

PROLOGUE

“Senators,” said Fawcett as he strode across the polished floor in his monogrammed Stubbs & Wooton opera slippers, “I’m so very pleased you could make it.”

The study was lined from floor to ceiling with beautiful leather bound books; most of them first editions. Velvet draperies were drawn tight against the windows, obscuring from view the frigid waters of Southern Wisconsin’s famed Lake Geneva. The industrialist’s eagerly awaited guests sat in two leather club chairs by the fire.

Senator Russell Rolander was the first to stand. “Donald, good to see you.” The Senator stuck out his beefy paw and pumped Fawcett’s hand. Rolander and Fawcett had been roommates together at the University of Illinois. The Senator had been a college football star and continued his notoriety through many years with the Chicago Bears before going into Illinois politics. Long known as one of Washington D.C.’s biggest power brokers, Rolander was a ranking member of the U.S. Senate, held a coveted position on the Appropriations Committee, and owned a weekend home down the road from Fawcett’s.

Slower to rise was New York Senator, David Snyder. Snyder shook Fawcett’s hand only after it had been offered. Described as a sneaky, little son-of-a-bitch by his adversaries, Snyder had scaled the rocky heights of the American political landscape by adhering to a simple mantra: *do unto others before they do unto you*. He was a master of dirty tricks, and there were few in Washington who had dared cross Snyder’s path. Those that had, hadn’t survived long politically. Snyder, a slight man of wiry build and soft features, was the mirror opposite of the large, rugged, blond-haired Rolander. However, what Senator David Snyder lacked in physical stature, he more than made up in brain power. That intelligence, coupled with a genius for strategy, had landed him an all but permanent spot on the Senate Intelligence Committee. There wasn’t a covert operation conducted in the last 7 years that didn’t somehow or other have Snyder’s fingerprints on it.

Fawcett, always the showman, picked up a remote from the inlaid Egyptian box upon his desk and pointed it at a wall of books to the right of the fireplace. The false wall slid back to reveal the entryway to a smaller room, about fifteen by fifteen feet. The white walls were decorated with rococo trim and were lined with more leather bound books. The entire space was permeated with the smell of honey. The wooden floor was covered by a large oriental rug. A small fireplace, trimmed in marble, stood in the southwest corner. It utilized the same chimney system as the fireplace in the large study, which helped keep this room a secret to outsiders. Several gilded mirrors hung upon the walls and reflected the room’s centerpiece, an enormous antique roll top desk. A plush couch, with handsomely carved legs, sat opposite the desk. Fawcett waved his guests into the adjoining room. Once all three were together, he tapped a button on his remote and the door slid shut behind them. With only minimal pressure from Fawcett’s fingertips, a set of faux book spines sprung forward from one of

the bookshelves, revealing a set of crystal decanters.

“Brandy anyone?” said Fawcett as he removed a large snifter and a decanter filled with the amber colored liquor.

“I’ll take one,” replied Rolander.

“Scotch rocks, if you’ve got it,” said Snyder.

As Fawcett began pouring the drinks, he motioned for the men to take a seat on the couch. Rolander, very much at ease with himself, plopped right down onto the antique sofa. Snyder lingered, wandering around the small room for a few seconds pretending to admire the decor. The high-tech surveillance sweeper, disguised as a beeper on his hip, vibrated uncontrollably as he and Rolander were led down the long hallways of Fawcett’s palatial home towards the study. An adept student of security and surveillance systems, Snyder had noticed many of Fawcett’s obvious safety measures and had guessed at the ones he couldn’t see. No doubt Fawcett had the best money could buy. An extremely cautious man, Fawcett never left anything to chance. Snyder knew that much about him and that was one of the reasons he’d agreed to become this deeply involved.

The sweeper hadn’t vibrated at all since he had entered the secret room and for the moment, Snyder was satisfied their conversation wasn’t being monitored. He took his three fingers of Scotch from Fawcett and sat down on the sofa next to Rolander.

“You know Donald, we should have all of our meetings in this room,” said Rolander. “I like it. In fact, this has got to be one of my favorite rooms in the whole house.”

“What’s that smell?” broke in Snyder. He vaguely recognized the scent, but couldn’t exactly place it, nor why it was arousing him. “It’s strangely familiar. Smells like some kind of powder.”

“It’s honey,” said Fawcett. “Technically, it’s beeswax. The wooden floors in here are polished with it.”

The minute Fawcett said the word honey, Snyder knew why the smell was so familiar and so arousing.

Mitchell Conti, or Mitch as everyone was fond of calling him, had joined Senator Snyder’s staff two summers ago. He was a strikingly handsome twenty-three year old who quickly became very popular on the hill. He cut a wide swath, dating numerous female aides and pages. To any outside eyes, Mitch Conti was into women only, but David Snyder knew better and so did Mitch. There had been constant electricity between David and Mitch from the moment they met and one weekend when Mitch brought papers over to the Senator’s townhouse for his signature, long looks over drinks led them straight to the bedroom. The affair lasted for many months.

Mitch had been fond of a product he found at an adult novelty store known as *Kama Sutra Honey Dust*. The dust was really a fine powder that smelled and tasted like honey. Mitch would brush it all over Snyder’s body with a small feather duster and then lick it off. Not only had David liked it, but so did the many women who shared his bed between visits from Mitch.

The half empty canister of honey dust under the sink was Snyder's only living reminder of his twenty-three year old lover. Several months into their time together, Snyder discovered that Mitch had not only been seeing another man on the side, but also had plans to blackmail *him*, David Snyder, one of the most powerful senators in New York history. Snyder had come too far to have it all come crashing down over something like this.

Two weeks later, Mitch and the other man were the victims of yet another DC drive-by shooting. The politicians were up in arms that this sort of thing could happen again, and this time to someone from the hill. But, the anger quickly subsided. The deaths became, as David Snyder knew they would, became just another unfortunate statistic in the DC crime blotter.

"The entire room, including the beeswax polish, is an exact copy of Louis XV's secret study at Versailles," said Fawcett. "As a matter of fact, this roll top desk," he said sweeping his hand over the smooth wood, "is Louis' original desk. The first roll top ever made. The one at Versailles is just a copy, even though those putzes have the balls to try and pass it off as the real thing.

"I told you how we got it, didn't I?" Fawcett said to Senator Rolander.

"Yeah, you used to have it in your place in Chicago."

"Well, Senator Snyder here hasn't heard the story." Fawcett looked at Snyder and raised an eyebrow as if to say, *You're not going to believe this*. "When the palace of Versailles was stormed by the people of France, they saved the paintings and sold off the furniture. Those prissy academics who run Versailles now have been scouring the world trying to buy back all of the original furniture.

