

**THE
TORCHLIGHT
GAMBIT**

**THAD
DUPPER**

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The Torchlight Gambit is a work of fiction set in the near future. The premise of the novel and descriptions of naval operations and technology are grounded in fact. However, certain liberties have been taken in the interest in creating a compelling narrative. This work is fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner.

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Dedicated to

Captain Bradley Eugene “Joho” Johanson, USN

Commanding Officer, USS *John C. Stennis*, 2005–2008

Principal Characters

Mike “Grumpy” Bartlett: US Navy Commander, CO of VX-23

Lisa Collins: Director of the CIA

Chris Dunbar: CIA Agent and ex-Navy SEAL

Tom “Flatbush” Fraser: Rear Admiral, John C. Stennis Strike Group (COMCARGRU-3)

Chul Goh: General of North Korea Armed Services

Lauren La Rue: former Managing Director of Oasis LLC and current CIA operative

Pavo Ludovic: Leader of NetRiot cyberhacking group

Kristin McMahon: Deputy Director of the NSA

Andrew Russell: President of the United States (POTUS)

Kennedy Russell: First Lady of the United States (FLOTUS)

FOREWORD

My husband, Bradley Johanson, was the commanding officer of the USS John C. Stennis from 2005 until 2008. Thad approached me about writing this Foreword as the storyline in *The Torchlight Gambit* features the Stennis.

I first met Brad in 1977 at Orlando, FL where my first duty station was. Brad had several passions in his life in addition to his family – and very high on that list was being a naval aviator. He joined the Navy in April 1977 and went on to graduate from Jacksonville University in 1980 as a summa cum laude with a chemistry major.

I remember distinctly when he soloed during flight training in Pensacola in 1981, he came home with an ear to ear grin on his face. He was one happy man. It was then I knew I would not only become a Navy wife – but a Naval Aviator's wife. We then began our journey that took us across the USA numerous times and Brad traveled all over the world to many interesting places.

It wasn't long before we had our two children, Amber and John, who mostly grew up traveling with an adventure around every corner. We have many fond memories of camping across the country, going to theme parks, and experiencing the historical sights you read about in school books.

Deployments and frequent base transfers can be hard on a family. We found that staying connected to the communities that we lived in really helped with separations. By 1991 Brad had advanced to command of VS-29 Dragonflies which flew the S3-B Viking. Brad then went on to earn a master's degree in national security and strategic studies from the US Naval War College in 1995. Brad next assumed command of the USS Denver which was the precursor to achieving his ultimate goal and his next assignment.

On Friday, May 6, 2005, in Bremerton, Washington we all attended the change-of-command ceremony where Brad accepted command of the USS John C. Stennis from Captain David Buss. Commanding the Stennis, the highlight of his naval career, was a two-and-a-half-year assignment.

As planned on Friday, September 26, 2008, Brad turned command of the Stennis over to Captain Joseph Kuzmick. During the change-of-command ceremony Brad commented, "There is no finer ship and more devoted crew that I have ever served with than the John C. Stennis."

It was just a short time later that Brad retired from the Navy at the rank of Captain after a 31-year career.

We were only a few months into his retirement when Brad was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease. As you can imagine, it was a devastating diagnosis for all of us but Brad faced the disease, as he did his career as an aviator with courage, a strong will and a zest for life.

As I close, I reflect on our thirty-three years of marriage as a very special time. He was a wonderful father, a caring companion and I was truly blessed to have shared this tremendous journey with him – I just wish it could have been longer. We, his children,

grandchildren, sisters, parents and I, all miss him dearly. But we also are very proud – Brad spent his life in service to his country and in that all the Johansons take great pride.

To close, I will add if you have the wherewithal please consider donating to the Muscular Dystrophy Association to aid in ALS research. My brave warrior and I would greatly appreciate it.

Junay Johanson
Bremerton, WA

PROLOGUE

This morning found President Paek, the leader of North Korea, on the phone with the son of the late sheik Abdul Er Rahman.

“Good morning, my friend,” said Paek warmly to Salman Rahman, the twenty-two-year-old son of the sheik whose untimely demise was believed to be the result of a secret attack by the Americans.

Getting right to the point, Salman replied, “Yes, good morning. Mr. President, I am calling to enlist your help.”

“Of course. What is it you require, Salman?” Paek asked the young sheik, who had inherited his father’s immense wealth as well as his hatred for the United States.

“My father’s managing director, Lauren La Rue, the one who defected to America—I need your help to find her. We almost caught her in Dubai last year but she escaped,” said Salman Rahman.

Seeing an opportunity to help himself, Paek replied, “Salman, I think we can be of service in that endeavor.”

“Mr. President, she is being protected by the CIA, so it will not be easy. Plus—and this is important—I want her captured alive,” said Salman, his voice evoking the vengeance that was one of the hallmarks of the megawealthy in the Middle East.

“No doubt, it will be very difficult,” said Paek, positioning for something he wanted.

“That’s why I called you, Mr. President. With your resources, I am certain my search for her will be greatly accelerated.”

Paek, barely thirty years old, had not yet developed the gravitas of his deceased father. As a result, his words often came off like a collection of plagiarized lines rather than sophisticated oratory.

“Salman, I knew your father. I did business with your father; I considered your father a friend. If you say this woman is your enemy, then she is my enemy as well,” said Paek. “I’ll have my intelligence chief contact you to assist in your task,” he continued.

“Mr. President, last year my government in Riyadh obtained missile technology from the Chinese,” said Salman.

“Yes, we are aware that King Abudallah procured some new anti-ship ballistic missile technology,” said Paek.

“President Paek, I have come into possession of three of those missiles, the Dong-Feng 21D missiles. I would like to offer them as a sign of my gratitude. Would they be of interest to you, sir?”

Paek was pleased at the offer. He guessed the missiles had cost Salman many millions of dollars to obtain, but the cost was immaterial, as he was driven by his desire to capture La Rue.

“Yes, they would be of value to us, Salman. I will have our people work out the details for their transport,” said Paek.

“I am happy to help in any way I can,” replied Salman.

“Clearly the gesture of a friend, Salman, thank you,” said Paek as he terminated the call.

The call had greatly exceeded Paek’s expectations. Obtaining the Chinese-made DF-21D anti-ship missiles would give Paek an important advantage in his escalating conflict with the

Americans, whom he despised and was determined to fight at every turn.

It was January 6, a crisp, sunny Saturday morning in New York at Pier 88 at the foot of Forty-Eighth Street on Manhattan's West Side.

Pier 86, the home of the Intrepid Sea, Air and Space Museum, usually commanded the attention of this portion of the waterfront, but not today.

Today at Pier 88, in full dress ship with flags flying from mast to mast, the newly refurbished SS *United States* was being put back into service by President Andrew Russell, the forty-sixth president of the United States.

A reviewing stand at the foot of the pier covered with bunting for the occasion set off the podium from which the Seal of the President of the United States hung.

First to speak was the mayor of New York, who welcomed the president and the large collection of VIPs on hand for the festive event. At the conclusion of his remarks, the mayor introduced the next speaker, Tim Cook, CEO of Apple.

Cook began, "Thank you Mr. Mayor. I would like to begin by acknowledging President Russell, Senators Schumer and Gillibrand, Cardinal Gotimer, members of Congress, and the members of the armed forces here today. I would also like to thank the New York Police Department for their support in arranging this grand event.

"Five years ago, an Apple systems engineer, who is with us today, sent me an email with an extraordinary idea. He suggested that Apple purchase the historic ocean liner the *United States*, which was rusting away in Philadelphia. His vision was to refurbish and modernize the

United States to make it a floating venue that would cruise the world hosting Apple events and providing classes for young people all over the world.

“Today, that idea becomes a reality. After four years and an investment of \$4 billion, we are ready to put this landmark of American ingenuity and design back in service. And she’s never looked better,” said Cook, turning to admire the towering liner behind him with its funnels painted in the familiar red, white, and blue.

At 990 feet and now sixty-five thousand tons, the *United States* had been completely gutted and renovated, courtesy of Apple. In addition to accommodating up to two thousand passengers and a crew of eleven hundred, the ship possessed the latest in technology. It was a floating data center, innovation lab, training facility, and hotel all in one.

After highlighting the technical innovations of the ship and recounting Apple’s goal of rescuing this amazing part of American nautical history, Cook finished strong: “As you know, my predecessor at Apple loved good design. It was his passion. And when you look at the design of this magnificent liner, you can tell it was ahead of its time, and for that reason its design is enduring. Apple is pleased and humbled to have been able to repurpose this great ship as an innovation lab that will travel the world educating and informing the next generation of engineers, gadflies, and geniuses. And let me close by saying, Steve would have loved what we’re doing today.” At this point Cook introduced President Andrew Russell.

