

PROLOGUE

Leland Babbitt shot through the doors of the Hay-Adams Hotel and ran down the steps to the street like he had someplace to be.

The White House was just across Lafayette Square, awash in lights and radiant in the cold rainy evening, but Babbitt ignored the view, looked to his right, and began racing toward the limo waiting for him there.

The chauffeur hadn't been expecting his passenger for another hour and a half, but he was a pro; he quickly extracted himself from the warm Town Car and opened the back door. He noticed that the man seemed to have forgotten his overcoat in his haste—to say nothing of his wife.

The thickly built passenger folded quickly into the limo; the driver climbed back behind the wheel and looked into the rearview mirror for instructions.

In a voice commanding yet hurried, Babbitt said, "Sixteen twenty-six Crescent Place. Break every law you need to break, but get me there now!"

The chauffeur didn't know his passenger; he'd only been hired for the night to ferry Mr. Babbitt and his wife from their home in Chevy Chase to a black-tie gala here at the Hay-Adams, and then back home again. But the driver knew this town. He'd been shuffling VIPs around D.C. for a quarter century; this wasn't the first time some suit

had told him to blow through the lights to get to a destination on the double.

He started the engine. “You got a badge?” he asked, still making eye contact with the man in the backseat via the rearview mirror.

“Play like I said yes.”

The chauffeur’s eyebrows rose now. He’d danced this dance before. “National security?” he asked.

“You bet your ass.”

With a shrug the driver said, “That’ll work,” and he shoved the transmission into gear and squealed the tires. Behind him, his passenger lifted his cell phone to his ear.

“En route.”

The chauffeur couldn’t imagine what was so important on Crescent Place, a two-lane road of majestic Georgians and neo-Colonials, and he was certain he would never know. This was D.C., after all. Shit went down behind the gates of tony residences all over the city that was far above the driver’s pay grade.

His job began at the front door of one building, and it ended at the front door of another, and whatever went on inside was not his problem.

Babbitt had his phone clutched to his ear now, and even at speed the driver could hear the man’s voice clearly over the engine of the whisper-quiet Lincoln—short, soft blasts of interrogatives and shorter bleats that sounded like commands. The man behind the wheel did his best to tune the words out, standard operating procedure for a limo driver in Washington. Twenty-five years hauling dips, pols, spooks, K Street douchebags, and foreign dignitaries around the nation’s capital had taught the driver discretion, to ignore his passenger’s voice unless he himself was being addressed.

He could have listened in; surely the fate of nations had been decided in the backseat of his limo more than once in his career.

But the driver, quite frankly, didn't give a damn.

And tonight, even if he had tried to pick up any of his passenger's side of the conversation, he would have heard only generic phrases, cryptic-speak, and alphanumeric references. The man in back had himself spent a lot of time in limos, and he had his own standard operating procedure when being chauffeured around—if he did not know good and well that the guy behind the wheel had Top Secret/Sensitive Compartmented Information clearance with a full-scope polygraph and codeword access to the relevant program, then it was cryptic-speak or nothing at all.

Leland Babbitt had been in this game too damn long to rely on the professional discretion of a fucking limo driver.

ONE

The Lincoln squealed through a hard left turn, drifting in the slick intersection awash in the glow of headlights from angry oncoming traffic. It raced up Crescent Place and then past a small, unlit sign that read *Townsend Government Services*. After squeezing through electronically operated iron gates still in the process of opening, it rolled up a winding driveway lined with bare cherry trees to a huge peach-hued brick mansion bathed in floodlights. Lee Babbitt climbed out of the Lincoln without a word to the driver and ran through the cold rain up the stone steps of the residence, passing through a door held open by a lean man in a sport coat.

In the round marble foyer of the building, two more young men with military haircuts and civilian clothing stood with Heckler & Koch automatic weapons hanging from slings over their shoulders. Before anyone spoke, a man in his late thirties, some decade younger than Babbitt, came rushing up a long hallway that led to the rear of the building. He wore a cardigan sweater and corduroy slacks, and an assortment of card keys and laminated badges bounced on his chest from a chain around his neck.