"They made it perfectly clear that they believed the desk was a national treasure and that they would go to any lengths to get it back. They claim that they were dealing directly with the owner, but that's a load of bullshit. The owner was a savvy old bird who used Sotheby's on the sly to mount a very discreet bidding war. I had one of my lawyers from Amsterdam represent me as an anonymous buyer. The French bid high right from the get go, and we followed them straight up. There was no way I was going to let them get it. Bill Gates was hovering around the fringes of the bidding and I thought I was really going to have some trouble out of him, but he lost interest after a while. When the other players fell out of the running and we were neck to neck with the French, we let them win the bid."

Snyder leaned forward surprised. "If you let them win the bid, how'd you end up with the desk?"

"I'll tell you how," said Fawcett, "and if I do say so myself, it's brilliant. We had a girl inside who handled the banking. For their deals, especially one of this size, Sotheby's has very strict rules. They don't care if you're Charlie De Gaulle or Charlie Potatoes, if you can't come up with the payment, you lose your place in line. They came back to us when the French money didn't show and asked if we would match the bid. Meanwhile, the Frogs were going batshit trying to figure out what went wrong. It was beautiful. Our girl had worked it so she was spotless. It looked like the bank in France screwed things up. We were able to

get the roll top for a fraction of what it would have cost if there'd been an all out bidding war. And let me tell you this, it felt good to stick it to the Frenchies."

Rolander had heard the story before, but the guile of his old college roommate made him smile nonetheless. Rolander was amazed at how far sheer force of will and personality had carried Fawcett. He sometimes wondered where he would be if he'd been as ruthless. Being a Senator wasn't bad by a long shot and Russ Rolander didn't get to where he was by sitting around, but what would it be like to have Fawcett's money and power? What would it be like to afford all of his vices with his own money, rather than depending on the steady stream of Fawcett deposits to his Caribbean bank account?

Well, if you were going to be in a pocket, he reasoned, it might as well be a deep one.

Snyder's position wasn't much different. He was also amazed at the lengths to which Fawcett would go to get what he wanted. Snyder felt a bizarre sense of camaraderie with the man. Both he and Fawcett knew no limit to their passions, nor to the depths they would descend to force the world to give them what they wanted. As much as Snyder believed they had in common, there was one thing that he knew for sure, he was smarter than Donald Fawcett would ever be.

"So," continued Fawcett, "that's how my little Louis XV room came to be. How much do you want to bet that he banged Marie Antoinette right on that couch you're sitting on?"

Snyder tried to suppress it, but a slight smile crept across his lips. Fawcett might have monkey loads of money, but he didn't know shit when it came to history. Marie Antoinette wasn't married to Louis XV, she was married to Louis XVI.

"I get what I want. Don't I, Russ?"

"That's right," Rolander managed between coughs, as Fawcett, who had been walking behind the couch, smacked him hard on the back mid-swig of his brandy.

Snyder didn't like the way Fawcett circled the room like a buzzard looking for a wounded animal, and was glad when he finally sat down behind the desk.

"Enough small talk," said Fawcett looking into his snifter as he swirled his brandy, releasing the sweet, metallic vapor. "Where do we stand?"

Rolander sat up straighter, his imposing size dominating the couch, and cleared his throat, "As you know Donald, the deal has been moving along smoothly. We have our foreign assets in place and the advance information we have received fits the equation perfectly... as we knew it would. In an undertaking such as this, the CYA, or cover-your-ass factor cannot be stressed greatly enough--"

Fawcett interrupted Senator Rolander, "That's what I never did like about politicians, always worrying about covering their asses when they should be worrying about doing their jobs."

"Listen, Donald," said Rolander. "Don't you fucking patronize me. This is one serious deal and if you think I'm not covering my flanks, you are sorely mistaken."

“There’s nothing wrong with covering your flanks, Russ. Just don’t spend so much time watching your ass that you miss what’s right in front of you. Understand?”

“Yeah, I understand all right. I just hope you do. This isn’t shooting fish in a barrel. This is serious business. The smallest detail could turn this into a major cluster fuck and send us all running for cover... or worse.”

“Spare me the lecture, Russ. I know this is serious business. I’ve got billions riding on it. Jesus, with all of the power problems in California alone, you’d think we’d be developing our fossil fuel capabilities further, not scaling back. What the fuck are they thinking? Alternative energy sources? Not only are they dangerous and unreliable they’re just too much of a hard sell to the American public.”

“But, you forget about the green house gases and global warming,” broke in Rolander.

“Fuck the green house gases, fuck the Kyoto protocol, and fuck global warming,” spat Fawcett. “That’s all a bunch of inconclusive bullshit. I have invested tens of millions of dollars trying to get you and your colleagues back east to see the light on this one. God, if I never see another lobbyist or politician with his hand out again it’ll be too soon. But, after all is said and spent, where’d my money get me? Nowhere, that’s where. If this fossil fuel rollback happens, I don’t even want to think about how much money I’ll lose. It’s bad enough the government has forced us into selling power to states like California at fire sale prices, but now they want to go further and whittle away our market. I have gone at this thing every way I can and now the buck stops here.”

“Which brings me right back to what I was saying, Donald. To avoid this thing hitting the fan, we’ve got to have a flawless strategy,” said Rolander.

“Relax, Russ. I told you already that I have the details all worked out. You think I want this deal to go sour? Besides, the trail goes so cold before it reaches either of your doors that Rudolph the fucking Red Nosed Reindeer couldn’t even follow it. Got me?”

“I gotcha,” said Rolander, “but you get me Donald. I don’t care how much money you’ve put into this deal and I don’t care how much you stand to lose. No more changes. This thing goes off as planned. You of all people should appreciate the value of what I’m saying. Our off-shore associates are not happy with how you’ve pushed up the closing.”

“You let me worry about them,” said Fawcett. “In fact as I’ve said before, let me worry about everything. All of the players are being extremely well compensated for their participation. There is no reason for anyone to be getting jumpy. The closing was moved up because the closing had to be moved up. That’s the nature of the business. We’re all professionals here, so let’s get our acts together and get on with the deal. Now,” Fawcett rubbed his hands together in anticipation and leaned forward over his desk, “what’s the word from Star Gazer?” Two sets of eyes fell upon Senator Snyder and awaited his report.

Snyder took a deep breath and smoothing the crease in his left trouser leg began to speak, “As we expected, he has agreed to become a player in the deal, but he did have some reservations.”

“He didn’t have any objections other than those we forecasted, is that correct?”

“That is correct,” said Snyder.