President Russell, mindful of the time, kept his remarks brief while still recognizing the historical significance of the event. “On this brilliant January morning, we welcome back to the Port of New York one of its finest liners. Designed and built in the 1950s, the

United States represented the state of the art in terms of shipbuilding, engineering, and innovation. And today it takes that place again, thanks to the vision and resources of Apple. But now the *United States* has an expanded mission of bringing technology and education to the next generations of the world's youth."

The president continued for a few more minutes before closing. He then walked over to the prow of the ship along with his wife, Kennedy Russell, who exclaimed, "I rechristen thee SS *United States*. May God bless her and all who sail on her." And with those words, she swung the ceremonial bottle of champagne, which exploded on the bow of the sleek liner as the US Marine Band played "The Stars and Stripes Forever" followed by "New York, New York."

Apple had had many internal debates about whether to change the name of the ship. While being civic-minded and proud of its US roots, it worried that the name *United States* would not be in keeping with the new ship's mission as a lab for the youth of the world. In the end, Tim Cook went with tradition and kept the original name, knowing that it was "bad luck" to change the name of a ship.

It was a great event—great for the country, for the city, and for Apple. Clearly Apple had made the right decision. It had taken only a fraction of its \$256 billion cash hoard and put it toward the *United States* project, but the amount of goodwill Apple would realize from the *United States* would be enormous.

With the festivities out of the way, there was real business to discuss.

Under the guise of a tour of the ship, Tim Cook welcomed President Russell, Sterling Spencer, the president's chief of staff, and Lisa Collins, the director of the CIA, to the William Francis Gibbs Suite, named for the naval architect who originally designed the *United States*.

“Thank you again for attending today’s event, Mr. President,” said Cook.

“It was a great event and you and Apple should be proud of this achievement,” replied Russell.

As they sat down, Spencer took over. “Tim, we would like your assistance for a mission we have in mind for the *United States*,” he said.

This caught Cook a little off guard. After all, they’d just put the ship in service forty-five minutes earlier.

“We think for its inaugural cruise the *United States* should go to South Korea and then visit North Korea,” Spencer said dryly, which befitted his personality.

“North Korea?” was Cook’s only response.

“Yes, we think it will be in keeping with the role you just laid out for the ship. The US government won’t condone the visit, but we won’t prevent or criticize it either. Furthermore, going to North Korea will advance your narrative of how Apple technology can help bring the world together,” added Spencer.

Cook said, “We were planning to bring the *United States* to San Francisco for an Apple company event as its first port of call.”

President Russell replied, “You have the opportunity for the first voyage of your ship to make history. No other company has ever been in a position like this. Apple will be at the forefront not only in technology but in global outreach as well. Think of the PR opportunities for you.”

“While I am intrigued by the idea, what’s this really about?” asked Cook.

This was the cue for Lisa Collins to join the conversation. “Mr. Cook, when the *United States* makes port in Busan, South Korea,

we are going to need cabins for one hundred. We will be putting a team of security personnel on board. That's all you need to know other than the mission in North Korea is important to our national security and that of the world."

Cook wasn't surprised at her reply, but he was clearly annoyed and shot back at Collins, "Director Collins, we don't know each other that well, but let me share with you my opinion of the CIA and the other US intelligence agencies. You harass us endlessly about our encryption. Your agents make comments almost daily that portray Apple as unwilling to cooperate with the CIA, and frankly, your *cyberexperts* are a team of engineers who couldn't cut it in Silicon Valley so they had to take government jobs."

Any hope President Russell had of keeping the discussion friendly went out the window with Cook's last remark. But before Collins could respond, the president stepped in. "There's no need for this to get personal. Tim, this is what we need you to do—it's what *I* need you to do. We need the first visit of the *United States* to occur in Busan, South Korea, on April eleventh. We want you to reach out personally to President Paek of North Korea and suggest the *United States* visit Namp'o, North Korea. Tell him you think it would be history making if you can be part of their Day of the Sun celebrations on April fifteenth. Tell him you don't care what I or the US government thinks and that you are looking to make history with your ship's first voyage. I think he will accept your offer as another way to embarrass the US government, which is just fine with us."

After a pause, and in a cooler tone, Cook responded, "I understand, Mr. President. Give me a few days and you will have my answer, sir."

As the meeting finished, President Russell asked for a minute alone with Cook.

“Tim, clearly you aren’t aware, but there’s a strong possibility, if not a likelihood, that Lisa Collins will succeed me as president. And her influence will only grow leading up to that election. It would do you and Apple well to get on her good side. In addition, I didn’t appreciate your comment about our cyberanalysts.”

“I apologize, Mr. President,” said Cook, “It was an inappropriate comment. You know how much I think of you and your leadership.”

Russell nodded and continued. “Tim, I’m counting on your support in this matter. It’s very important. I wouldn’t ask you if this were just some sort of political maneuver.”

Cook nodded that he understood.

The president closed with, “I look forward to your response, but I expect it to be positive.”

As they left the suite, the president said, loud enough for Cook’s staff to hear, “Congratulations, Tim. It was a great event today—for Apple and the world. You and your team should be very proud.” The president paused for a few minutes to take pictures with the executives of Apple, and then he was gone.

A week later the president’s chief of staff came into the Oval Office saying, “Mr. President, I heard from Tim Cook. The *United States* will be making its first trip to South Korea and he is going to reach out to Paek about visiting the North as well.”

“Good, good,” was all the president said as they moved on to other business.

CHAPTER ONE

Deep inside Cheyenne Mountain in Colorado at NORAD Headquarters, the screen on First Lieutenant Camila Alvarez's screen started to flash.

“Sir, we have a possible missile launch from Shampoo.”

Shampoo was the code name for Namp'o, North Korea, a known missile site located on the Yellow Sea, or what today is more commonly called the East China Sea.

The on-duty officer, Major Brian Sloan, toggled over to the missile-tracking screen on his MIDS display. MIDS was the US Air Force's new Missile Information Defense System.

Alvarez zoomed her display to the East China Sea area and added, “Sir, we have confirmation. We are tracking a Korean missile launch. Confidence is high. I repeat, confidence is high.”

As he administered instructions on his keyboard, Major Sloan picked up his handset and pressed the P1 button. “This is Giant Killer on alert. Giant Killer is issuing a P1 missile launch warning for the East China Sea. POO”—point of origin—“is Namp'o, North Korea.”

With the P1 Alert, activity in Cheyenne Mountain, located near the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, dramatically increased. Sloan got on the phone with his commanding officer, Colonel Tim

Raftery. “Yes, sir, we are tracking a launch of a ballistic missile from North Korea.”

When a P1 Alert is issued, all commands of the US Navy, Army, and Coast Guard, as well as the NSA, CIA, and White House, must be notified.

Before Colonel Raftery hung up he barked, “I’m coming down”; then the line went dead.

Sloan turned his attention back to his MIDS screen. “Alvarez, what’s MIDS telling us about the missile?” Just as the US Navy tracks and tapes all enemy submarines to document their acoustic signatures, MIDS was now analyzing the heat signature, speed, and track of the North Korean launch to determine what type of missile it was.

“Sir, MIDS is classing the missile as a Chinese DF-21D. It’s a ‘carrier killer,’ sir.” Alvarez used the colloquial name for the DF-21D because it was thought that this anti-ship ballistic missile, or ASBM, if nuclear armed, could destroy a US Navy aircraft carrier.

Sloan shot back, “Lieutenant, how can the North Koreans be firing a DF-21D missile? Rerun your analysis.”

“Sir, I did,” she quickly replied. “MIDS is indicating the missile has the heat signature and performance characteristics of a Dong-Feng 21D.”

The Dong-Feng 21D was an improved variant of a standard ballistic missile modified to be an anti-ship missile specifically for use against US aircraft carriers. With a range of fifteen hundred nautical miles and traveling at a reported speed of up to Mach 10, or seventy-six hundred miles per hour, the DF-21D could be armed with either a conventional or a nuclear warhead, reportedly up to 150 kilotons. To put that in perspective, the Hiroshima bomb was

fifteen kilotons and the Nagasaki bomb twenty-one kilotons. A nuclear-armed DF-21D would be up to ten times as powerful.

Major Sloan yelled to an airman to bring up the tactical plot for the East China Sea. “Who do we have out there?”

The airman put the tactical plot on one of the four ten-by-ten-foot displays that overlooked the entire control room. “Sir, Carrier Strike Group 3—the *John C. Stennis* Strike Group—is in the East China Sea.”