Babbitt met the younger man in the middle of the foyer, and his voice echoed off marble. "It's happening?"

"It's happening," the man in the cardigan confirmed.

"The assault is underway?"

"Infiltrating to target as we speak."

“One man? *One man* is going to hit that fucking fortress?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And it’s him? It’s our boy?”

Jeff Parks took his boss by the arm and quickly ushered him back up the hall. “We think so.”

“You’ll have to do better than that,” Babbitt said. While he walked, he unfastened his bow tie and opened the top button on his shirt, freeing his thick neck. “There is more than one motherfucker out there who wants to stick a knife into the neck of Gregor Sidorenko.”

The long hallway was trimmed in stained cherry, and the tastefully lit walls were adorned with fine art of the American West. There were Russell watercolors of cowboys on a cattle drive, regal George Catlin portraits of Native Americans, and a pair of Frederick Remington desertscapes worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, as well as a Remington bronzed buffalo statue on a side table lit by antler lamps.

As they rushed up the corridor, Babbitt pulled off his damp jacket and slung it over his arm. He asked, “How did we pick him up?”

“One of the UAVs was up on a calibration flight. No one expected activity tonight. It’s Saturday; a party was in full swing at the target location until about an hour ago, which put three times the number of personnel on scene as normal. Plus, the weather’s shit and the next illumination cycle isn’t for two days.”

“Right.”

“The ScanEagle pilot spotted movement a half mile off the coast. We tracked the signature for less than a minute before determining we were most likely looking at a singleton attack on Sid’s property.”

“Speedboat?”

“Negative.”

“Scuba? That water must be less than forty deg—”

“He’s not swimming.”

“Then how—”

Parks stopped at a door and looked up to his boss with a grin. “You need to see this shit for yourself.”

Parks scanned a card from his chain through a reader next to a heavy oaken door, then opened the door to reveal a staircase. He followed his boss down, the older man’s patent leather shoes echoing in the stairwell. At the base of the stairs was another corridor; this one went back in the opposite direction, and it was, in contrast to the hallway above, narrow, dimly lit, and utilitarian, though its walls were also adorned.

As the two men hurried up the hall they passed several lighted shadow boxes of differing size. Inside the first ones were tintypes and wet-plate prints of severe, bearded men in black coats and top hats, hefting shotguns and standing alongside caskets propped up, dead men inside pine boxes looking back at the photographer with eyes covered with coins. With these photos were mounted artifacts of the Old West—faded telegrams, single-action revolvers, stirrups and handcuffs, even a man’s dress shirt, torn and stained with old black blood.

Babbitt and Parks ignored the shadow boxes as they walked. They’d passed them countless times. “So we have no assets in place?” Babbitt asked.

“I established comms with Trestle Actual, told him he had twenty mikes to assemble his boys and kit up. They are thirty miles away in St. Pete on R & R, but no worries. The UAV will track the target through the exfil. We’ve found him.” A satisfied smile. “We’ll get him.”

A display containing a costume beard and wads of deutschmarks taken from a captured Serbian war criminal was on their left now, and, on their right, a photograph of two men with wide smiles and thumbs up, their eyes obscured with superimposed black bands, standing next to a bleary-eyed and shackled Manuel Noriega in the back of a cargo aircraft.

A gold automatic pistol taken from one of Saddam’s palaces was

mounted in a case near the end of the hallway, and a row of photos of more men and even a few women, their eyes again blacked out, standing around men with bagged heads and shackles.

The hallway displayed the secret history of this organization, a force of outlaw hunters that reached back one hundred fifty years, and although neither of the two men hurrying up the corridor were thinking of it now, they fully expected to commission a new memorial very soon to commemorate the successful resolution of their current hunt.

At the end of the hall was a well-lit alcove, and here another man with a military haircut stood at parade rest next to a small desk. An HK submachine gun hung from a sling over his shoulder, and to his right, a heavy steel door was flush with the wall.

A small sign on the door read SIGNAL ROOM—BIOMETRIC ACCESS ONLY.