This was the part of the game that Fawcett loved, the psychology. He had known exactly how Star Gazer would react. He would be indignant at first, considering the proposal out of the question. Then the stroke and sting, as Fawcett liked to call it, would begin. First his ego would be stroked and then his fears would be stung. It was an age old tactic, but it worked every single time. The more self absorbed the personality, the greater the success. Star Gazer was about as self absorbed as they came, although he hid it very, very well. This camouflage ability was Star Gazer’s greatest strength. Seeing people exactly for who they were, knowing what motivated them and how to turn those motivations to his advantage was Donald Fawcett’s.

“What are you two talking about?” demanded Rolander.

“What we’re talking about,” answered Snyder, “is that Mr. Fawcett read Star Gazer like an open book. He accurately forecasted what Star Gazer’s objections and areas of concern would be. He knew which cards should be played and in which order to successfully bring him on board. Star Gazer has left us with a brief list of ‘demands’, our full agreement with which being the only way he will participate. The list is exactly as Mr. Fawcett predicted.”

Rolander looked at Fawcett, impressed, “He agreed to come aboard?”

“Indeed he did,” replied Snyder. “Now, as to his conditions.”

Fawcett leaned back in his chair and smiled.

“Condition number one: after the deal is closed, the President is to be returned to his office,” Snyder paused before finishing his sentence, “alive.”

CHAPTER 1

The exterior ice chime sounded, warning of potential ice on the roadway, and Gerhard Miner gripped the leather steering wheel of his black Audi A6 a little tighter. His Gucci-clad foot pressed down harder on the accelerator. The sun was setting over Lake Lucerne and a chill wind, blowing since lunch, began to pick up. *Ah, what a lunch that was today*, Miner thought to himself as the sleek black sedan hugged the shores of the choppy Swiss lake, *It was absolutely exquisite*.

Claudia Mueller, an investigator from the Federal Attorney's Office, had been pressing Miner for a face-to-face meeting to discuss a cache of armaments missing from a military base outside of Basel. Crates of special night vision style goggles, flashbang grenades, Swiss SWAT assault rifles, anti-tank missiles, plastique, and a couple of next generation, non-lethal weapons known as 'glare guns,' had all mysteriously disappeared.

Though Claudia insisted her questions were just routine, Miner had been putting her off for over two months. He claimed his case load didn't provide a single extra moment to meet with her. Surely the security of Switzerland, which Miner was charged with, overrode the necessity to ask a few 'routine' questions.

He half expected her to go away, but she didn't. Claudia wanted badly to talk with Miner and for good reason.

Five years ago, he had commanded a special division of Swiss Intelligence that tested the security of military bases and weapons installations throughout the tiny country. Miner was so successful with breaching security at the bases that his unit was shut down for fear of further embarrassing the military establishment and he was transferred to a different department of Swiss intelligence.

Not only had Miner commanded the special division, he had also created it. The idea for the division, known as *Der Nebel*, or more appropriately *The Fog* in English, stemmed from training Miner had received while on a U.S.-Swiss cross-training exercise in Little Creek, Virginia. Little Creek headquarters the U.S. Navy SEAL teams involved in Atlantic and European operations and is also responsible for the Navy's Special Warfare Development Group. This group is a SEAL think-tank where new weapons, equipment, communication systems, and tactics are developed.

The Investigative Affairs agent's long list of boring questions had been the last thing Miner was interested in sitting through, but curiosity eventually got the better of him and he ordered a copy of Claudia Mueller's personnel file. In his position as one of the Swiss government's highest ranking intelligence officers, the file was not hard to get, nor did the request seem at all out of the ordinary.

Miner flipped through Mueller's file with only minimal interest. As he

reached the back, he slowed. The backs of files were always the most interesting part. Included were her service photo, her most recent passport photo and best of all, a magazine photo from a climbing competition in which she had taken first prize. In sharp contrast to the serious service and passport photos, this picture showed a proud and energetic woman. Here, her ruddy face was flushed with adrenaline and the excitement of competition. She was gorgeous. There was no need to put Claudia Mueller off any longer. At that moment, Miner not only knew he had to meet her, but he had to have her.

An hour and fifteen minutes away in Bern at the Federal Attorney's Office, known as the *Bundesanwaltschaft*, Claudia Mueller was studying the file of Gerhard Miner for the thousandth time. Out of all the people she had spoken with during the course of her investigation, Miner had been the toughest to nail down. Sure, Miner had his reasons for being unavailable and they all checked out when Claudia leaned on her boss to speak with his contacts at the Ministry of Defense, but something bothered her. Call it her Swiss fetish for organization. Something about Miner just didn't jibe.

Miner was 53 years old and never married. He was a handsome man, tall, about six-foot-two and extremely fit. His gray hair was perfect as were his expensive, custom made Italian suits. In almost any woman's opinion, Gerhard Miner would be quite a juicy catch. She was studying the photos of him yet again, glued to his deep brown eyes, when the phone rang.

"Hello?" Claudia answered, still staring at the file in front of her.

"Fräulein Mueller, this is Gerhard Miner of the *Nachrichtendienst*." *Nachrichtendienst*, in Swiss German, translated to the deceptively benign sounding Information Services. The highly secretive *Nachrichtendienst* was a division of the Ministry of Defense and responsible for counter espionage for Switzerland. Not much beyond that was known about the *Nachrichtendienst*, not even by the most enlightened and connected of Swiss citizens.

Instantly, Claudia's attention shifted from the pictures in front of her to the voice on the other end of the phone. "Well, Herr Miner, to what do I owe the unexpected pleasure?" Claudia asked pleasantly, masking her eagerness. After leaving messages and being dodged by Miner for the last two months, she was excited to finally have the man himself on the phone.

Miner leaned back in his chair and wondered what Claudia might be wearing. He pictured her in a highly provocative outfit, completely unlike what a woman of her position actually wore to the office. His mind continued to wander as he answered smoothly, as if on automatic pilot, "I should say the pleasure is all mine. I can't remember the last time a woman pursued me as aggressively as you have."

"I hardly believe my repeated requests for information in a formal investigation to be in the same category as you are imagining, Herr Miner."

"Of course not. I apologize. I'll tell you what, I have time available tomorrow to meet with you if you still want, but after that I will be quite busy with an ongoing assignment."

"Done," replied Claudia. "I'll meet you at your office say-"

"Oh, I'm quite sorry once again."

“Why?”

“I won’t be in my office tomorrow. I’m taking a little time off and will be at my home in Lucerne.”