Hearing the news, Sloan picked up his handset and issued the following priority alert: “Giant Killer is going to battle stations. All stations confirm and authenticate. Alert the *Stennis* Strike Group. Giant Killer has picked up a launch of what we are classing as a Dong-Feng 21D in their AOR”—area of responsibility—“priority 1.”

Going to battle stations is the highest level of alert Giant Killer can set, and it is the customary alert level for a missile attack on either the US homeland or a base. Over the last twenty years, going to battle stations has been utilized only a handful of times. One was on 9/11 and another was when President Andrew Russell’s family was attacked on Nantucket the year before.

The USS *John C. Stennis* (CVN-74), one of the United States’ supercarriers, along with the escort ships that formed Carrier Strike Group 3 (CARGRU-3), had put to sea from the newly reopened naval base in Subic Bay, Philippines. The US Navy almost always deployed one of its carrier groups to provide a military presence in the East China Sea.

The local time on the *Stennis* was 7:30 p.m. when the Giant Killer call was received.

In the *Stennis*’s Combat Direction Center (CDC), screens started blinking as the Giant Killer alert was received.

Lieutenant Commander Larry Stone, the *Stennis's* CDC duty officer, picked up the handset and pressed the button for the bridge. “Captain, Giant Killer has just gone to battle stations. They are tracking a DF-21D ‘carrier killer’ fired from North Korea heading to the East China Sea.”

Traveling at seven thousand miles an hour, the inbound DF-21D could cover the approximately fifteen hundred miles from its launch in Namp’o to the location of CARGRU-3 in barely fifteen minutes.

The captain responded, “On my way. Alert the admiral.”

On the admiral’s bridge of the *John C. Stennis*, sitting in his command chair, was newly flagged rear admiral Tom “Flatbush” Fraser, commander, Carrier Strike Group 3—in short, COMCARGRU-3. Upon being notified of the ASBM, Admiral Fraser also headed to the CDC.

Captain Ryan of the *Stennis* arrived first and asked, “Did our Tall Boy pick up the launch?”

He was asking whether the Aegis cruiser of the carrier group had detected the missile launch. It was the task of the Ticonderoga-class Aegis cruiser to provide air defense to US carrier groups using its state-of-the-art missile systems.

Just as the captain spoke, on board the USS *Mobile Bay* (CG-53), the Ticonderoga-class cruiser, the BMD (ballistic missile defense) screens started lighting up.

Adhering to procedures and without waiting for a confirmation, the BMD operator on the *Mobile Bay* issued an alert to all ships in CARGRU-3. “This is Red Crown on Guard.” Red Crown was the call sign for cruisers assigned to US carrier groups. “Vampire, vampire, vampire, Red Crown is tracking an inbound vampire BRAA, 015, 1,200, 3.3, beam east.” The BRAA call indicated bearing, range,

altitude, and aspect of the inbound missile, designated as a vampire, which indicated that the BMD classed it as an enemy missile.

In a matter of seconds, every ship in CARGRU-3 went to battle stations, missile.

That meant three Arleigh Burke destroyers and the cruiser USS *Mobile Bay*, as well as the *Stennis* and their accompanying fast-combat support ship, USS *Rainier* (AOR-7), were all in the process of manning battle stations to repel a possible incoming anti-ship missile attack.

In addition, underwater the USS *Washington* (SSN-787), a Virginia-class attack submarine attached to the strike group, was manning battle stations, which included rising to the depth of one hundred feet in order to be ready to launch its defensive anti-ship missiles.

Rear Admiral Tom Fraser was now in the CDC along with his staff.

“Execute Group Order Baker Foxtrot Zulu,” commanded the rear admiral. This was the order for his carrier group to disperse the group at maximum speed, go active on all tracking systems, and implement what is called a SP-JASHO condition on all ships.

SP-JASHO was a defense condition specifically designed to defend against an inbound missile attack. It stood for spoof, jam, and shoot, which included (1) spoofing, which sends false images to the incoming missile, (2) jamming the inbound missile’s tracking system in order to confuse it, and (3) all the ships in the group employing their BMD—ballistic missile defense systems—and firing a variety of missiles intended to intercept and destroy the inbound missile.

The missile had already been in the air for five minutes. That meant a potentially nuclear-armed anti-ship ballistic missile traveling at a speed of two miles per second was headed toward the USS *John C. Stennis* Strike Group. Tensions were high all around.

Captain Ryan pressed the button on his handset for the bridge and ordered the officer of the deck, “Execute Baker Foxtrot Zulu ahead flank.”

Ryan then pushed the button for the chief engineer. “CE, it’s the CO. Pull out the rods; I want flank speed—give us all you can.”

The chief engineer responded, “Aye, aye, ahead flank, indicating 125 rpms.”

With that, the vibrations on the USS *John C. Stennis*, all hundred thousand tons of it, started to increase as the ship accelerated past its official top speed of thirty-three knots. Likewise, the Arleigh Burke destroyers of the group were all nearing thirty-six knots as every ship in the group ran from the incoming North Korean missile.

With Giant Killer going to battle stations, the US Secret Service needed to notify and secure the president. That meant interrupting the president, who was at the White House hosting a breakfast meeting with the Republican opposition leaders.

Dan Nicols, the president’s US Secret Service detail chief, came into the West Wing’s Roosevelt Room and whispered the words no president wanted to hear: “Sir, we have a situation.”

President Russell stood up, saying, “Ladies and gentlemen, something has come up. We’ll need to continue this discussion at another time.”

The president was quickly ushered into the elevator that would take him to the Situation Room, which was housed under the West Wing. When the Secret Service informed him that Giant Killer had gone to battle stations, Russell demanded, “My family?”

“Yes, sir, the first lady and the children are being secured. Your children haven’t left for school yet, sir.”

The president greeted the hastily convened staff in the Sit Room by immediately asking, “What do we have?”

“Sir, we have picked up the launch of what appears to be a Dong-Feng ‘carrier killer’ missile from North Korea. The missile is six minutes out from the *Stennis* Carrier Group, which is in the East China Sea coming out of Subic,” said the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Brad Johnson.

“Can the group shoot it down?” asked the president.

“Unclear at this point, sir. They are spoofing and jamming but it is only a matter of minutes before the missile will hit.”

“The USS *Washington* is firing its Harpoon missiles as fast as she can get them off.”

“We don’t know if the DF-21D is armed, sir. We have made no overt act of aggression, so this attack is unprovoked,” added Johnson.

“What the hell are the North Koreans doing with a Dong-Feng?” was the president’s next question.

“Sir, we don’t know where the North Koreans would have gotten it but we know it was launched from Namp’o and our systems are classing it as a Dong-Feng with confidence high,” said Admiral Johnson.

On the bridges of every ship in CARGRU-3, everyone was bracing for the flash of the detonation.

As the seconds ticked off, the DF-21D started to veer off course. At first the deviation was slight, but then it became more erratic and pronounced. The missile fell into the sea eighty miles from the *Stennis* Carrier Group without detonating. It wasn’t clear whether their jamming and spoofing had proven successful, or the missile had suffered an internal failure, or even if it had been issued a self-destruct order. That would all be discovered later,

but for now Admiral Fraser asked the CDC officer, “Are there any other threats on the board?”

“Sir, the scope is clear. There are no airborne or ballistic threats. We are only tracking some small fishing boats approximately twenty-five miles from Home Plate,” said the CDC lieutenant, using the code name *Home Plate* for the flagship, the John C. Stennis.

The admiral’s chief of staff sent out a message to the group to stand down from general quarters and to re-form into a tactical formation. He then ordered that all ships in the group continue to remain on alert with their surface-to-air weapons and radars. Fraser turned to his chief of staff and said, “Send the *Kidd* to see if they can find any of the debris from the missile. Also, have the *Hamilton* get those fishing boats out of here.” COMCARGRU-3 was referring to the USS *Kidd* (DDG-100) and USS *Paul Hamilton* (DDG-60), both Arleigh Burke destroyers of DESRON-21—Destroyer Squadron 21—attached to his carrier group.

“Copy, Admiral,” replied the captain.

Minutes later, Admiral Fraser convened his staff. “Gentlemen, why do I feel like we were caught with our pants around our ankles?”

The admiral was referring to the inability of USS *Mobile Bay*, whose job it was to defend the carrier group, to fire any of its interceptor missiles. The BMD system, made up of the AN/SPY-1D radar and Aegis Combat System, had detected the incoming enemy missile but wasn’t able to track or paint the Dong-Feng to get launch coordinates.

