saudis, Ward, and all the rest. That you’ll go back to the Cape, race your bike, spend time with your new family, and never set foot back in the US. Do that and I’ll give you a ride to the airport.”

Rapp remained silent.

“Yeah. That’s what I thought,” Nash said, shaking his head slowly. “But I want to tell you something. I’m going to make you a hero. All the shit you’ve done that no one knows about? I’m going to tell them. You deserve that.”

Rapp walked to a rock outcropping, tracked by the men covering him. He sat and rested his elbows on his knees. “I got an interesting text on the way here.”

“I meant to ask you about that.”

“Like I told you, Ward’s people are still a few weeks out from putting names to the network of burners you were using. But he has put together some of the towers they connected to.”

“So?”

“So, he noticed something interesting. That one of those phones connected twice to the same tower I do when I’m at home in Virginia.”

Nash’s brow furrowed as he tried to make sense of what he’d just heard. Rapp decided to help him out.

“Apparently, Nick Ward’s memory is better than mine. I don’t re-

call telling him that the man I was meeting today lived in my neighborhood. But he did.”

“I don’t understand,” Nash said, backing away a few more steps and glancing at his backup to make sure they were all still in position.

“I didn’t, either. The video from Irene telling me to meet her in the middle of nowhere. The old password from Belarus that anyone high up enough in the Agency could get hold of. The mole who was too smart for anyone to identify. But then the cell tower put it all together for me.”

This time when Nash looked at the men covering Rapp, he did so with the intensity of someone who realized something had gone very wrong. It took only a moment before his body language revealed that he’d figured out what that thing was. It was already over when the men removed their goggles and face coverings.

Nash looked away before he could meet Scott Coleman’s eye. Understandable in that Coleman was probably his best friend in the world. Joe Maslick and Bruno McGraw—also present—rated pretty high, too.

“What did you find in the forest?” Rapp asked.

“Seven mercs,” Coleman said.

“All dead?”

“All but the one we left alive to interrogate. They were solid operators. Too dangerous to play around with.”

Rapp nodded and the silence in the clearing began to stretch out. Finally, he broke it.

“I’m giving you a five-minute head start, Mike. For old times’ sake.”

Rapp took not-so-careful aim and fired a single round into the trees. The sound of the shot was deafening and the snap of the bullet as it cut through the foliage would be terrifying. Which was the goal.

Thirty minutes into the chase, the grade of the forested slope had increased to probably five percent. Barely noticeable to him, but a significant obstacle for Nash. Things would have been different during his time as a Marine, but those days were long past. He’d largely aban-

doned his cardio workouts for weightlifting and ballooned to a solid two hundred and ten pounds. Good for stabilizing the damage done to his spine back when he'd still been a man of honor, but not so great for uphill running.

Rapp adjusted his aim a few degrees to the left and fired another round. He'd herd Nash up the incline for as long as possible. Even after years of kissing political ass and polishing desk chairs, the man wasn't to be underestimated.

Rapp started forward again, making some effort to be quiet but not going overboard. The same explosion that damaged Nash's back had also damaged his hearing. It was unlikely that he'd be able to separate the rhythm of human movement from the sound created by the intermittent breeze.

This would be a historically satisfying end for the son of a bitch. Humans had evolved not that far from where they were now with very few physical advantages. They weren't fast. Or strong. They lacked sharp claws or big teeth. Their only talent was an ability to keep going, wearing down prey until they finally stopped, stunned and unable to defend themselves.

Rapp wasn't going to involve himself in hand-to-hand combat with a desperate former Marine who outweighed him by almost forty pounds. No, Nash would end up on his fucking knees—gasping for air and waiting for the bullet that would kill him. Or maybe that wasn't entirely accurate. The truth was that the loyal soldier Rapp had known for so long was already dead. He had been for some time. The bullet would just make it official.

As he weaved through the trees, Rapp couldn't help thinking about how it had happened. He remembered the battles they'd fought, some against America's enemies and others between the two of them. He remembered shouting matches about strategy, tactics, and personnel. He remembered drinking on Nash's deck with Maggie and the kids and teaching their oldest son lacrosse.

Rapp slowed as his white-hot rage faded to dull red.

A few years back, he'd forced Nash to take credit for something Rapp himself had done, turning him into a hero. He'd received the Distinguished Intelligence Cross, the fawning attention of Washington's elites, and an enormous amount of media coverage. The unexpected celebrity had made it impossible for him to continue as a clandestine operative. Through no fault of his own, Nash suddenly found himself shut out of the career he'd spent his life building.