The guard at the door said, “Evening, Mr. Babbitt. Sweet tux.”

Lee Babbitt placed his hand on a small screen on the wall next to the door. As he waited there for the biometric finger reader to confirm his identity, he acknowledged the man. “Al.”

“Just say the word and we’re wheels up.”

Babbitt shrugged as he waited impatiently. “Trestle’s turn at bat, Al. Jumper’s on deck. You guys will get a shot next time.”

A muffled click came from inside the door, and Al reached for the handle, pulling it open and allowing Babbitt and Parks to pass through.

As the two men entered, the guard outside shut the door behind them and the heavy lock reengaged.

This room was lit only by computer monitors and video screens; the opposite wall was half-filled with a ten-foot-wide and seven-foot-high plasma display, and small glass-walled offices ran off the left and right of the main area. A young woman in jeans and a Georgetown sweatshirt appeared in the dim glow and handed Babbitt and Parks wireless

headsets, which they both donned. The room was mostly quiet, though alive with movement on every display. Men and women, some dozen in all, sat at their desks, attached by headset umbilical cords to communications equipment and computers.

Babbitt was still positioning his earpiece and pulling the microphone into place over his lips as he asked, "Time to target?"

A female voice came through his headset. "Feet dry in ten seconds. He'll be on the X in under five mikes."

Babbitt stared at the center screen. An infrared image was projected in the middle, and it was surrounded by digital readouts. Altitude, temperature, barometric pressure, compass heading, and wind speed.

He leaned closer, squinting at the image being tracked by the camera.

The female voice followed up her last transmission. "Feet dry. Oh three five six local time."

The cold sea had sharpened the relief of the target when it traveled over water, but now, over land, the image was less clear. A sensor operator flipped a button and the infrared signature reversed. Now the white-hot moving object became black-hot, the earth below turned lighter hues of gray, and the new picture clearly identified the target as a man under a small delta wing, with an engine pouring heat into the cold air behind it.

"What the hell am I looking at?" Babbitt asked the room, a tinge of marvel in his voice.

Next to him, Parks answered, "He's *flying*, Lee. It's a one-man air raid."

"Flying *what*?" Babbitt muttered, and he stepped closer to the screen. "That's not an airplane. Not a helo, either."

"No sir, it is not," Parks confirmed with a smile.

TWO

Four thousand four hundred fifty-two miles east of Washington, D.C., a small craft buzzed six hundred feet above snow-covered treetops, its thin fluttering wings reaching wide for lift in the unstable air and its sharp nose pointing toward its next waypoint, just under a kilometer away.

St. Petersburg glowed gray in the east, its waterfront lights barely penetrating the snow and the darkness. To the west was nothing but black. The Gulf of Finland. Open water all the way to Helsinki, nearly two hundred miles distant.

And directly ahead, a few pinpricks of light. The hamlet of Ushkovo was not much, just a dozen homes and buildings and a railroad station, but it was surrounded by the Lintula Larch Forest, so the lights on there at four A.M. made an easily identifiable waypoint for the man flying through the black sky.

The aircraft was a microlight trike, a hang glider with a tiny fiberglass open cockpit below for the pilot and a propeller behind to give powered flight. Courtland Gentry flew with his gloved hands on the control bar. His eyes darted between the lights ahead and a small tablet computer Velcroed to his thigh. The tablet kept him informed of his altitude, his speed, and his position by way of a GPS fix over a tiny moving map display.

He also had an anemometer attached to the center console, and this told him his wind speed every five seconds. It varied by as much as ten knots from one reading to the next as the coastal breeze buffeted the

delta wing, however, so it wasn't providing him much in the way of actionable intelligence.

Court wore NOD's, a night observation device, but the monocle was high on his forehead now, stowed up in a way that made Court look like a unicorn. The night vision technology was better than nothing, but this unit was old and simple and the device only allowed him a forty-degree field of view. This narrow field, and a lens no doubt wet with the blowing snowfall, made the NOD's ineffective at this altitude, but he knew he would be forced to use it as he neared his target.