It wasn’t unusual for government officials to keep a small apartment in the Capitol and then commute home on the weekends. The Swiss are extremely loyal to their cantons and ancestral homes. Claudia herself spent many weekends with her family back in Grindelwald in the house that would one day pass to her when her parents were gone.

She paused to figure out how long it would take her to get from Bern to Lucerne and whether she should go by car or by train.

“I’ll tell you what,” began Miner.

Again with “I’ll tell you what,” Claudia thought. After being dodged for two months, Claudia was ready to jump down Miner’s throat, but she knew she had to be careful. She had recently applied for a new position within her organization and stepping on the toes of one of the Ministry of Defense’s most respected officers wouldn’t help her move up the ladder any quicker.

Life at the *Bundesanwaltschaft* had grown to be extremely tedious for Claudia. She had taken the job with the Federal Attorney’s office right out of law school. She was fluent in all four official languages of Switzerland: German, Italian, French, and even the rarely spoken Romansch. She was also fluent in English. Her enviable ability with languages, tenacious manner, and keen eye for detail made Claudia a shoo-in for the *Bundespolizei*, the investigative affairs division of the *Bundesanwaltschaft*. As much as Claudia had enjoyed her job in civil intelligence at the outset, she longed for the promotion that would take her out of the mundane business of being a glorified detective and put her on cases which were much more exciting and which she could actually prosecute.

But, no matter how badly Claudia wanted to switch to another department, she would not for a moment compromise an on-going investigation. Worse than stepping on a few Ministry of Defense toes, would be not solving this case. And, if she couldn’t solve this one, she was sure she would end up staying exactly where she was, or worse, she would get demoted, or possibly even fired.

Claudia’s boss, Arianne Küess, had been hand picked to be head prosecutor for the war crimes tribunal at the United Nations Court. This meant that the missing weapons case was being led by the very disagreeable Deputy Federal Attorney, Urs Schnell. This was Schnell’s first case and he wanted it wrapped up with a ribbon ASAP. He placed a very high priority on this one and the weight rode chafingly on Claudia’s shoulders. The problem though, was that she had not made any progress and was quickly running out of leads.

“Let’s meet for lunch here. Is that convenient for you?” Without even waiting for a reply, Miner continued, “We’ll meet at the restaurant in the *Hotel Des Balances* in the old town. Say, 12:30?”

No, it wouldn’t be convenient for her to travel to Lucerne, but Claudia needed to speak with Miner and so she agreed and hung up the phone. That evening, she agonized over what to wear. She wanted to appear professional, but knowing Miner’s penchant for women, she couldn’t help but want to play her good looks for all they were worth. She was scraping the bottom of the ethical

barrel and she knew it, but she was desperate. She chose an attractive, tight fitting navy blue skirt that rode just above the knee and a form fitting navy blue blazer with a funky silver blouse. She left one button undone and then undid the second upon entering the lobby of the hotel at 12:25 the following day.

Miner had been considerate enough to select one of the restaurant's quieter tables. The booth was framed at one end by a window facing onto the *Reuss* river. Beyond a clutch of empty iron patio tables, a group of Lucerne's swans paddled slowly past the city's historic, covered *Kapellbrücke* bridge. Miner appeared to be watching them as they up-ended their snow white tails, plumb the depths of the quickly flowing current in search of food. In reality, he was using the reflection of the window to observe Investigative Affairs Agent Mueller's entrance, as well as the rest of the lunch patrons who had entered the restaurant in the last twenty minutes. Miner watched Claudia walk almost the length of the dining room then feigned surprise when she finally reached the table.

'Herr Miner, good afternoon. Sorry to startle you.' Claudia leaned over to shake his hand, certain that he had seen her entrance.

The game was on.

Two hours later, dissatisfied and angry, she left the *Hotel Des Balances*. She needed to walk a little and clear her head. Claudia made her way up the hotel's short cobblestone driveway towards the *Weinmarkt*, in Lucerne's Old Town.

The Old Town was a pedestrianized area on Lucerne's right bank comprised of aging cobblestone streets and buildings from the sixteenth through the eighteenth Centuries. Many of the facades were decorated with frescoes depicting Swiss life. The ground floors of the buildings housed boutiques, restaurants, and small shops. One couldn't walk two meters in this part of town without seeing watches or cuckoo clocks. There was no question that it was geared heavily towards tourists, but its beauty always had a soothing effect on Claudia.

She wandered aimlessly past the shops along the *Kappellgasse* trying to make some sense of her meeting with Miner. He had been cordial, but cordial to the point of condescension. It hadn't taken Claudia long to realize that she wasn't going to get anything out of Miner, at least not willingly. He was extremely uncooperative, choosing to shroud himself in the cloak of national secrecy whenever Claudia put a direct question to him.

"Where were you on the night the weapons were stolen?"

"On assignment."

"On assignment where and for what?"

"I cannot say."

"Can't say where or can't say for what?"

"Neither."

"And why can't you say?"

"It is a matter of National security."

"And a large amount of sensitive weaponry missing from a Swiss defense depot isn't a matter of National security?"

“All I can say is, it is not my matter. It’s yours.”

“Herr Miner, is it that you can’t tell me your whereabouts on the night in question or is it that you just won’t?”

“It is both,” Miner replied. “I won’t tell you because I can’t.”

“Are you aware, Herr Miner that I can get a court order to compel you to answer my questions?”

“Yes.”

“So, why don’t you make it easier on both of us, answer my questions and I will go back to Bern to pursue my investigation from there.”

“Fräulein Mueller, I am not in the business of making your job easy. I serve the Federal Republic of Switzerland. I’m not at liberty to answer the questions you’re asking. Should you wish to attempt to compel me to answer, I assure you your efforts will be met with much resistance. I do a job for the people of Switzerland that is, shall we say, *delicate*. I have done this job for more years than you have even been alive. My position does not require me to answer your questions. I have told you I would be of no value to your investigation, yet you pursued me nonetheless.

Claudia was determined to get something out of him and so, changed course, “Perhaps then, as you are an expert on the security of Swiss military installations, maybe you could suggest to me how such a theft would be possible and where such weaponry might be secreted or sold, if that was the intent.”

“Fräulein Mueller, I have learned that there are many ways to enter one of our bases undetected. A person or persons could have done so with or without assistance from someone inside. Were there any signs of a forced entry?”

“Not according to our investigation.”

“Were the security measures functioning properly at the time the theft was assumed to have taken place?”

“Yes, they were.”

“You of course questioned the entire base staff to see if anyone saw or heard anything unusual during the time in question?”

“Naturally.”

“And?”

“And, no, nothing unusual was seen or heard.”