He'd been pissed as hell and, in retrospect, probably with good reason. At the time, Rapp had told himself he'd done it for the man's own good. That he was losing his edge and had a family that needed him. He'd convinced himself that he was protecting his old friend. But was that really his decision to make? And were his motivations really so pure? It had been clear that someone was going to have to take credit for what had been done and Rapp didn't want it to be him. The problem was that he hadn't just fled the spotlight, he'd shoved his friend into it in his place.

Rapp came to a stop, listening to the forest around him for any indication of his target. But there wasn't anything. When properly motivated, Nash could apparently still move his fat ass up a hill.

He started forward again but found that his pace had slowed even more. He thought back to a particularly ugly fight he and Nash had years ago. It ended up with Rapp leaving the man lying on the shoulder of the road.

Now he couldn't even remember what they were arguing about.

He tried to refocus on the task at hand, reminding himself that the penalty for taking Mike Nash for just another manicured bureaucrat could very well be death. But the focus wouldn't come. Only the memories.

The hard-to-face truth was that he'd made Nash the man he was today. He'd sent the Marine to the executive floor kicking and screaming. Once there, what had he expected him to do? Nash always excelled. In school. In sports. In combat. Why wouldn't he examine his new battlefield and calculate how to win on it? Why

wouldn't he recognize that Washington was an operating environment that didn't reward loyalty and courage. It rewarded treachery and self-interest.

Adapt or die.

As Rapp slipped through the trees, he reflected on the things Nash had said to him back in that clearing. Was it possible there was a kernel of truth in it? Over the course of their relationship, they'd probably disagreed more than they agreed, but Rapp had always taken the man seriously. Sometimes more seriously than he was willing to admit.

Son of a bitch.

Rapp hated doubt. It was almost as bad as regret on his scale of bullshit wastes of time. But there he was. Walking through the forest wallowing in it. Setting a pace designed to ensure that he never caught his target.

By God, he'd make Nash suffer, though. He'd keep running him up this hill until the forest opened onto farmland and forced the man to double back. He'd keep shooting at random, suspending Nash at the edge of panic. Then, eventually, he'd collect Coleman and the guys and drive away. Nash would stay hidden in the woods for days, starving his ass off, getting chewed on by bugs, and hopefully ingesting an amoeba that would cause truly catastrophic diarrhea. Eventually he'd emerge, filthy, unshaven, and dehydrated. Separated from his Agency support and family. Not knowing who he could trust.

When he finally slipped back to the United States, he'd be Kennedy's problem. Maybe she'd ship him off to surveil a Siberian weather station for the rest of his career. Or shove him in a forgotten warehouse full of Cold War intelligence reports in need of filing. Rapp didn't care as long as he never had to lay eyes on the man again.

The sunlight intensified just ahead, indicating a break in the trees. Rapp turned to skirt its edges before spotting a figure near the middle.

Nash.

He hesitated for a moment, but then moved into a position where he'd be visible but still have reasonable cover. Nash had taken no such

precautions. He was out in the open with his gun hanging loosely from his hand.

“You’re even slower than I thought,” Rapp said.

“I didn’t figure there was any hurry. Just putting off the inevitable, right? I’m not going to let you push me up this hill until I drop. I’d like to die with a little more dignity than that. If I’m going down, I’ll damn well do it with a shirt free of puke and the crease in my pants still holding.”

“Whatever works for you.”

“It’s been a wild ride, huh, Mitch? The things we’ve done? The things we’ve seen? Even if we could talk about it, no one would ever believe it.”

Rapp just shrugged.

“I stopped to tell you something. And there’s no reason for me to lie anymore, right? So, you should take this seriously. None of this shit matters. Just Claudia, Anna, Irene, and Scott and the guys. That’s it. Everyone else is just waiting to stab you in the back. That’s what I’ve learned traveling the world’s conference rooms. We all die and, in a few years, no one will remember we even existed. Nothing we do means anything.”

“Do you have a point?”

“Yeah. I do. Make peace with the president, Mitch. Even you and Irene can’t stand against what’s coming. I know you don’t want to join him, but at least be smart enough to back away. And while I know you haven’t listened to me much over the years, you should think about what I’m telling you. It’s good advice.”