Court passed just west of Ushkovo, his buzzing engine just out of earshot of the sleeping villagers, then banked twenty degrees east to his new heading, deeper in the Lintula Larch Forest. He added power and pushed the bar forward slightly, and his microlight began to climb higher into the snowy air.

Ahead in the distance a new pinprick of light grew into a thumbnail of light as he closed on it. It was the town of Rochino, and just east of that a palatial mansion rose from the trees, four stories high and surrounded by outbuildings and other structures.

This was the target, the objective waypoint.

The X.

As he neared Rochino, Court reluctantly unfastened a wool blanket he'd lashed over his legs and he tossed it over the side, letting it fall away to the forest below.

Now he ran his hands over his body and in the cockpit around him, putting his hands on each piece of his critical gear, methodically making one last check that everything was both secure and positioned for easy access.

Over a black cotton fleece and black cotton pants that would have been no real protection from the cold without the wool base layers under them, Gentry had only a few pounds of equipment strapped to his body. It was not much gear, but Court had cut kit for mobility and ease of access, and he'd cut weight for speed.

He'd spent months preparing for tonight, and his load out reflected this. He wore a Glock 19 nine-millimeter pistol in a thigh rig with an attached silencer that reached all the way to his knee on the outside of his right leg.

On his lower back was a nylon pack that held two cables, each one attached to a climbing harness under his clothes, and they were both spooled around electric spring retractors. One of the cables was quarter-inch climbing rope; the other was a thicker bungee cord. Collapsible remote activated grappling hooks were attached to the end of each cord, with the rubber-tipped noses of the titanium hooks protruding from the nylon bag for quick access.

On his belt he'd strapped the controls for the retractors and the hooks, a cell phone-sized panel consisting of four small three-position levers.

Also adorning his utility belt was a multi-tool in a pouch and two black-bladed combat knives in quick-access sheaths.

He wore a small backpack stuffed with clothing and a medical kit, and on his black, low-profile chest rig, magazines for his nine-millimeter were fastened in Velcro pouches, as well as a 26.5-millimeter single-shot flare gun that looked like a snub-nosed revolver with a fat barrel. It was loaded with a smoke grenade, and several more ballistic smokes adorned his chest rig, held in place with Velcro straps.

On his right ankle Court wore a Glock 26, a subcompact nine-millimeter pistol. He was hoping he wouldn't have to go for the 26 since it was not suppressed, but Court had been around long enough to know to be prepared.

Back when he was with the CIA, his principal trainer's name was Maurice, and Maurice used to preach preparedness versus luck with a mantra, often shouted into Gentry's ear when he'd left something to chance. "Hope in one hand and shit in the other. See which one fills up first!"

That visual never left Court when hoping for the best, or when preparing for the worst.

Court shivered in the cold; he missed that blanket already, but he ignored the discomfort, checked his altitude, and pushed the control bar forward again for more lift.

With a jaw fixed in determination he looked to his target in the distance, reached to his center console, and added full power to the engine.

At Townsend House in D.C., the fourteen men and women in the signal room watched an infrared black-hot heat signature float over a hazy white forest on the other side of the world. After a command from a surveillance technician over the comms link to the drone pilot, a laser reached out from the UAV. It touched the moving craft like an invisible finger and then reported the speed and altitude back to the sensor operator.

A disembodied male voice spoke through the headsets. "He's in the climb and accelerating."

Babbitt was still trying to get his head around the event unfolding in front of him. "How does he expect to make it to the target area without the Russians hearing that thing?" he asked.

A young man answered from his desk near the front of the room. "We assume he will cut power for stealth. The wind is inland from the water, at his back. Even with the weight of the engine and the cockpit, that microlight's glide ratio is good. If he climbs to a thousand feet or so, he can sail a good two or three clicks while totally silent."

"And *then* what? He just lands on the lawn?" That seemed, to Babbitt, like a terrible idea. Even though the first rays of morning light would not appear over northwestern Russia for another four hours, everyone in the basement signal room knew Sidorenko's property was crawling with gunmen.