“Yes, our jamming and spoofing worked, but other than the *Washington* we didn’t get a single shot off. If that missile had detonated a nuclear warhead, the group would have sustained significant damage. We were lucky this time, gentlemen, and we don’t rely on

luck, do you read me? Get on it.” With that the admiral departed to brief the commander, US Pacific Fleet, known as COMPACFLT, who in turn would brief the CNO, the chief of naval operations. The staff remained in the conference room, continuing to review the actions taken during the attack.

In the Sit Room President Russell turned to his chairman of the Joint Chiefs, who also had joined the conference bridge, saying, “Take us to DEFCON 4—find out if there are other hostile actions under way anywhere else. Also, have the South Koreans raise their alert posture.”

Acknowledging Lisa Collins, the director the CIA, who had conferenced in, the president said, “Lisa, verify this was launched by the government of North Korea.”

“Will do, Mr. President,” responded Collins.

George Riordan, the director of the NSA, was also on the bridge. “George,” the president said, “what does the NSA know?”

“Sir, not much at the moment. If this was a DF-21D, we know North Korea doesn’t have that technology. Recall the Chinese did sell some DF-21s to KSA”—the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia—“but they weren’t specials”—in other words, nukes. “My bet is if this was a 21D and it was indeed fired by North Korea, then they got it from the Saudis.”

The president shook his head. “The Saudis again.”

Not waiting for a reply, the president turned to Admiral Brad Johnson and asked, “What assets do we have in the area in addition to the *Stennis* Group?”

“Sir, we have the *Michael Mansoor*, the new Zumwalt destroyer, off Vietnam. We have the submarines USS *Florida* and USS *Connecticut* at Pearl. And there’s the *North Carolina* escorting the

United States, per your orders, but it won't arrive in the area for about a week."

The president knew what Johnson was suggesting when he mentioned the USS *Florida*. The USS *Florida* was an Ohio-class ballistic submarine that had been modified to house the top secret Torchlight technology. Very few knew of this development, and for the moment Russell needed to keep it that way.

Soon after being sworn in as the forty-sixth president, Andrew Russell was given a top secret briefing on Torchlight by the program director, Jim Hartel.

"Mr. President, Torchlight is a laser-based technology specifically designed to defeat ballistic missiles," he began. "By using an extremely powerful and focused laser beam, Torchlight has the ability to destroy incoming missiles.

"That said," continued Hartel, "the challenges of the Torchlight technology are many. First, the weapon requires a tremendous amount of power. We use the next-generation nuclear reactors configured in a series. But that alone is not enough. We also employ EDFAs, or an erbium-doped fiber accelerator, which allows us to amplify the power of the laser beam by a factor of ten. With the EDFA technology, we take the one million megawatts generated from the reactors and increase it to ten million megawatts to power the laser weapon systems."

The president asked Hartel, "What about the targeting system?"

"That's the other challenge of the Torchlight program—tracking and steering. For tracking, we have integrated Torchlight with the new S-band radar the Navy is developing—the SPY-6." Hartel was referring to the next-generation state-of-the-art radar system that

was being developed by Raytheon and would provide a new search capability for air and ballistic missile defense.

“As for steering,” said Hartel, “we have adapted technology from our latest-generation fighter jets and incorporated it into Torchlight. We have taken the fast-steering mirror from the F-35 Lightning, a technology from Ball Aerospace in Boulder, Colorado, and adapted it to allow the laser beam to track at extremely fast intervals—at the microsecond level. We also added a photon detector and a quad cell to provide added steering accuracy.

“In addition, we have added antiroll gyros to the laser-targeting systems, anticipating that Torchlight will be deployed at sea as well as on land.”

The president went on the offensive. “Mr. Hartel, we are spending in excess of \$8 billion on the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system this year. Why is that not money well spent?”

Hartel was expecting a question along those lines and replied, “Mr. President, there are four main reasons why Torchlight is superior to THAAD. First, as you no doubt know, the kill rate for THAAD is sixty percent. Torchlight’s is in excess of ninety percent so far. THAAD has a range of a hundred and twenty miles. Torchlight’s range is more than twice that. And from a cost perspective, every time we fire Torchlight it costs us practically zero. We are generating a laser beam made up of highly concentrated photons. The latest budget numbers for THAAD indicate that each missile costs us \$75 million.”

The president replied, “I don’t doubt your facts, Mr. Hartel, but I have mobile THAAD launchers in South Korea, Hawaii, Guam, and on the West Coast. They are operational at this point. Torchlight isn’t.”

“Mr. President, when THAAD was envisioned, twenty years ago, it was a very formidable defense system, but Torchlight is the next-generation solution in virtually every dimension,” said Hartel. Just for emphasis he added, “Torchlight is more accurate, has a longer range, is faster, has a lower cost, and can be mounted on our submarines.”

President Russell had already decided that Torchlight held the promise to eclipse THAAD, but he wanted to hear Hartel’s defense, which made him even more committed to the program.

The president pivoted and asked, “Jim, what’s the plan to get this technology into the fleet for testing?”

“Mr. President, we are deploying land-based Torchlights at our bases in South Korea, the Philippines, Vietnam, Hawaii, and Guam, as well as on the coasts of the US, but none of those installations are complete yet. Estimated time to get them online is late next year, sir. In terms of the Fleet Readiness program, our plan is to test the SPY-6 radar with Torchlight together on our first sea-based platform on the USS *Florida*.”

The president interjected, “The *Florida*? Isn’t that an Ohio-class boomer?”

Hartel nodded. “Correct, sir. The *Florida* was a ballistic submarine, or ‘boomer,’ but we recently converted it to a special mission under the Torchlight Program and redesignated it as SSGN-728. Sir, the *Florida* was chosen because at 560 feet in length and more than eighteen thousand tons she had the room needed to install the reactors required to power Torchlight. We removed the twenty ICBM missile silos and in their place installed six of the new Bechtel A1B nuclear reactors from the new *Ford* class of aircraft carriers, the SPY-6 system, the EDFAs, and, of course, the laser.”

Hartel concluded his briefing by saying, “Mr. President, Torchlight has the potential to be a game-changer, but it has some technical hurdles before it can become operational. Not to mention, sir, the impact it might have on the atmosphere. Some of our scientists at the Jet Propulsion Labs in Pasadena worry that such a powerful laser could ‘tear’ a hole in the atmosphere, causing unfiltered gamma rays from the sun to bombard the earth, possibly compromising the planet’s core. We have been conducting tests on that and we believe those concerns are unfounded. Sir, once the *Florida* is fitted out, it will sail out of Pearl in Hawaii to conduct fleet testing. We call it the Death Star of the Fleet, sir.”

The president had approved the next phase of the Torchlight project, which included field-testing the technology on the USS *Florida*.

Of course, all of this was fifteen months ago. Since then, the *Florida* had completed its installation and begun its testing of Torchlight. The results were very promising, but it was still expected to be another year before Torchlight completed its fleet readiness testing and would be ready for official deployment by the Navy.

The president, bringing his attention back to the situation at hand, addressed his Sit Room team. “Brad,” he said, addressing the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs, “move the *Florida* and *Connecticut* into the East China Sea ASAP.”

Admiral Johnson responded, “Copy, sir.”

Pavo Ludovic was the leader of a cyberhacking group based in the Brasina area of Dubrovnik, Croatia. He and his team, known in the hacking world as NetRiot, occupied a small house in view of the Adriatic Sea on the old French Road. It was a cadastral plot of land that in an earlier time had been cultivated for agriculture.

Today just a few olive trees remained. The only thing that could have given away that this was no longer a simple country house was the multiple satellite dishes set up in the yard. But to see them you would have to gain access to the property, which was shielded by an eight-foot-high wooden fence and guarded by two Rottweilers.

Ludovic and NetRiot were part of the black underworld of cyberterrorism. Their particular expertise was penetrating the financial system known as SWIFT.

The Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication, or SWIFT, provides a network that enables financial institutions across the globe to send and receive information about financial transactions in a secure, standardized, and reliable environment.

Today, SWIFT links more than nine thousand financial institutions in more than two hundred countries, which exchange an average of fifteen million messages per day.

NetRiot had been syphoning off millions from the SWIFT accounts of its less technically astute members. Easy pickings were the accounts of Bangladesh, Thailand, and many of the African countries. And it was for that reason that NetRiot was hired by a company out of North Korea with the nondescript name of Imperial Imports LLC.

Pavo reminded his team leader, “Antonija, make sure you keep the lifts under US\$10,000 so as not to raise any red flags.”