“Fine then, that brings us to your next question. As far as where such merchandise could be hidden, the answer is anywhere. And, as far as where such merchandise could be sold, my answer again is *anywhere*. You simply do not have enough evidence to even begin to formulate a hypothesis as to what happened. You are chasing ghosts and I frankly do not see much hope for a successful outcome to your investigation. But, your day is not a complete loss. Since you have come all the way from Bern, you can at least enjoy your lunch and perhaps we can take a stroll together afterwards.”

Claudia spent the rest of their lunch probing for answers while Miner deftly parried each question. Miner also had the indecency to try to seduce her. He found Claudia attractive and in all fairness she had attempted to use her wiles to goad a little more information out of him. Instead of coughing up some information though, he had come onto her even more strongly. Claudia should

have known better. Though everything about him indicated he had a passion for women, passion did not necessarily equal weakness and that had been Claudia's mistake.

The end of their lunch was no less frustrating than its beginning. Without even consulting her, Miner ordered dessert for the two of them. This was a liberty that sent Claudia's already boiling blood over onto the stove. Number one, he ordered liquor, which Claudia didn't touch while working and number two, he went on to lecture Claudia on her poor taste for turning down a fabulous dessert wine which the hotel manager kept specially in the cellar for him. *No doubt*, Claudia thought to herself, *Miner had something good on the manager to rate such treatment*. She made a mental note to check the manager out when she got back to Bern.

It wasn't enough that he let her know the wine was a special delicacy the hotel reserved solely for him. No, Miner had to go on and make sure that uneducated, little Claudia knew exactly what she was missing. In a tone which was entirely haughty and which entirely suited Gerhard Miner, he launched into what sounded like rote memorization of a wine club's tasting notes.

Vin de Constance, was a dessert wine from the Constantia estate in South Africa. It was a favorite of Napoleon Bonaparte who had thirty bottles a month shipped to Elba to ease the misery of his banishment. The King of Prussia as well as Louis XVI loved *Vin de Constance*. Dickens celebrated it in *Edwin Drood* and Baudelaire said, 'only the lips of a lover surpassed it in heavenly sweetness.' Only twelve thousand bottles were produced annually with almost all of it accounted for before it hit the market. An American colleague who had introduced Miner to the stuff helped arrange for a case to be sent to Switzerland. No small feat as *Vin de Constance* is one of the most coveted wines in the world.

Throughout this ridiculous speech, Claudia developed a pretty good plan for where Miner could put his wine if the hotel's cellar ever got over-crowded. Though she had already politely declined Miner's offer, he poured the expensive liquid into her glass anyway. A faint sneer developed at the corner of Miner's mouth when Claudia grabbed the neck of the bottle and repeated, "I said no thank you." The sneer, which Miner quickly masked with a false smile, proved to Claudia that the man was not completely impenetrable. She counted this as one small victory in the series of sharp defeats that had been their lunch.

Claudia had insisted so strongly on questioning Miner because he was her last possible lead. She had exhausted everything else. Claudia had gone back and questioned the base staff again and again. She had monitored their bank accounts and purchasing patterns hoping that if there was someone involved on the inside, they would slip up and make a large deposit or a large purchase that couldn't be explained away. To date, nothing had happened. Nothing had turned up on in Switzerland and nothing had turned up on the black markets abroad.

The *Vin de Constance* lecture notwithstanding, Claudia felt as if she didn't know any more today than she did yesterday and that her whole trip to Lucerne was a waste of time. As far as the missing weapons were concerned, Miner did have better means than anyone in all of Switzerland to steal them. Claudia was

dead on. But, just because Miner had once been involved in government-sanctioned exercises testing the security of Swiss military establishments, didn't mean that he had anything to do with her theft.

Miner was also right about something. Any attempts to try to get a judge to compel him to answer her questions would be met with resistance from the highest ranks of the Swiss Government. Lacking any evidence whatsoever against Miner, there was no way anyone would force him to cooperate.

With Miner refusing to cooperate, Claudia didn't even have straws to grasp at. All she had was air. Her investigation had been marked by failure after failure. Though her gut told her one thing, her mind told her it was a million-to-one shot that she could have turned Miner into a bonafide suspect. Now, Claudia Mueller's investigation and her career were at a complete stand-still.

As Gerhard Miner pulled into the long-term parking lot at Zurich International, he was no longer thinking about Claudia, his mind was back on his mission. The sudden schedule change had bothered him, but such was the nature of his business. Heads-of-State often shortened trips or changed plans altogether at the last minute. As this trip was set to coincide with the birthday of the American President's fifteen-year-old daughter, Miner had been certain, barring any international incident, that the President would spend as much time as he could on his ski trip. The fact that the President was now planning to cut it short by a couple of days was inconvenient, but it didn't make the mission impossible.

Miner entered the empty first class line and presented his ticket and passport. He went out of his way to be extra flirtatious with the female desk staff, who wondered why such a handsome man did not have an attractive woman traveling with him to Athens.

While waiting in the Swissair lounge for his flight to board, he changed tack and acted enraged when a young waitress spilled a glass of *Cabernet* all over his trousers. The poor young girl thought it was her fault, when in fact Miner had leaned his shoulder forward and nudged her tray as she was placing a cocktail napkin on the table. His explosion earned him an effusive apology that lasted from the first class lounge all the way to the gate from a Swissair airport services manager. Once Miner had been seated on the plane, the manager again apologized and asked the chief first class flight attendant to take especially good care of his long-suffering passenger. Miner had achieved exactly what he wanted. At least five people would be able to vouch that he had boarded the Swissair flight to Greece.

He spent the next week and a half in the popular ports of Paros and Mykonos, spending too much money entertaining new friends and repairing repeated "mechanical problems" on his rented sailboat. He over-tipped waiters, barmen, and harbormasters. Not only would Miner be remembered, but many would be anxiously awaiting the return of the man and his easy flowing money next season.

Secure that his alibi was well established, Miner sailed to the uninhabited island of Despotiko, about three hours southwest of Mykonos. Waiting for Miner, just as planned, was his cousin from the Swiss town of Hochdorf, a carpenter

who bore an incredible likeness to him.

Happy to have a free vacation and knowing the sensitivity of his cousin's occupation, the carpenter from Hochdorf never asked any questions. The plan was for him to continue sailing south to Santorini and then Crete where he would leave the rented yacht, citing a string of mechanical problems as the reason. The carpenter would then make his way to the western port of Patras where a first class cabin was booked on a Minoan Line cruise to Venice.

His cousin would be traveling on Miner's passport and Visa credit card. Knowing that cabin stewards present first class passengers' passports for them to customs officials as a courtesy, Miner was not worried about his cousin or his passport receiving any undue scrutiny. The carpenter was to spend a week in Northern Italy before proceeding via train to France.