He raised his sidearm until the barrel was tucked under his chin.

“Mike! No!”

But it was too late. The gun sounded and he collapsed to the forest floor.

CHAPTER 1

WEST OF MANASSAS
VIRGINIA
USA

THE rain just kept coming. In sheets earlier. Then in waves. Now it seemed to go in circles, overwhelming the windshield wipers on Rapp's rental car and swirling in his headlights. Behind, Irene Kennedy was piloting her own SUV, tracking him at a distance of only a few feet. The vague glow of his house started to be discernable through his fogged windshield, but it didn't bring much comfort.

He'd just told Maggie Nash that her husband was dead. The carefully crafted bullshit about his heroics hadn't done much to obscure the fact that she was now a widow with four fatherless kids. Nor had it softened the look in her eyes. The one that said "What the hell was my executive husband with a bad back doing in Uganda? Why is he—like so many others—dead while you just keep on breathing?"

A fair question that he didn't have an answer for.

The modern, vaguely museum-like concept of the house looming ahead had originally been dreamed up by his late wife. Architecturally

cutting-edge from the outside while allowing for no-compromises security to be integrated from the foundation up. When first completed, it had felt a little like a bunker. Not that he'd had a problem with that. There was nothing like being surrounded by thousands of tons of concrete to make him sleep at night. With the addition of Claudia, though, it had actually started to feel like a home. The smell of cement and fresh paint had been replaced with that of baking bread, flowers, and coconut shampoo. The hum of the state-of-the-art HVAC had been replaced with Anna's breathless storytelling and the banging of pans.

Now, as he closed in, it transformed back into a bunker. Eight million dollars' worth of dead and empty.

The massive gate opened when he hit a button on his key fob and he kept it depressed to allow Kennedy to tailgate him inside. Additional security lights came on as they pulled up to the front door and jumped out into the rain. A custom-made key got him inside, where he disabled the security system and started a diagnostic. He'd already completed one over his mobile phone but didn't trust it. Anything connected to the Internet could be hacked. The physical system, though, was built into the walls and subverting it would take more than some clever hackers—it'd take jackhammers.

It showed all-clear just as Kennedy entered the vestibule. She held her umbrella outside to shake it before closing the door again. It blocked out most of the sound of the storm, leaving him with the drone of the HVAC again.

"Claudia gave me a list of things she wants me to bring back to Africa," Rapp said. "Why don't you grab a bottle of wine and then meet me upstairs?"

Kennedy nodded silently and started toward the cellar.

"Might as well get a good one," he called as he jogged up the stairs. "I doubt I have much time and I'm not sure I'll ever be back."

In fact, he shouldn't have been there at all. But leaving Kennedy to talk to Maggie alone seemed like the coward's way out. He bore a lot

of responsibility for her husband's death and the least he could do was look her in the eye when she got the news.

Rapp entered the master bedroom and used his phone to turn on a white-noise generator that played over hidden Bluetooth speakers. It would obscure any conversation from hidden microphones that were almost certainly not there. Better safe than sorry.

He pulled up the list Claudia had given him and waded into the walk-in closet that he rarely set foot in. The tangle of dresses, shoes, scarfs, and God-knew-what-else at first looked random but upon further examination hinted at some overarching master plan.

He'd still managed to locate precisely none of the things on the list when Kennedy appeared with an open bottle of Bordeaux.

"What's the difference between a heel and a wedge?" Rapp asked.

She poured a couple of glasses and then motioned him out of the closet, taking his phone as he passed. A quick glance at the list on-screen was all she needed to start retrieving things.

"What happened, Mitch?"

"Mike was your mole."

She nodded silently. "Can I assume he was working at the direction of the White House?"

"Yeah."

President Anthony Cook was very different from his predecessors. He was autocratic, ruthless, and had no love for the country he ran or the people who inhabited it. In fact, the opposite seemed to be true. He saw every flaw, every weakness, and had an incredible gift for exploiting them. In his mind, the further he could pit the American people against each other, the more he could control them. His only goals appeared to be basking in the adulation of his followers and the accumulation of power.

In many ways his wife was even worse. She was nowhere near as charismatic, but smarter and more calculating. Combined, they were a force to be reckoned with. If nothing else, Mike Nash had been right on that point.

When Kennedy spoke again, it became clear that she'd been thinking about something that hit a little closer to home.

"Did you kill him?"

"He killed himself."