Antonija, an expert in hacking bank systems, understood Pavo’s order and nodded. By keeping the amount they stole in each transaction small, the Brasina team had accumulated almost \$100 million in pilfered funds. That, plus the fees they charged their clients, including Imperial Imports LLC, a front for the North Korean government, made them all wealthy. Of course, they did not consider themselves criminals but rather cyber–freedom fighters.

Other cyberterrorist groups were focusing on stealing and leaking confidential information. This included state secrets, as in the case of Edward Snowden, but increasingly included, as was witnessed in the 2016 US election, the hacking of personal information such as emails, text messages, and photos. These were the areas that had propelled WikiLeaks to its current vilified position of power, influence, and fear around the world.

Beyond the theft of personal data, the other risk from cyberterrorism was the disruption of society and the spread of anarchy. Cyberattacks on airlines, air traffic control systems, hospitals, the electric grid, and banking systems all represented high-profile targets for the various hacking groups.

The US intelligence agencies—the NSA, CIA, and FBI—all have cyberoperations, as do the intelligence organizations of every first-line country today. The US military apparatus provides both defensive and offensive cyber capabilities. The United States Cyber Command, known as USCYBERCOM, located in Fort Meade, Maryland, is the centralized command of cyberoperations. USCYBERCOM is the coordination point for elements of the US Army Cyber Command, the US Navy’s Fleet Cyber Command/Tenth Fleet, the US Air Force’s Twenty-Fourth Air Force – Air Forces Cyber and the Marine Forces Cyberspace Command.

In addition to these formidable assets, governments would often employ cyber attack groups like NetRiot and Guccifer with the benefit of removing themselves from the groups’ predatory activities.

To defend against those threats, governments, businesses, and powerful people were investing millions of dollars to deploy electronic messaging systems (text and email) that were hackproof. But the notion of a hackproof system was a fallacy. To that end,

some people, most notably Saudi sheiks and Russian oligarchs, had stopped using electronic communications altogether, electing to have proxies do their communicating for them.

It was for these reasons that cyberterrorism had joined radical Islamic terrorism and North Korea as one of the top three threats facing the security and safety of the United States. Pavo Ludovic and his team at NetRiot were considered one of the best hacking groups, and as a result, their services were in high demand.

Kristin McMahon, deputy director of the NSA, was a rising star whose reputation had only grown after she'd been involved in the analysis that contributed to the rescue of the Russell children when they were kidnapped on Nantucket.

In addition to a promising career at the NSA, McMahon was in the final stages of planning her April 28 wedding to US Navy pilot Commander Mike “Grumpy” Bartlett. Commander Bartlett was the newly promoted commanding officer of VX-23, the Salty Dogs, based in Patuxent River, Maryland. VX-23 was the Navy's premier Test and Evaluation squadron. In addition, Bartlett had worked closely with President Russell on the plan to exact justice from the man responsible for last year's attack on the president's family—the late Sheik Abdul Er Rahman of Saudi Arabia.

As a couple, it was nice for McMahon and Bartlett to, on occasion, escape the sphere of the Washington intelligence and military worlds. Tonight found McMahon and Bartlett on their way to dinner with friends at a Georgetown bistro.

As Bartlett navigated his 1985 Porsche 911 through the neighborhood streets of Georgetown, McMahon said, “I'm looking forward to seeing Pam and Dave.”

Bartlett replied, “Me too. It’ll be nice to have a dinner where we aren’t talking shop with your spy friends.”

McMahon, who was now expert in picking up on Bartlett’s sarcasm, responded, “Or spending a night with your fighter pilot buddies and their supersized egos.”

“Who are you referring to? Do you mean the best of the best?” came Bartlett’s reply.

“Exactly,” responded McMahon with a smile. She actually liked Bartlett’s aviator friends, even if the discussions always included a heavy dose of squadron reminiscing, with some of it bordering on a cross between a frat party and a ready-room technical briefing.

But tonight’s dinner with David and Pam Weaver would include none of that. David was a European history professor at Georgetown and Pam was a pharmaceutical scientist expert in transdermal transfer systems.

It made for an interesting foursome. But tonight, a lot of the conversation would be about the upcoming McMahon-Bartlett nuptials.

Once seated, Kristin and Pam immediately started talking about the wedding while Mike and David talked sports and cars. David Weaver was a transplanted New Yorker, so of course he followed the New York teams, but it being early April, it was too soon for baseball. With that in mind, the topic moved to cars, given that the commander was restoring a 1967 Mustang with plans to build a re-creation of the car from the movie *Bullitt*.

David said to Mike, “My advice, get the project done quickly, because once you and Kristin are married and start a family, time for things like restoring a car will evaporate.” David spoke from firsthand knowledge. He and Pam had a two-and-a-half-year-old son and were working on their second child.

Bartlett nodded as he responded, “I hear you. My goal is to get the car completed this year. Plus, my career rotation calls for an at-sea assignment next year.”

David’s eyes rolled as he said, “Well, you better make the honeymoon and the next few months count, then.”

Bartlett nodded and said, “Kristin tells me you’re headed to Europe?”

“I am. I’m going to Munich for a conference on the history of the Austrian and Ottoman Empires and their impact on today’s Balkan ethnic strains.”

Bartlett looked quizzical. Weaver continued, “The history of the Balkans and their religious conflict goes back over a thousand years and to a large extent continues today. We will be discussing some of the historic and even anthropologic reasons for the discord. But really it all boils down to economics and religion. The Turks and the Germans have fundamentally different approaches to life, business, and religion. On one hand, you have the people of Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, who prize order and discipline in their societies and have a strong separation of church and state. Then you have the Turks, who are a very emotional people and make religion and family the center of every aspect of their lives. Those two cultures collide in the geographic area of the Balkans. It’s a combustible mix—then and now. The only real solution is separation.”

Bartlett asked, “Can’t all conflicts be reduced to that—differences in religion and economics?”

“Perhaps, at a high level, but what’s interesting—or disturbing—about the Serbian-Croat conflict is how it has resisted evolving. At Georgetown, one of my colleagues, a biologist, likes to say that a virus must mutate in order to survive. However, here, the lack of

mutation hasn't threatened their survival. They're locked in a two-thousand-year cycle, they've made very little progress, they haven't evolved, yet it hasn't burned itself out yet either."

Bartlett was puzzled and asked, "So if the society hasn't mutated, why has it continued to survive?"

"Well, that isn't the substance of my paper, but to answer your question—everything needs to mutate in order to survive. Every society, every religion, even relationships. Mutation and adaptation are key to longevity.

"In order for an ethnic conflict to mutate to a new state, it requires a period of two to three generations, or about eighty years, in order to break the current cycle. That's the mutation. Without mutating, peace or progress cannot occur. Look at Northern Ireland, which is now completing the second generation of peace. One more generation without violence and Northern Ireland will have broken their cycle. Ditto with civil rights in the US, apartheid in South Africa, and the India-Pakistan conflict. But today's hot spots of Serbia and the Middle East—none have had even one generation of peace to start the cycle. At least not yet."

"So what's the meeting in Munich about? To recommend the start of an eighty-year stretch of peace in Croatia and Serbia to break the cycle? Certainly it's not that easy," said Bartlett.

"Well, that would be an abbreviated way to describe it, but, yes, we are suggesting a formula for change to begin the mutation cycle," said Weaver. "As you know, historians study the past as a way to predict the future," he added.

David paused, saw he was dominating the conversation, and said, "But enough of solving the world's problems—how's the wedding planning going?"

Bartlett responded by rolling his eyes, but it was a good cue for them to join the other conversation that was under way between the two women.

Kristin said, “It’s getting hectic as the date approaches, especially with the president and first lady attending—it just adds to the complexity.”

Pam added, “I think it’s so romantic to be having your wedding at Annapolis, and it’s got to be incredibly exciting that the president and first lady are attending.”

“It is amazing, but with their attendance we run the risk of losing some control over the wedding,” said McMahon.

Bartlett added, “If you want I’ll call Andrew Russell and tell him we’re eloping to Vegas.”

Kristin deadpanned, “I’m sure our parents would be thrilled with that suggestion.”

Bartlett added, “Other than the metal detectors and the Secret Service snipers, it’ll be your run-of-the-mill wedding.”

Not missing a beat, Kristin fired back, “It’s not the Secret Service or snipers I worry about. It’s your squadron buddies. I don’t want the reception to turn into a toga party.”

Bartlett replied in a more reflective tone, “Ten years ago that would have been a valid concern, but in the ‘new Navy’ that sort of behavior isn’t tolerated. I mean it, I’ve seen COs and captains get relieved for behavior that ten years ago wouldn’t have even raised an eyebrow. It’s all for the best, but on occasion there’s a career officer who falls victim unfairly to the new policy.”