A female voice said, “We think he will try to land on the north side of the property—*crash-land* is probably the better term. There is less security there, but still, he’s going to have to pull a few tricks out of his sleeve to make this happen.”

Babbitt did not avert his eyes from the screen. He said, “He’s thought this through. He knows what he’s doing. If he’s got a way in, he’s got a way out.” The prospect of losing this opportunity to get his man was almost too much to contemplate. “The UAV team on site. How close are they?”

Jeff Parks was still at his boss’s side. “They are in Rochino. Two clicks from the X.”

Lee called out to the room in a voice unnecessarily loud, considering he was wearing a head mic. “Who’s in contact with the UAV team in Rochino?”

“I am, sir,” said a middle-aged African American woman. She stood at her workstation to Babbitt’s right, the coiled wire of her headset hanging from the side of her head down to her commo box.

“I want their second drone in the air and loitering on station. Bring the other ScanEagle down and refuel it. We can’t lose him when this is over.”

“On it, sir.”

Parks said, “Lee, there are fifty armed men around that dacha. We have to allow for the possibility that this will end, tonight, right inside those walls.”

Babbitt chuffed. “If Sid’s boys kill him, we don’t get paid. Tonight I’m rooting for Court Gentry.”

Court looked at the moving map on his thigh one last time, then pulled the tablet off his leg and tossed it over the side of the microlight. He then reached down between his knees to the tiny console and flipped a switch, killing power to the engine behind him. The propeller slowed,

then stopped; all engine noise ceased and, other than a soft flapping of the wind over the fabric of the delta wing, Gentry was enveloped by the silence and stillness and darkness of the night.

The sensation was startling. He soared quietly through the air, riding a powerful and comforting tailwind eight hundred fifty feet above the treetops, his target dead ahead at twelve o'clock. He flipped down his NOD's and the green haze from his image-intensifying equipment, diffused by the wet lens, added to this surreal experience.

He descended slowly, sailing silently toward his objective way-point, a spot just above the tiled roof of the massive dacha in the center of the target location.

He'd be involved in furious activity in moments, but for now there was little to do but hold the control bar steady and clear his mind to prepare himself for the unknowns of the impending op.

And, Court admitted to himself, there were a hell of a lot of unknowns.

He was not here by choice, although he was under contract. The man in the dacha at his target location, Gregor Sidorenko, was the head of a large and dangerous *Bratva*, or brotherhood of Russian mafia, and Sidorenko had spent the past year chasing Court, quite literally, to the ends of the earth, sparing no expense in the hunt.

Sid operated in a state of rage and fear and obsessive compulsion. Sid knew that if he did not kill Gentry, then surely Gentry would kill him. Gentry realized this; he knew Sid would never stop throwing men and money at the task, so Court knew he could not keep running.

He had to attack into this threat.

To this end Court made contact with a competitor of Sidorenko, the leader of a Moscow-based *Bratva*, and the two men negotiated a contract price. The Muscovite mobster used his extensive organization to help Gentry with equipment and intelligence, and this, along with training Gentry underwent near Moscow, had all coalesced into this evening's operation.

Court didn't like partnering with the Muscovite and his shitty

gang any more than he liked taking on Sidorenko and *his* shitty gang, but he knew he had no choice.

Court had to take out Sid, and in so doing reduce the incredible number of threats against him by a grand total of one.

It wasn't much, but it was something.

Court flipped the NOD's back up for a moment and made a slight course correction. He reached down and unfastened his seat belt, then grabbed the metal hook at the end of a bungee cord attached to the fiberglass cockpit of the vehicle. This he hooked into a hole drilled into the right side of the control bar. He pulled a slightly less taut cord on the left side of the cockpit, and this he hooked on the left side of the bar. A third bungee connected the center of the bar and the front of the cockpit.

He let go of the control bar, and the microlight continued to fly, steady in its descent, its fluttering wings held in place with the bungee cables. Each end of the control bar had a long cord tied around it and stored in a bag, and Court removed the cords and tossed one over each side of the cockpit.