"Are you speaking figuratively?"

"You mean am I saying that he crossed me and that's as good as suicide? No. He put a gun under his chin and pulled the trigger before I could stop him."

She sagged a bit as some of the tension she was carrying released. He watched for a few seconds as she coiled a belt on top of a chest of drawers.

"What now, Irene?"

She didn't answer immediately but when she did, it was with a phrase he rarely heard from her. "I don't know."

"That's it? You got me into this, remember?"

"Do you mean the mole hunt? Or this life?"

"Both."

"I guess I did. Maybe an apology is in order."

"Nah. We had a pretty good run."

"Have we?" she said, turning toward him. "Because it led here. To this place. To this moment. I recognize now that I've been turning away from the truth, Mitch. For a long time. Maybe for as long as we've known each other."

"What truth?"

"That American democracy is much more delicate than I was willing to admit. I always knew there was a power-hungry ruling class, but I didn't allow myself to see how many people would be willing to kneel in front of it. Maybe freedom just demands too much of the average citizen. Too much personal responsibility. Too many opportunities for failure."

"Right before he died, Mike said we should make peace with the Cooks. That we can't beat them. Or change what's coming."

"It's probably good advice."

"He said that, too."

She carried a neatly folded stack of clothing from the closet and laid it on the bed before returning to her wineglass. Rapp couldn't tell if it was his imagination or if her hand shook a little as she brought it to her lips.

"The role of the CIA is going to change under the Cooks, Mitch. It's going to turn inward. They aren't concerned with outside powers, because they aren't a threat to them. They're much more concerned with internal enemies—political opponents, critics, and eventually the American people. Homeland Security is going to become an organization dedicated entirely to maintaining their power."

"That's a big change that involves a lot of people. Are they going to be able to pull it off?"

"I've given that question a lot of thought and the answer is yes."

"But you're still standing. Sounds like the plan was to put Mike in your chair, but that didn't work out."

"No, it didn't," she said, staring into her wineglass.

"But either way you figure you're done," Rapp prompted.

"No question. I have a lot of public support and some powerful friends inside the Beltway, so the Cooks are moving cautiously. But with the lack of pushback they've gotten on their purge so far, there's no reason for them to hold back."

"And you think it'll be effective," Rapp said.

"Incredibly so. Consider how effective the Stasi was at controlling the citizens in East Germany using only handwritten notes, hardwired listening stations, and black-and-white film. Compare that to high-definition video, social media, and artificial intelligence. The technology to surveil every citizen in America exists today. And not just what they do and say. What they think and feel. It's just a matter of scaling up and putting it in place."

Rapp nodded and folded his arms across his chest. "This isn't what I signed on for, Irene. I was happy to defend my country from outside enemies, but it's not my job to defend it against itself. The fact that the

American people vote for these pieces of shit isn't my problem. But the fact that Cook sent one of my best friends to kill me is."

"You're not having any wine?" Kennedy said, obviously anxious to avoid the issue for just a little longer.

"It probably wouldn't be a good idea."

She smiled bitterly and tipped a little more into her glass. "No. I suppose not."

CHAPTER 2

**THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON, DC
USA**

THE experts had once again gotten it wrong.

A briefing from NOAA suggested that the storm would pass harmlessly, with only its edges making landfall. Instead, America's eastern seaboard was being hammered by torrential rain and unseasonably high winds. To the south, a number of major cities were without power and flooding was overwhelming unprepared authorities. The DC area was faring better and, according to those same experts, would continue to do so as the storm weakened. Whether that prediction would prove to be any more accurate than the first one remained to be seen.

Catherine Cook stood silently at the window of her office, watching the trees struggle against the onslaught and listening to the rumble of it through the glass. Not as good a view as those afforded by the windows behind her husband's desk in the Oval Office, but still an extremely interesting perspective. Far different than the one from the

office she'd occupied as first lady of California. Or the one she'd had at the hedge fund she once ran.

She'd worked her entire life to get where she was now but had still arrived unprepared for the scale of it. The problems and opportunities of governing California seemed trivial by comparison. And the billions she'd handled during her time in high finance were nothing but rounding errors to the Federal Reserve.

Above it all, though, was the overwhelming sense of opportunity. While many of her colleagues in New York were blind to it, Wall Street's dead end was easy to discern. Once one acquired everything money could buy, it all became a game. A petty competition between people with insecurities that they mistook for ambition and superiority.