Bartlett realized he had entered lecture mode. He quickly regrouped and added, “But besides that, I’m afraid Father Time is catching up with the members of my class from Annapolis and even with the members of my first squadron VFA-143.”

“Hmm,” replied McMahon with a smile. “VFA-143, remind me again, what’s that squadron’s name?”

Bartlett quickly responded with the squadron’s Latin motto, “Sans Reproache, baby—what’s wrong with that?” He added the “baby” to get a smile out of Kristin, which it did, but also because in the fighter community you always ended a squadron motto with the term “baby.”

Pam now joined in, “‘Baby,’ maybe the ‘new Navy’ needs some more work?”

But Bartlett already knew what was coming. “The Pukin Dogs,” stated McMahon flatly, looking at Pam.

Pam blinked. “The what?”

“That’s right,” said McMahon, “the name of VFA-143 is the Pukin Dogs. And remember to leave off the *g*—that’s very important.”

Pam laughed and said, “I’m sure that will go over great with the first lady.”

“Ha,” quickly responded Bartlett, “you forget, Andrew Russell also flew with VFA-143. You’ll be fighting a losing battle if you try to enlist the support of POTUS.”

Glancing at Pam and David, McMahon said, “And you wonder why I worry about the reception?”

Bartlett added, “Well, honey, we’ll be mixing the Pukin Dogs with the Salty Dogs,” referring to Bartlett’s current billet as CO of the Test and Evaluation squadron based out of the Naval Air Station Pax River, where Bartlett and VX-23 were certifying the new F-35C Lightning II fighter jet for fleet duty.

“That’s too many ‘dogs’ for any wedding, if you ask me. Just make sure they behave themselves,” McMahon said with a laugh.

Pam injected, “Well, we’re looking forward to the wedding. And seeing all those pilots in their uniforms—yay.”

CHAPTER TWO

Lauren La Rue, who a year ago had been on the CIA's most wanted list, was now working for the US.

La Rue had worked last year with Sheik Abdul Er Rahman, the mastermind behind the Al Qaeda-funded mission to kidnap President Andrew Russell's family as they vacationed on Nantucket. La Rue, as the sheik's financial manager, had unknowingly arranged the financing for the mission.

However, La Rue had been captured as part of defeating the operation.

Subsequently, La Rue cut a deal with the Justice Department by agreeing to work for the CIA to help penetrate networks similar to the sheik's. And that is how Lauren La Rue found herself on this cold April morning headed to the CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia.

Prior to La Rue's arrival, a meeting was under way with the director of the CIA, Lisa Collins, the deputy director of the NSA, Kristin McMahon, and key members of their staffs.

"In order for us to advance Operation Deadeye, we need to make contact with NetRiot in Croatia. Our intelligence tells us that NetRiot can provide us with a Chinese missile operating system hack, which is critical to the overall success of Deadeye," said Collins.

"And our best avenue into NetRiot is La Rue," added McMahon.

“Can we trust her at this point? She’s only been with us for five months now,” remarked Collins.

A staff member spoke up. “Zoran Kordic is the key. He knows La Rue and trusts her from their past dealings with the sheik. We need La Rue to get us access to NetRiot through Kordic. Given the high priority of Deadeye, I don’t see we have a choice.”

Everyone in the room knew that last statement was one hundred percent correct, but still concerns were great.

“I don’t disagree, but we know the sheik’s people are still after La Rue. I give her only a fifty-fifty chance of coming back alive,” said McMahon.

McMahon was referring to the bounty on La Rue’s head. The bounty was not to kill La Rue but rather to capture her. Killing La Rue would be too kind in the eyes of the sheik’s family and associates. No, they wanted her captured so she could be tortured and made an example for all to see.

“It’s imperative that we make contact with NetRiot, and we need to do it at once to maintain our timeline. In order to protect La Rue, we’ll send one of our best agents with her. Plus, we’ll have a ready evacuation plan in place in case things fall apart,” Collins said.

Reading the reluctance in the room, she added, “Look, we’ll send her over there and try to get her back here ASAP. Frankly, it’s a risk that we must take.”

Thirty minutes later, Lauren La Rue joined Director Lisa Collins and Deputy Director Kristin McMahon in the fifth-floor conference room. It was noteworthy that the attendees of this meeting, where the country’s most secret covert operations were being discussed, were all women. It was a remarkable image and represented the progress that had occurred in the intelligence community and American society overall—with more still needed.

Collins began, “As you were briefed, Lauren, we believe the North Koreans have obtained some sophisticated Chinese anti-ship ballistic missile technology. We don’t think it came directly from the Chinese. Our intelligence indicates it was obtained from Saudi Arabia, to whom the Chinese sold their technology last year. Four days ago, the North Koreans fired one of these missiles, unarmed, at the *John C. Stennis* Carrier Group, operating in the East China Sea.”

La Rue listened attentively despite being familiar with the information from having read the briefing paper that was distributed prior to the meeting.

Collins continued with intel that was not in the briefing paper, “We have identified a cyberterrorist group that goes by the name NetRiot operating in Dubrovnik that we believe helped the North Koreans finance the purchase of the Chinese missile technology.”

La Rue asked, “Have we been able to identify the flow of funds?”

Collins replied, “Yes, but as you can imagine it’s a very complex flow. Most of the funds, we believe, originated in the Bangladesh SWIFT hack.”

Both McMahan and La Rue nodded, knowing that hacked funds were often used to fund arms purchases and, indirectly, terrorist activity.

McMahan spoke: “The NSA has been surveilling groups within KSA, Croatia, and North Korea. What we don’t know is if the government of Saudi Arabia knew of the missile sale or if it was just a black-market transaction.”

La Rue grimaced. “You’re not thinking of sending me to KSA, are you?”

Collins replied, “No, Lauren, we don’t want you to go to KSA. But we do want you to go to Croatia and meet with Zoran Kordic. I believe you know him. Kordic can introduce you to NetRiot and their

leader, Pavo Ludovic.” As Collins spoke, photos of Kordic and Ludovic came up on the large flat-screen in the windowless conference room.

“Tell us about your relationship with Kordic,” requested McMahon.

“Relationship?” said La Rue. “There is no relationship. I know Zoran from prior dealings I had with him for Sheik Rahman. I believe he trusts me. We transacted hundreds of millions of dollars of business while I was in Dubai.”

“Good,” replied Collins. “Lauren, we need to leverage your experience with Kordic and convince him to introduce you to Ludovic. Ludovic is doing business with a North Korean front called Imperial Imports LLC. We want to learn everything we can about them and who funded the purchase of the Chinese missile technology.”

La Rue responded, “That’s all fine, but I’m not a field operative. Plus, you know there’s a price on my head from the sheik’s family.”

“We completely understand, Lauren,” said Collins, “but this falls in your area of expertise—international banking. Plus, you’re the only one who knows Kordic. We’ll put a thorough security plan in place for you. Plus we’ll send one of our best field agents with you.”

“And when were you thinking I would go?”

“Tomorrow. The plan has you flying Dulles to Frankfurt and then to Montenegro, where you’ll make contact with Kordic. From there you’ll go by car to Croatia.”

“I see. I’d like to meet the field agent you’re thinking of sending with me first before I commit,” requested La Rue.

“We can make that happen. His name is Chris Dunbar. He is an ex-Navy SEAL who joined the Agency five years ago. He’s one of our best field operatives,” Collins stated as she closed her

folder, the indication to McMahon and La Rue that the meeting was over.

It was cold, rainy, and gray in P'yŏngyang, North Korea, as was typical this time of year. The black limousine carrying General Chul Goh stopped at the entrance to the General Committee building. A soldier quickly opened the door to his car and escorted the general in silence to the office of the president of North Korea. There President Paek was sitting with his two trusted advisers. To his left was the head of North Korea's secret police, the State Security Department (SSD), and to his right the head of North Korea's version of the CIA.

General Chul Goh, general of the Missile Command Services of North Korea, saluted the president, who nodded and demanded, "General, what's the operational status of the DF-21D missiles?"

"Mr. President, we have two missiles remaining after our test. Our teams are preparing to arm one with a fifty-kiloton warhead. We believe we will have it ready for service within two weeks."

Paek nodded and leaned over to have a private conversation with the head of the North Korean spy agency.

Looking back at Goh, he said, "General, you are to continue your work to make both missiles operational—both the unarmed missile as well as the missile with the warhead. I want to be kept apprised of the progress on both. I want the launch of our next missile test to coincide with our Day of the Sun celebration on the fifteenth; Secretary Lui will provide you with the targeting coordinates."