Miner had booked his cousin on an overnight train in a first class compartment. As the train would be crossing the French border while passengers were sleeping, the steward would gather passports as passengers boarded, presenting them to border officials sometime during the night and then returning them with breakfast in the morning.

After a week in France, the carpenter would take a final overnight train back to Switzerland where the customary passport collection by the steward would once again be conducted. When the steward delivered the passport with breakfast the next morning, the carpenter was to place it in a thick, manila envelope with the canceled train tickets, credit card receipts, and other odds and ends he had been told to accumulate during his wonderful vacation. The envelope was addressed to a post office box in Lucerne and stamped with more than enough postage. When the train arrived in Bern, the carpenter would mail the envelope from the train station post box before catching his connecting train back to Hochdorf.

With eyewitnesses, customs records, and a credit card trail that would lead through three European countries all but guaranteed, Miner entered Turkey from Greece with a false Maltese passport as part of a tour group, feeling quite confident that his alibi, if ever needed, would be airtight.

Twenty-four hours later, the people seated in the airline's waiting area paid no attention to the rumpled, western European businessman who sat reading a day old copy of *The International Herald Tribune*. Disguised with blond hair, a full beard, blue contacts, and padding which made him appear an extra twenty kilos overweight, Miner was now traveling on a Dutch passport as Henk Van DenHuevel of Utrecht.

He sat reading an article he had found quite by chance. It dealt with the upcoming ski vacation United States President, Jack Rutledge was to take with his daughter, Amanda and what it would cost American tax payers.

As first class passengers were welcomed to board flight 7440 from Istanbul to New York, Miner folded the newspaper under his arm and made his way towards the gate thinking, *They have absolutely no idea what this trip is going to cost.*

CHAPTER 2

"You guys having an awesome day or what?" asked the young *liftie* as Scot Harvath and Amanda Rutledge shuffled up to get on the next chair-lift. He was referring to the snow that had been falling all day.

"Light's kinda flat," replied Amanda.

Scot had to laugh. Amanda was relatively new to skiing, but she was picking up the lingo and the idiosyncrasies of a spoiled skier pretty quickly.

"What's so funny?" she said as the lift gently hit them in the back of the knees as they sat down, beginning the ride up to Deer Valley's Squaw Peak.

"You, that's what's so funny."

"Me? What do you mean?"

"Don't get me wrong, Mandie your skiing's come a long way, but you've skied what, maybe five or six times in your life?"

"Yeah, so?"

"And it's always been that east coast garbage. All ice, right?"

"And?"

"Well, it's just funny to see you complaining about the light when you are skiing on snow people would kill for."

"I guess it is kind of funny, but you've got to admit that it's tough to see anything in this weather."

On that point, Amanda Rutledge was 100% correct. The snow had been falling steadily for a week. Hoping to indulge his passion for astronomy, Scot had brought his telescope on this trip. The lights back home in DC made it impossible to see anything in the night sky. Unfortunately, the weather in Park City refused to cooperate. Today in particular, it was really coming down. Visibility was extremely low and conditions worried Scot enough that he suggested the President and his daughter take the day off and wait to see what tomorrow brought. Regardless of what the head of his advance team had to say, though, the President made it clear that he and Amanda had come to ski and that's exactly what they were going to do.

Unfortunately for his ski plans, the coalition the President had cobbled together to get his fossil fuel reduction bill, the bill that signaled a financially devastating blow for the major oil companies, but would breathe long overdue life into America's alternative energy sectors, through Congress was starting to crack. The President's constant handholding of key 'swing' voters was absolutely necessary if he was to see his legislation through. The predicted turnover in the upcoming Congressional election spelled doom for the President's pet project. The simple fact was that this bill could only pass in this session.

Even though he had already shortened the length of the vacation before leaving DC, the President was thinking about returning even earlier now. Scot understood the man's desire to get in as much skiing and quality time with his

daughter as possible before returning to the Capitol.

“Are you dating anyone now?” asked Amanda.

The sudden change of subject caught Scot off-guard and pulled his mind back from the President’s problems and the weather.

“Am I dating anyone? Who wants to know?” he teased.

Blushing, Amanda turned away from his gaze, but kept speaking, “I do. I mean, you never seem to talk about anybody.”

Scot started to smile again, but didn’t let her see. She must have been building up her courage all day to ask him.

Amanda had had a crush on Scot ever since he became part of daily life at the White House, and everybody knew it. More than once, the President had to reprimand his daughter and remind her not to distract Scot while he was on duty. Amanda, or *Mandie* as Scot called her, was a good kid. Despite losing her mother to breast cancer only a couple of years ago, she seemed as normal as any other child her age. She was smart, athletic and would some day grow into a beautiful woman. Scot decided to change the subject.

“That was one heck of a birthday party last night,” he offered.

“It was pretty cool. Thanks again for the CD’s. You didn’t have to get me anything.”

“Hey, it was your birthday. The big 16. I wanted to get you a car, but your dad’s National Security Advisor thought that behind the wheel of your own machine, you might be too dangerous for the country. So, the Ferrari will just have to sit in my garage until we can change his mind.”

Amanda laughed. “Not only were the CD’s sweet, but I really appreciate the lessons today.”

Before joining the SEALs and subsequently being recruited into the Secret Service, Scot had been quite an accomplished skier and had won a spot on the U.S. Freestyle team. Against the wishes of his father, Scot had chosen to postpone college to pursue skiing. He spent several years on the team which trained right here in Park City, Utah. He did extremely well on the World Cup circuit and was favored to medal in the upcoming Olympics. When Scot’s father, an instructor at the Navy SEAL BUDs training facility in their home town of Coronado, California died in a training accident, Scot was devastated. Try as his might, after losing his father he couldn’t get his head back into competitive skiing. Instead, he chose to follow in his father’s footsteps. After graduating college *cum laude*, he joined the SEALs and was tasked to TEAM Two, known as the cold weather specialists, or Polar SEALs.

Scot knew that it was not only his familiarity with Park City, but also his background and experience which were key factors in his being selected to lead this Presidential advance team. He also knew that was why President Rutledge agreed to indulge his daughter’s request for Scot to ski on her protective detail today and give her pointers.

Amanda was overjoyed and despite the ‘flat light,’ she felt the day had been perfect.

“You’re an excellent student, so the lessons are my pleasure.” Scot’s radio crackled, interrupting their conversation. He held up his hand to let her know he

was listening to his ear-piece. Amanda fell quiet.