Running California had been largely the same. With no access to the national security apparatus, no military, and a limited ability to engage foreign powers, the end of the road had been less obvious, but just as real.

This window was different, though. Despite the driving rain, she could see forever.

She and her husband were the right people in the right place at the right moment in history. They had an opportunity to remake not just America, but everything. The liberty that the free world had enjoyed over the last century was nothing more than an anomaly. A momentary pause between the priests and nobles of antiquity and the politicians and billionaires of the new age. A momentary pause that was coming to its end.

They were entering an era that could be dominated in a different, but much more profound, way than in the past. The acquisition of territory—so important at one time—had become irrelevant. Society's next iteration would be one overseen by a network of loosely allied dictators spread across the globe. The challenge was making sure that it was the American president, and not the leaders of China or Europe, who ushered in that change. And for that to happen, Washington

would have to be transformed into a central power that exceeded even Beijing or Moscow. Weakness and compromise could no longer be tolerated.

So many opportunities. But only for those with the courage to take advantage of them.

Boldness in the political arena was not something her husband had ever lacked, but now their operating environment had shifted. And on unfamiliar ground, glimmers of something she'd never seen in him were becoming visible: cowardice.

He had been elected for his charisma, his good looks, and his confidence-inspiring certainty. He could charm, anger, and terrify with an effortlessness that no one in the world could match. Anthony Cook was a lightning rod for human emotion. Whether that turned out to be love or hate was irrelevant. Either way, it dominated everything and everyone that came into his orbit.

Or at least, that's what he had once been. Before they had crossed paths with a meaningless CIA thug named Mitch Rapp.

Catherine turned toward a television depicting the governor of North Carolina walking through the storm that was devastating his state. In normal times, her husband would have been alongside him—looking young and vital, his drenched dress shirt clinging to a muscular torso. He'd have been depicted talking to locals with an expression of deep concern. Unloading trucks. Stacking sandbags. But no more. Virtually all activities that took place outside the gates of the White House had come to a screeching halt. He'd even backed away from the online partisan sniping that kept the American people so entertained. His mind was now focused on one thing and one thing only: countering the perceived threat posed by Mitch Rapp.

She turned back toward the window and after a few moments heard the door open behind her. There was no question as to who it was. Only one person in the world entered her office unannounced.

"I thought you had a meeting with Dick Trenton?" she said without turning.

Trenton was a billionaire donor who reveled in his access to the president and missed no opportunity to sit across from him in the Oval Office.

“I canceled it.”

“Why?”

He evaded the question. “Still no word from Mike Nash?”

She let out a long breath but kept facing the window, preferring to look at his hazy image reflected in the glass. “No. But that isn’t particularly surprising. He said it would take time.”

“But how much time, Cathy? How do we know that he didn’t have a change of heart once he reconnected with Rapp and the others?”

“Mike’s not an idiot, Tony. He understands where the world is going and the role he can play in it. He’s not going to make enemies of us in hopes of getting forgiveness from Mitch Rapp.”

“Then maybe Rapp killed him. Like he has everybody else.”

She closed her eyes, blocking out the distractions around her. “Mike is a former recon Marine and one of the few people in the world Rapp trusts. More likely, Rapp’s already dead and Mike’s in the process of getting to Nicholas Ward. Once that’s done, we’ll replace Kennedy and it’s over. No one’s going to push back against Mike taking over at the CIA. If anything, he’s better liked around Washington than Kennedy. She has a way of making people uncomfortable.”

“But can we trust him to stay on the path we’re building?”

That was a more difficult question. Nash still had an archaic sense of morality that he couldn’t completely break free of. In the end, though, he didn’t have to like any of this. For now, it would be enough for him to understand that he had no other options.

“There’s nothing we can do about that now,” she said. “But there are things we can do about the Chinese making you look weak in the Pacific. And we need to strategize about how to take advantage of the immigration fight that we both know is coming. And then there are your slipping approval—”

There was a quiet knock on the door and a moment later her assistant opened it. "I'm sorry for the interruption, but Stephen Wright just called to say he's on his way here. He wanted me to tell you it's urgent."

Not surprisingly, that got her husband's attention. Wright was the recently installed head of the Secret Service and the man in charge of his all-important physical security.

"When?" Cook said, spinning toward the door a little too eagerly.

"Ten minutes, sir."