General Goh spoke carefully. "Mr. President, the Americans are on heightened alert as a result of our last missile test. We know they are moving additional assets into the area. Should we fire

another DF-21D at their carrier group we must expect some form of retaliation.”

The president, who did not tolerate opinions and commentary, shot back, “General Goh, your job is to prepare the missiles and follow orders. That is all. Get the missiles operational and report back. Dismissed.”

With that the general saluted and quickly exited the room. After Goh departed, the head of North Korean intelligence asked Paek, “Can we count on Goh when the time comes to carry out his mission? I have my doubts.”

President Paek sat in silence for a minute before replying. “I do not share your concerns about Goh. He has proven himself to be reliable and trustworthy, but put a backup plan in place just in case.”

That was the North Korean way—no matter what position one attained in the military, society, or government, no one was bigger than the institution itself and backup plans were common.

“We have another matter to discuss,” said Paek, turning to his heads of security and intelligence. “We have received an offer from the CEO of Apple. They are bringing their newly outfitted ship of technology for a visit to the South and he offered to also visit us in the North,” said Paek.

“The Apple ship visiting us?” asked his intelligence chief. “Sir, it is a spy mission.”

“Possibly,” said Paek. “They have offered to participate in the Day of the Sun festivities. It could be a very good thing to show our people how we are willing to interact with outside influences such as Apple. Plus, I think the visit would very much annoy the American government; at least, that is what the Apple CEO indicated. But more importantly, it would give us another American bargaining

chip. The Americans will not attack us if we have their cruise ship in our harbor. It will give us tremendous leverage when we fire our next DF-21D. I am going to agree to let them visit us.”

As General Goh rode back to his base in Namp’o, about twenty-five miles south of P’yŏngyang, the thought of firing another missile—armed or unarmed—at the US carrier group weighed heavily on him. For the first time in his career he disagreed with the direction the president was pursuing. Yes, he had been a strong supporter of North Korea developing a nuclear arsenal. He had worked countless hours implementing their Hwasong-14 ICBM capability. He had always believed it to be a deterrent and safeguard against an attack from the South. But now Paek’s aggression against the US and his escalation of firing at the US carrier group was taking the North down an increasingly confrontational path, one that Goh did not think would end well for his country.

The next day at 3:30 p.m., a black suburban pulled up to Lauren La Rue’s Georgetown town house. Even though she now worked on a CIA salary, she had made millions in her previous assignment as the financial manager for Sheik Abdul Er Rahman. Part of her negotiation with the Justice Department was to keep the wealth she had accumulated working for the sheik. An agreement was reached that La Rue would donate \$18 million to the dependents of those who died in the Attack on Nantucket and she could keep the rest.

The black suburban drove La Rue to Dulles International Airport, where she avoided all security using her CIA credentials, then boarded United Airlines Flight 989 to Frankfurt. Once on board the 777 airliner, she settled into seat 12H in business class. A few minutes later a man in his late twenties sat next to her. He

was tall, at six foot three, with very short dark hair and chiseled features. Dressed all in black, he also sported a five-day beard. As he sat he turned to La Rue and nodded. They had met the day before at CIA headquarters.

She nodded and said, “Good afternoon, Chris.”

“Lauren,” the agent acknowledged with a slight nod. Their cover was as a sales team on their way to a meeting with the T-Mobile wireless carrier in Montenegro. Chris Dunbar would be the technical support and La Rue the salesperson.

As they prepared for takeoff on the eight-hour evening flight to Frankfurt, Chris Dunbar stood and took out his headphones and a hooded sweatshirt from his carry-on tote, surveying the passengers around him.

As the flight attendant came down the aisle, Dunbar said, “I’ll be back in a minute.”

He made his way to the restroom after walking through the first-class cabin. He then stopped in the galley to ask about the time of departure, allowing him the opportunity to size up the flight attendants.

La Rue watched Dunbar as he made his way back to his seat. As he reached his seat he put on his sweatshirt, pulling the hood over his head. La Rue thought it would be very hard to identify him with the hood pulled down and his headphones on. But an eye skilled in the art could see he was ex-military and that he knew how to handle himself.

Commander Mike Bartlett was sitting in his office at Pax River, Maryland, going over a flight plan for the afternoon’s flight, when his yeoman came hurriedly into his office. “Sir, I have a call for you from the White House—on line one.”

“Commander Bartlett,” was all he said as he picked up the line.

“Commander, this is Alice Ahern, the president’s personal secretary. The president would like to meet with you tomorrow at 10 a.m., if that’s convenient.”

The commander chuckled to himself. He knew when the commander in chief wanted to meet with you, you became immediately available whether it was “convenient” or not.

“Yes, of course, Ms. Ahern.”

“Thank you, Commander. I will notify security to have a pass ready for you. Please arrive thirty minutes early to clear security. Good day.” With that she hung up.

That left Commander Bartlett to sit in his office wondering what POTUS wanted to discuss with him. But any further thought about that would have to wait. Bartlett was scheduled for a hop in the F-35C Lightning II, which meant he had a briefing session to attend. After that he would suit up, and preflight his F-35C for the flight.

Bartlett was developing a fondness for the F-35C Lightning II—the C indicating it was the carrier version of the F-35. Which wasn’t a surprise—what fighter pilot wouldn’t want to fly the latest, newest fighter? The things he could do with the Lightning he could only dream of doing in the F/A-18 Hornet. And Bartlett knew how to fly the Hornet very well.

As Bartlett approached the flight line his plane captain saluted.

Bartlett, returning the salute, said, “LaTroy, is everything checked out?”

“Yes, sir, you’re good to go. She looks fine, doesn’t she, Commander?”

Walking around the jet checking the various control surfaces, Bartlett replied, “She does look good. And she flies even better than she looks.”

After climbing into the cockpit of his \$120 million fighter, he put on his \$400,000 Gen III Helmet Mounted Display System or HMD, plugging the umbilical into the fighter's console so the avionics could sync with the heads-up display of his helmet. The HMD was a breakthrough in technology and was fitted to each pilot by a laser scan of the pilot's head which was used to create a 3-D custom helmet liner. Bartlett was fully aware of the money that was needed to create the fighter in which he was sitting. Building, flying, and maintaining jet fighters was an expensive proposition, and one of the main reasons why so many in Congress were keen to fund the X-47B unmanned combat air vehicle program—a fancy name for unmanned Navy drones.

But that was all in the future. Today, Commander Mike “Grumpy” Bartlett would be flying the most advanced fighter in the world, along with his squadron mates of VX-23, out over the Chesapeake Bay on their way to open air over the Atlantic.

Bartlett called the tower for clearance for takeoff: “Lightning 73, ready to depart runway 6.”

Five hours later, after a successful mission, Mike Bartlett turned his Porsche into the driveway of the home he shared with his fiancée in Potomac, Maryland. It was just after 6 p.m. as the garage door opened. Bartlett noticed the empty spot on Kristin's side of the garage and figured he had time to get in a run before she got home. After changing and stretching he started down their street, heading toward the track at the Bullis School, not far from their home. Bartlett liked running on quarter-mile tracks so he could check his times. Pilots were competitive in almost every aspect of their lives.

Back at home, with his run over, he was getting out of the shower when he heard the beep of their alarm system, which told him Kristin was home.

As he entered the family room he saw McMahon looking over the mail.

“Hi, Kris, how was your day?”

“Fine, how was yours?” She gave him a quick kiss.

“Good, I had an eval hop with the squadron. The F-35 continues to check out. It’s one sweet bird. Also, I got a call from the White House.”

That got her attention.

“The White House? So how’s the president?”

“Not sure, but he wants to meet with me tomorrow morning.”

“Maybe he wants to talk to you about your bachelor party,” said McMahon with a straight face.

“No doubt.” Bartlett chuckled.

McMahon laughed in return and said, “I’m going to change.”

Bartlett settled onto their sectional couch, putting his legs up on the ottoman as he reached for the TV remote control.

A few minutes later Kristin was back downstairs, now wearing a pair of capris and one of Bartlett’s too-large Navy T-shirts. She grabbed a Vitaminwater from the fridge and plopped down on the couch next to Bartlett, where she immediately reached for the remote and changed the channel to CNN.

“Hey, McFly, I was watching that,” chided Bartlett. He always called her McFly instead of McMahon anytime she did something that annoyed him, referencing the old *Back to the Future* movie.

“We have a lot of TVs in this house. I want to watch Anderson Cooper.”

“Anderson Cooper, are you kidding me?” repeated Bartlett.

“Yes.” Now it was McMahon’s turn to goad Bartlett. “He’s sexy.”

“Anderson Cooper?”