“Norseman, this is Sound. Over,” came the scratchy voice via Scot’s Motorola. ‘Norseman’ was the call sign Scot had picked up in the SEALs, which had remained with him ever since. At 5’10” and a muscular 160 lbs., with brown hair and ice blue eyes, the handsome Scot Harvath looked more German than Scandinavian. In fact the call sign didn’t derive from his looks, but rather from a string of Scandinavian flight attendants he had dated while in the SEALs.

The voice on the other end of Scot’s Motorola identified as ‘Sound,’ was the head of the President’s protective detail, Sam Harper. Harper had taken Scot under his wing when he joined the team at the White House. The head White House Secret Service agent, who Harper and Scot both reported to was William Shaw - call sign, ‘Fury.’ When you put Harper together with Shaw, you got ‘The Sound and The Fury,’ and anyone who had ever screwed up on their watch knew exactly how appropriate that title was.

Communications had been fine over the past week, but for some reason the radios were cutting in and out today. *Maybe it was the weather.*

“This is Norseman, go ahead Sound. Over,” said Scot via his throat mike.

“Norseman, Hat Trick wants to know how Goldilocks is doing. Over.”

“Mandie,” said Scot turning to Amanda, “your dad wants to know how you’re holding up.”

When then Vice President Rutledge came into office after having been named one of DC’s sexiest politicians three times, the hockey inspired nickname ‘Hat Trick,’ meaning three goals, became an inside joke among the people who knew him. Though Jack Rutledge found the media’s attention on his looks somewhat embarrassing, he didn’t object to the nickname and so via the Department of Defense, who issues the Presidential and Vice Presidential code names, it stuck. After the President’s wife passed away, word quietly spread among White House staffers that the President would not seek to return to Pennsylvania Avenue for a fourth time. The code name had turned out to be aptly prophetic.

Amanda’s code name on the other hand, was an obvious call. With her long, curly blond hair, she had been called Goldilocks for as long as anyone in the White House could remember.

“I’m a little hungry, but other than that pretty good,” she said.

“Sound, Goldilocks is ship-shape, though she’d like to get into the galley sometime in the near future. Over.”

“Roger that, Norseman. The lifts close to the public at 16:30, that’s twenty minutes from now. Hat Trick wants to know if Goldilocks wants to keep going, or if we should wrap it up. Over.”

Scot turned to Amanda, “Your dad wants to know if you want to have them keep the lift open for us, or if you want to make this the last run and we’ll ski back to the house?”

“My toes are getting kind of cold. I think I’ve had enough skiing for today. Let’s make this the last run.”

“Sound, Goldilocks wants to little piggy. Over.” *Little piggy* referred to the children’s nursery rhyme where the fifth little piggy went *wee, wee, wee all the*

way home.

“Roger that Norseman. Hat Trick concurs. Let’s meet at the last lap. Over.”

“Last lap, roger that Sound. Norseman out.”

When Scot, Amanda, and their security detail reached the meeting point known as the *last lap* the President, Sam Harper and the rest of the team were already waiting for them.

“Hi sweetheart,” said the President as his daughter skied up and he gave her a hug. “How’s your skiing coming along? Notice any difference now that your sixteen?”

“Sixteen doesn’t make any difference, dad. But, I have gotten better.”

“Is that so?” replied the President.

“Yes, sir, Mr. President. Amanda has come a long way this afternoon. I think she could take us all down Death Chute if she wanted to,” said Scot.

“Death Chute?” said Amanda, “You’ve gotta be nuts. I wouldn’t even snow plow down that thing!”

Several of the Secret Service agents laughed nervously. Death Chute was one of the most difficult of the off-piste chutes that fed back to the area where the Presidential party was staying. The home the President was using was located in the ultra exclusive ski in, ski out, Deer Valley community known as Snow Haven.

The Secret Service agents’ nervousness was well founded. Death Chute required a tremendous amount of skill to navigate and would be a nerve racking challenge for even the best of them. Not only were there lots of rocks and steep vertical drops, but as the piste began to flatten out before dropping off again, there was a wide plateau filled with trees.

Quite an accomplished skier, the President loved tackling a new chute each day on his way back to the house. He skied easy runs with his daughter in the mornings and then they split up after lunch so he could ski the more difficult trails. The super challenging, end-of-the-day chutes he had to choose from were technically known as “back country” and not part of Deer Valley’s marked and maintained trail system. Therefore, the chutes had not required a lot of work for the Secret Service to secure. All of the routes feeding into these chutes were simply made off-limits to any other skiers.

As the President’s confidence grew, so did his desire to tackle harder chutes. The ‘rush’ he got was a rewarding way to end the day. All of the chutes the he had tried up to this point were grouped in one area. Death Chute stood alone, a bit further to the east and the Secret Service knew it was only a matter of time before the President decided he wanted to give it a whirl.

The only person who could have possibly given him a run for his money on Death Chute was Scot, and he was skiing with Amanda’s detail today. Amanda would take the long, easy way down as she had all week. That was okay. The last thing the President wanted was for his daughter to get hurt.

“So honey,” began the President, “what do you think? You take the high road and I’ll take the low road, and I’ll be sippin’ hot chocolate ‘afore yee?”

"I might beat you yet!" yelled Amanda as she gave herself a push and started shooting down the longer, yet safer of the two routes. Scot and the rest of his team smiled at the President's group and took off, quickly catching up with Amanda. She seemed hell bent on beating her father back to the house, an impossibility unless she dropped over the rim of the bowl and shot straight down. Even with her growing skill and confidence, Scot knew she wasn't ready to tackle something that serious yet.

Amanda used her poles to push herself forward and picked up more speed. One of the agents skiing to the right of Scot shot him a look saying, *Somebody's cruisin' for a bruisin'*- and before Scot could return the look, Amanda caught an edge and tumbled down hard. First she lost a pole and then a ski, then the other pole and the other ski.

When she finally came to a stop, her gear was scattered across thirty feet of snow uphill from where she lay. Scot caught up to her as she stopped sliding.

"Impressive! If you're gonna go, go big. That's what I always say."

Amanda was on the verge of tears, her pride hurting more than anything else.

"That's not funny," she said sniffing.

"I'm sorry, you're right, it's not funny. Are you okay?"

"What do you care?" she said, wiping the snow from her face.

Scot started to laugh.

"It's not funny, Scot. Cut it out!"

"I know, I know. I'm sorry, Mandie. You were really flying though. You looked good. Right up until the point you biffed. You know, we should have tagged your gear before you decided to have a yard sale."

"Stop it!" Amanda managed before breaking into a fit of laughter.