Stowed under his knees on the floor of the cockpit was a small vinyl gym bag. He retrieved it, opened it up, and pulled out a banded string of fireworks, sixty in all. There were several different sizes, shapes, and functions. Glowing rockets; super loud, flashless boomers; and multistage aerial shells. Like Christmas lights, each of the fireworks was attached with a wick to a long fuse, and the fuse terminated in a small black metal box, inside which was housed a wireless igniter. Court quickly pulled the band from the collection, then let the fourteen-foot-long snake of small explosives drop over the side of the craft, whipping through the darkness to the forest below.

Quickly now Court unhooked a rope ladder attached to the left side of the aircraft, then gingerly turned, kicked his legs out and over, and found the first rung of the ladder with his foot.

The wings did not like the jarring movement; the craft banked left, then back to the right when Court leaned back over the cockpit to right

the turn. Gentry worried he'd given up more altitude in the past few seconds than he had to lose, but the tailwind kept him steady enough, and he knew there was little he could do now but hope for the best.

With one last glance to check the stability of the control bar, he disappeared over the side, descending into the darkness over the tree-tops, sailing forward at just over twenty-five miles an hour. As he descended he reached out and found the control bar cords, giving him basic ability to steer the delta wing while under the cockpit.

Lee Babbitt watched the ten-foot plasma display while he barked instructions into his headset. "I want that UAV down closer. No thermal, no infrared. We need visual confirmation of the target. He isn't Sid's only enemy. If this turns out to be some other asshole who—"

Babbitt stopped talking as the black-hot figure moved off the side of the small vehicle but did not fall; instead he hung there, below the cockpit, and then he lowered into thin air.

Fourteen men and women gasped into their live mics.

This was clearly not some other asshole.

"Never mind," Lee Babbitt said. "That's Gentry."

Babbitt felt the hair stand on the back of his neck. It had been a long wait, tens of thousands of man-hours of prep and hold, but there was money in the budget for the hunt, and there were incentive bonuses and cost-plus billing and hazard pay bumps that kept his employees on task and his drones in the air.

And a wide-open spigot of black fund dollars from the CIA made this all possible.

The ScanEagle's sensor operator switched from the thermal camera to the night vision camera, and he zoomed in on the man below the cockpit, revealing a rope ladder some seventy-five feet long.

Gentry descended, hand over hand, quickly and adroitly climbing down the ladder.

“Who the hell is flying the microlight?” someone asked.

“No one,” said Parks. “He’s stabilized the wings, trimmed them to maintain a straight descent, probably by tying the control bar in position. He’s trusting that it will stay on its glide path till he lands.”

“Bet he’s going for the roof,” someone said into his mic. And then he added, softly, “Jee-sus, this guy is brazen.”

Lee Babbitt pulled off his headset and grabbed Parks by the arm, drawing him closer. With his eyes still on the screen, Babbitt spoke quickly, “Deploy the assets. Trestle to the target location. Alert Jumper Actual in Berlin and tell him to get his team on standby, ready to react to intel from the UAV. I want everyone on the move and prepared to tail Court off the X to his safe house, or wherever the hell he’s going, before the last shell casing hits the floor at Sid’s place.”

“Roger that,” Parks then asked, “What about the singleton?”

Babbitt turned away from the screen for the first time since entering the signal room. He blew out a long sigh. “He called it, didn’t he? Gentry is doing just exactly what the singleton said he’d do.”

“Yes, sir.”

Babbitt thought for a moment. With a quick nod he said, “Okay. Establish comms with Dead Eye. Have him drop his current op. I want him wheels up within the hour.”

Parks left his boss’s side and headed to a glass-enclosed office off the signal room’s main floor.

Babbitt stayed where he was; he watched the image of the man below the microlight again. Gentry was now less than eighty feet above the ground, just a few moments from crossing over the outer wall of Sid’s dacha.

Babbitt reached behind him and, without taking his eyes from the screen, pulled a rolling chair away from a desk.

He sat down. “Ladies and gentlemen, there is nothing left for us to do but to sit back and observe a master at work. It’s not every day you get to watch the Gray Man kill in real time.”