With that Bartlett leaned over and grabbed McMahon as she squirmed, trying to get away. “Yes, yes, yes, he’s sexy, he is.”

“You say you’re attracted to Anderson Cooper with this specimen of masculinity sitting right next to you?” Bartlett demanded as he continued to tickle McMahon.

Through the laughter all McMahon could get out was, “Yes, yes, yes.”

As the laughter subsided they fell into a long kiss.

McMahon eventually pulled back and said, “Fly-boy, are you interested in dinner?”

She knew how to get to Bartlett.

He leaned back onto the couch, stretching, and said, “How about Chinese?”

That worked for McMahon. After all, she was deputy director of the NSA and had put in a long day. She got up, grabbed the phone, and hit the speed dial to the local Chinese take-out place they liked.

Forty-five minutes later they were seated at the table eating take-out when McMahon brought up the White House meeting. “So, what do you think the president wants to talk about?”

“I don’t have a clue. You know how he likes to keep abreast with what’s going on in naval aviation. Maybe he wants to ask me about how the F-35 is checking out.”

McMahon frowned. “The leader of the free world? He could do that with a phone call or just ask for a briefing paper.”

She was right and had more experience than Bartlett on how Washington worked.

“I bet he wants to talk to you about a position in his administration,” stated McMahon.

Bartlett didn't respond. He knew he wasn't ready to leave the Navy yet. Besides, he was confident he would be soon be selected for promotion to captain. He was on a fast track career-wise, with a goal to command an aircraft carrier. But with his marriage in four weeks and now at thirty-five, Bartlett was ready to start thinking about the next phase of his life, including a family.

Bartlett knew firsthand how tough sea deployments were and the enormous strain and sacrifice they put on Navy families.

He just replied, "Well, we'll know soon enough. My meeting's tomorrow at ten."

At 9:30 a.m. sharp, Commander Mike Bartlett approached the White House visitor check-in security office. He handed his military ID to the White House security officer, who verified that Bartlett was on the access list.

The security officer handed back the ID, saying, "Sir, please step through the metal detector." Once he was through the detector, another security officer then checked Bartlett with a wand. After completing the security check, Bartlett was approached by a young assistant, who was clearly expecting his arrival. She began, "Good morning, Commander. Please come with me."

Bartlett nodded, not used to not being saluted, and followed the aide through the halls of the White House, eventually arriving at the West Wing. There she transferred him to the waiting area outside the office of Ms. Alice Ahern, the personal secretary of the president of the United States.

The aide let Ahern know the commander had arrived. The time was 9:45 a.m. Bartlett sat in the antechamber wearing his service dress blue uniform with three gold stripes on his cuffs, a pair of gold wings on his left breast, and his service ribbons and Command

Ashore pin – a trident and a star. He held his hat with its gold braid on its visor on his lap with both hands as he observed the activity around him. This was his first visit to the Oval Office, and it didn't matter who you were, a visit to the Oval Office was always an impressive and somewhat intimidating experience.

Commander Bartlett, used to flying high-performance jets and dealing with stressful situations, like all pilots, had developed certain mental exercises to maintain his composure and concentration. As Bartlett sat waiting, he monitored his breathing and worked to slow his heart rate.

At exactly 9:58 a.m. the aide returned and brought the commander to Alice Ahern's office.

“Good morning, Commander Bartlett. I am Alice Ahern.”

The commander held his hand out to shake hers.

“The president will be with you in a minute. Is this your first visit to the White House?” she asked.

“Yes, ma'am,” replied Bartlett.

On Ahern's computer screen a light came on, indicating that the president was now ready for his visitor. Ahern first went into the Oval Office to confirm that the president was ready. This was standard protocol for the White House—only Ahern, the president's chief of staff, Spencer Sterling, his personal aide, and his wife, Kennedy, had “walk-in” privileges to the Oval.

Coming out of the Oval Office, Ms. Ahern stated, “Commander, the president will see you.”

With that the commander placed his hat under his left arm and entered the office razor straight. Once inside he stepped toward the desk, came to attention, and saluted.

The president looked up from his desk and returned the salute, saying, “Commander, how have you been?” He closed a folder and

came around his desk to extend his hand to Bartlett. “Mike, please take a seat,” he said as he waved his hand for Bartlett to join him on the couch, to his left.

The president, always a gracious host, asked, “How’s Kristin and how are the plans for the wedding progressing?”

“She’s fine, Mr. President. Frankly, Kristin is taking care of most of the details.”

“That’s the right move,” replied the president with a smile. “Mrs. Russell and I are looking forward to it. It’s been a while since we attended a wedding, no less a Navy wedding.”

“Thank you, sir,” was all Bartlett could think to say.

Bartlett had spent many hours with the president, getting him requalified on the Super Hornet only six months earlier, after which he and the president flew on the mission that shot down Sheik Abdul Er Rahman’s private jet. But that had all occurred in flight suits, briefing rooms, and cockpits. Now meeting with the president in the Oval Office, he felt the full weight and magnitude of it all.

Just then Spencer Sterling entered the office and sat down on the couch to the president’s right.

“Sterls, this is Commander Mike Bartlett. I believe you remember him from Operation Warlord,” the president said, using the code name for the mission where the president shot down the sheik’s private jet.

Sterling replied, “Indeed I do, Mr. President. Commander, two weeks ago the North Koreans launched a Dong-Feng 21D at the *Stennis* Carrier Group operating in the East China Sea. It didn’t have a warhead, but as you can imagine it got our attention.”

“The North Koreans launched a Chinese missile? How’s that?” asked Bartlett.

“We believe North Korea got the DF-21D from Saudi Arabia. Last year China sold a few DF-21Ds to the Saudis. We’ve been after them to give us one so we can see how it works, but as of yet the Saudis aren’t cooperating. We believe the Saudis sold a few DF-21Ds to North Korea.”

Spencer continued. “Commander, we’re concerned about this link between the Saudis and the North Koreans. So are the Russians and the Chinese. The fact that North Korea obtained missile technology from the Saudis and then fired it at the *Stennis* is of grave concern.

“Commander, we have a new weapons technology code-named Torchlight. Let me emphasize this is *top secret* information.”

Bartlett nodded that he understood.

“Torchlight is an ultra-high-powered laser weapon system intended to shoot down ICBMs as well as ASBMs like the Dong-Feng. We’re in the process of deploying Torchlight here in the US, South Korea, Guam, and Hawaii, but it won’t be operational until late next year. We also have installed a version on board the USS *Florida*, which is ready for fleet testing. The feedback we received so far is all very positive,” concluded Spencer.

The president looked at Bartlett. “Which brings us to the point of our meeting. Commander, I’d like you to assess the Torchlight installation on the *Florida* and report back to me in terms of its readiness and effectiveness. I want you to work with Rear Admiral Tom Fraser, in command of the *Stennis* Strike Group. Commander, we have intelligence that indicates that North Korea will fire another DF-21D at the *Stennis* in as little as two weeks. If they do I want to use Torchlight to shoot it down.”

Spencer added, “Commander, you’ll head out to the *Stennis* first and then to the *Florida*. Immediately following this meeting

you will get an in-depth technical briefing on Torchlight. It will be conducted by the program director, Jim Hartel, who will accompany you into theater.”

“Commander Bartlett, Tom Fraser flew with me with VFA-32 off the *Truman* as a nugget. Flatbush knows you’re coming and will cooperate with you fully,” said the president, using the rear admiral’s call sign. The president then stood, signaling the end of the meeting.

”Commander, if Torchlight isn’t ready, we’ll need to move our ships out of the area in a hell of a hurry,” said the president dryly. “And that’s something I don’t want to do. I don’t want to run from the North Koreans.”

Bartlett stood as well at this point and said, “Understood, Mr. President. Your confidence in me means a lot. I won’t let you down, sir.”

“You never have, Mike. Give my best to Kristin and I hope she won’t be too upset with you traveling so soon before the wedding.”

“I’m sure she’ll understand, Mr. President.”

The president just shook his head.

“Miss Ahern will have the information about your next meeting,” said Sterling.

Bartlett saluted and exited the Oval Office. As he paused at Ms. Ahern’s desk, he let out a big exhale. She handed Captain Bartlett a package marked “TOP SECRET,” which contained the background information on Torchlight and the logistics about his next meeting with the program director, Jim Hartel. Bartlett reflected on what he had just heard and what he said to the president about Kristin understanding his having to fly to South Korea tomorrow. This was a conversation he was not looking forward to having.

“Of course,” replied Holloway.

back,” challenged La Rue.







The captain responded, "Secure Torchlight. Officer of the Deck, dive



















Et Al.