"Oh, so that was a mistake? There wasn't supposed to be a yard sale today? Whoa, then I better gather up the merchandise before we upset any of the neighbors."

He told Amanda to sit still and joined Secret Service agent Maxwell who was uphill gathering her equipment. When Scot reached Maxwell he saw that he was staring into the distance at the Presidential party making their way down Death Chute.

"Glad I'm not on that detail," said Maxwell as he handed Scot one of Amanda's skis.

Scot dusted the snow out of the binding, checking for damage as he waited for the next ski. "Maxwell, the reason you're not on that detail is because when it comes to skiing, you suck."

"Fuck you, Harvath," said Maxwell as he shoved the other ski at him, confident he was out of Amanda's earshot.

"No seriously. I heard that Warren Miller was looking to shoot a little footage of you for his next ski film. It's going to be a spin-off of that movie *Beast Master*, only worse. He's going to call it *Biff Master*. Nothing but your wipe outs-

"Fuck you."

"I'm not kidding. Nothing but three hours of wall-to-wall Maxwell face

down in the snow.”

“Fuck you.”

“There’ll be some of those trademark Maxwell fully geared somersaults, some awesome face plants... I think you could be up for an Oscar my friend.”

“Harvath, which part of *fuck you* do you not understand? I mean, I’m good to go on explaining either of the two words to you-”

Scot laughed as Maxwell lost his balance reaching over to pick up one of Amanda’s ski poles.

Looking off toward Death Chute, he too, could see the President and his detail still making their way down. The detail was doing a good job of keeping up with him. Everybody was right on the money. As he turned to take Amanda’s gear back to her, he glanced once more at Death Chute, just in time to see the President’s group near the trees and two Secret Service agents wipe out.

Maxwell had already recovered and gone down to Amanda. He was handing over her poles when Scot skied up.

“Well Maxwell, it looks like the heat will be off your skiing at dinner tonight.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“I think I just saw Ahern and Houchins bite it going into that part of the chute with the trees. But, with all the snow falling, it’s hard to tell.”

“At least I’m not the only one who bought it this afternoon,” said Amanda as she got to her feet and dusted the remaining snow off of her jacket.

“I told you,” said Scot, “the end of the day is when most wipe outs happen. You’re more tired than you think and some people push it a little too hard.”

Agent Maxwell took the skis from Scot and let Amanda lean on his shoulder for balance as she put them on. “I hope nobody hit a tree,” he said.

“That’s a good point,” responded Scot as he engaged his throat mike. “Sound, this is Norseman. Do we need to send the Saint Bernards and schnapps down for Ahern and Houchins? Over.”

Scot’s radio hissed and crackled. There was no response. He tried again.

“If either of them blew their knees, I’ve got a buddy here who’s a great surgeon. Tell Ahern and Houchins I’ll split the commission with them if they use my guy. Over.”

He waited longer this time, but there was still nothing but static.

“Sound, this is Norseman, we saw two agents go down. Can you give us a sit rep. Over?”

Sit rep was short for situation report. The President had probably pushed his guys just a little too far and just a little too fast for the end of the day. This really was the most common time for wipe outs. Ahern and Houchins were probably all right, but as head of the advance team, Scot felt responsible for every agent and wanted to know for sure.

“Sound, this is Norseman. Let’s have that sit rep. Over.”

Nothing.

Scot decided to change frequencies to the direct channel with the Secret Service command post. The blowing snow was beginning to pick up again.

“Birdhouse, this is Norseman, come in. Over.”

“Scot, I’m getting cold,” said Amanda as she snapped into her bindings.

“Quiet a sec, Mandie.”

Scot pressed the ear-piece further into his ear, but all he got was crackling static.

“Birdhouse, repeat, this is Norseman, come in. Over.” Scot waited.

“Birdhouse repeat, this is Norseman. Can you read me? Over.”

More static.

Agent Maxwell looked at Scot who shook his head to indicate he hadn’t made any contact.

“What do you think?” said Maxwell.

“I don’t know and I don’t want to cry wolf to the rest of Goldilocks’ detail just yet. I’ll try my Deer Valley radio. If that doesn’t work, then we harden up.” *Harden up* was the Secret Service term for immediately closing ranks and body shielding their assignment from any potential threat.

Scot tried three times to raise Deer Valley’s ski patrol and then tried Deer Valley’s operations station. There was no response. All of the radios were completely down. Scot let out a loud whistle, catching the attention of the rest of the detail agents, and gave the *Harden Up* command by waving his gloved index finger in a high, *circle the wagons* motion above his head.

In a matter of seconds, Amanda’s protective detail had her completely surrounded. There was an incredible array of weaponry drawn, from H&K MP5’s to SIG-Sauer semi-automatics and even a modified Benelli M1 tactical shotgun. The men’s eyes never stopped surveying the area as Scot explained that he had seen two of the President’s detail agents go down and all radio communication was dark.

There was probably a logical explanation. Ahern and Houchins could have simply wiped out and the radios *had* been acting up all day, with the weather as the most likely culprit, but that was not how the Secret Service was trained to think.

Operating procedure dictated that they take the fastest and safest route back to the command center immediately. With the loss of radio contact, Birdhouse would already have scrambled intercept teams to recover both details as quickly as possible. But, they were still a long way off. It was time to move.

Amanda saw her chance to break in and asked, “Scot, what’s going on?”

“Probably nothing Mandie, but we need to get you back down to the house as quickly as possible,” said Scot. “You’ve done an awesome job today. I’m really proud of you. Your skiing is red hot. Now, the normal way we go home would take us a bit too long. If we ski through the bowl, I can have you sipping hot chocolate by the fire with your dad in fifteen minutes. What do you say?”

“This is about him, isn’t it? Has something happened? Is he okay?”

“I’m sure he is, and the quicker we get back, the quicker you’ll see for yourself. Do you think you can do the bowl with me? I’ll be right next to you.”

“I don’t know. I think I can handle it.”

“Good girl.”

Scot smiled reassuringly at Amanda and gave the order to move out. The

detail dropped over the icy lip into the steep bowl. The wind grew more fierce and sent sharp blasts of snow into their faces. Amanda was slow, but at least she was moving forward. It was terrifying for her, but to her credit, she was doing everything Scot had taught her - weight on the downhill ski in the turns, leaning forward into her boots, and keeping her hands out in front as if she were holding onto a tray.

Even though Amanda's cautious skiing slowed them down, it looked like they were going to make it without incident.

Then the detail heard what sounded like the crack of a rifle, followed by the low rumble of a thunderhead. Scot had been around mountains too long not to recognize that sound.

Avalanche.