Catherine Cook settled into the seating area that dominated the center of the Oval Office. In contrast, her husband chose his normal position behind the modern table that had replaced the Resolute Desk. Constructed of glass, steel, and polished wood, it fit the new décor and was a reminder to all who entered that the past was dead. The battles ahead could be won only by those capable of breaking free of history's limitations.

Cook stood when his Secret Service chief entered, but Catherine remained on the couch. She'd known Wright for almost twenty years and had never seen him looking so haggard. His thick gray hair was still perfectly arranged and his tan improbably even, but there was perspiration gleaming on his forehead and gathering in the lines around his eyes. Not that it was surprising. He was a former judge with no history of running large organizations—government or otherwise. What he did have, though, was a vision of a new world order that was very similar to their own. Further, he was smart, trustworthy, and very much enjoyed the status provided by being a member of their inner circle.

His first task as director had been to begin purging the Secret Service's security detail of anyone with loyalties to either Mitch Rapp or Irene Kennedy. Secondarily, he was augmenting existing security protocols and changing those that Rapp and Kennedy would be familiar enough with to circumvent. Finally, he was quietly overseeing some of

the agencies that had not yet been brought under the Cooks' thumb—most notably the FBI.

"What do you have for us?" the president asked.

"My people temporarily lost Irene Kennedy, but then the surveillance team watching Mitch Rapp's neighborhood reacquired her. She went to Mike Nash's house—"

"Is he there?"

"She met someone in the driveway who we couldn't identify because of the weather. They went inside for about forty-five minutes and then drove to Rapp's house. Getting surveillance inside his wall is difficult. Particularly with drones unable to fly."

Cook went silent for a moment, his eyes darting nervously around the office. "Is it him? Is it Rapp?"

"I don't think we need to jump to conclusions," Catherine interjected. "It could just be Mike. He and Kennedy might have business at Rapp's house. They'd certainly have access to it. Mike is probably one of the people who take care of it when it's empty."

Wright just stood there in silence, looking back and forth at them. It was something she'd become accustomed to long ago. They governed very much as a team and people often weren't sure where the power in the room was located.

"It's him," Cook said.

"Tony, we—"

"Don't patronize me, Cathy!" He turned back to Wright. "Is your team ready?"

She felt the hairs stand on the back of her neck. "What team, Tony?"

"Yes, sir. In place and waiting for your authorization."

"Do it."

Wright gave a short nod and rushed from the room. When the door closed, Catherine repeated herself. "What *team*, Tony?"

It was hard to discern whether he was intentionally ignoring her question or just having a hard time tracking on it. "Mike's dead," he said flatly. "And in all likelihood, Rapp tortured him first. If that's the

case, he knows everything about our involvement with the Saudis. With Ward. And he knows what we sent Mike to Africa to do. Right now, he and Kennedy are standing in that fortress he built planning their next move.”

“You need to calm down, Tony. Even if everything you say is true, we don’t know what that next move is. This is our town and our country. Ours. Not theirs.”

“I’m not willing to be so dismissive, Cathy. If we let them disappear, they’ll reconnect with Coleman and his team. And that’s not all. They still have allies all over—”

“If Mike’s out of the picture, then Nicholas Ward is probably still alive,” she said, trying to stop him before he completely disappeared into the rabbit hole he was heading down. “We’re going to have to figure out how to handle that when it becomes public. There’s also the problem of no longer having a credible candidate to take over the Agency. Mike was going to be a popular appointment that would provide some cover for the ones that—”

“Politics? Are you really talking about politics while Rapp and Kennedy strategize about how to get to me?”

“I think it’s unlikely that’s what they’re doing. I admit that Rapp isn’t one to forgive, but Kennedy calculates everything she does. And a rash move against us isn’t going to pencil out to her.”

“Tell that to Christine Barnett.”

Christine Barnett had been their party’s leader before her very unexpected suicide. Conspiracy theories and suspicions abounded, but no one had ever been able to turn up anything that contradicted the official story.

“Speculation, Tony.”

“Speculation? Christine thought she was the second coming of Jesus and she was eight points ahead in the polls. Then, right when she’s about to get everything she’s ever wanted, she kills herself? Don’t insult my intelligence. Or your own.”

“More reason not to go after Kennedy and Rapp half-cocked, Tony.

Right now, you're in the most secure place on the planet, with a literal army dedicated to your safety. We have the luxury of stepping back and taking a breath."

Another unfamiliar expression flickered across her husband's face. Suspicion?

"That's easy for you to say, Cathy. Rapp's not coming for you. He's coming for me."

CHAPTER 3

WEST OF MANASSAS
VIRGINIA
USA

RAPP'S cell phone began to vibrate and he pulled it from his pocket.

"Problem?" Kennedy asked from inside the closet. She was searching Claudia's drawers for something called an obi belt while polishing off her second glass of wine. It was more than he could remember seeing her drink in their entire relationship. And why not? Neither of their prospects looked particularly sunny. And his had just taken a turn for the worse.

"I just got a breach warning. The power's been cut to the subdivision's main gate."

"I'd hoped you could be on your way before this happened. I imagine the president's anxious to talk to you."

"I'll bet."

"Can I assume you have a plan for something like this?"

He did. The default state of that gate was locked, so cutting the

power wasn't going to accomplish much. The incursion team would know that, though, and were probably just using the move as a diversion. In all likelihood, they had people in position all around the property and in the woods behind it. While the specific security measures built into his house weren't widely known, the general level of it was an open secret. They wouldn't want to risk a frontal assault and instead would purposely trigger an alarm in an effort to flush him out. And it was going to work. In the most literal and infuriating way imaginable.

"Yeah," he said at a volume that caused his voice to get swallowed by the room's white-noise generator. "Could you let Claudia know what's happened and put her stuff in FedEx for me?"

"If I'm not in prison," Kennedy said, pouring herself another glass. And not her normal two fingers. If the operators closing in on his property didn't move fast, they'd find her passed out on the sofa.

Rapp scrolled through images from the neighborhood's security cameras, pausing on one that depicted men in tactical gear coming over the southern perimeter fence. Through the rain, it was hard to see detail, but it wasn't necessary. There was no point in trying to get a head count. They looked like swarming ants.

It'd take about seven minutes to reach his property, where they'd dig in. If he didn't make an obvious break for it, they'd lay in an old-fashioned siege. Time, supply lines, and numbers were on their side.

He started for the door but before passing through the hallway he turned back toward Kennedy. "It's been interesting."

She smiled and raised her glass. "That it has."

The rain was really pounding when Rapp stepped outside. If anything, it was coming down harder than when they'd arrived. Even with the powerful security lights, the perimeter wall was just a haze. Puddles had overflowed their customary depressions in the flagstone courtyard and water was rushing toward strategically positioned drains. Once again, he'd gotten lucky. Surveillance drones would be grounded by the weather, and dogs—much more dangerous than humans in these

kinds of situations—would be neutralized. He was concerned about the number of men waiting for him in the woods behind his house, though. Was it twenty? Fifty? A hundred? As Kennedy was fond of pointing out, the president of the United States had a lot of resources. Far more than the terrorists and old enemies that the house was designed to turn back.

Rapp was soaked through by the time he reached an island of dense landscaping on the house's west lawn. He fought his way through the foliage, struggling to maintain forward momentum as the branches grabbed at him from all sides. Water was running in a thick stream from the bridge of his nose when he reached the center and dropped to his knees. At least it wasn't cold. Temperatures were still in the high seventies but would drop into the mid-sixties later that night. By that time, though, he'd either be safe and dry or on his way to sunny Guantanamo Bay.

After scooping away a few handfuls of muddy leaves, he found the metal hatch he was looking for. The wheel that opened it was stuck but that was a feature, not a bug. He'd been worried that Anna might happen upon it while searching for the soccer ball that always seemed to get away from her. A little more digging turned up a steel bar that he threaded through the wheel for additional leverage.

Rapp had bitched endlessly about the exorbitant cost of ensuring that his walled property didn't turn into Virginia's largest swimming pool in the rain. About halfway through the excavation, his attitude had done a one-eighty. The engineer working on the project had been more than a little surprised when Rapp suddenly demanded a much larger drainage pipe than necessary. When he'd then insisted that it include an access point big enough for a human to get inside, she'd thought he'd completely lost his mind. In the end, though, as long as the checks cleared no one seemed all that interested in complaining.

It took a little more effort than planned, but he finally freed the latching mechanism and pulled back the cover. Leaning into the hole, he used a red penlight to illuminate the moldy walls of the pipe and

the two or so inches of water rushing through its bottom. Fantasizing about twisting Anthony Cook's head off was just enough to motivate him to slip inside and pull the hatch closed behind.