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Act of Treason

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WASHINGTON, DC

JANUARY

Irene Kennedy looked out at the white landscape from her seventh-floor office. Three fresh inches of snow had fallen overnight. The capital had a majestic winter wonderland feel to it when it snowed. It tended to be the kind of wet, heavy snow that coated every branch, statue, and park bench. The city looked frozen in time, and in a sense it was. A lame-duck president occupied 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, and the president-elect was one week away from taking his oath of office. Traditionally, the only business that got done the week before the inauguration was the business of pardons. Lawyers, lobbyists, and big-money players lined up to ask the president to forgive someone for a crime they had committed, or been accused of committing. Politics had gotten so rough that sometimes just being a friend of the president could bring about the unwanted attention of a special prosecutor. With that attention also came a mountain of legal bills. It was quickly becoming a tradition for outgoing presidents to wave a magic wand and make these legal problems go away. Pardons could also be about bricks and mortar. A new presidential library needed to be built, and they were not cheap. With this president, however, it was mostly about setting things right.

This should have been on Kennedy's mind, but it wasn't. As director of the Central Intelligence Agency she should have been lobbying for a blanket pardon herself, but her mind was occupied with the here and now. This transition period between presidential administrations was always stressful, but even more so this time. The nation was without decisive and focused leadership until the new administration took over, and that left them vulnerable. To make matters worse, the word was out that the new administration was going to clean house. This was no surprise to Kennedy. She knew the minute the election results came in that she was out of a job. Actually, she knew several weeks earlier when the CIA's Global Ops Center called to alert her of the attack on that Saturday in late October.

The motorcade of presidential candidate Josh Alexander had been hit by a car bomb. Alexander and his running mate had narrowly escaped. Their limousine had been flipped by the blast of the bomb, but the structural integrity of the outer shell held. Alexander walked away unharmed while his running mate, Mark Ross, suffered a separated shoulder and a cut above his left eye. The second limousine did not fare as well. The front third of the vehicle collapsed under the blast and exposed Alexander's wife and three Secret Service agents to the superheated gases of the explosion. All four people were virtually incinerated. Fifteen other individuals were also killed, and another thirty-four were wounded, seven of them critically.

An al-Qaeda splinter group had released a statement the week before the attack that they were going to disrupt the American elections. In the immediate aftermath of the explosion, Kennedy had a pretty good idea how the American people would react to such foreign intervention in the democratic process. Two weeks later they proved her right. They turned out in record numbers on election day, and Josh Alexander and Mark Ross were swept into office by a landslide. Shortly after the election Ross began making statements to the press that he was going to do a top-down review of the CIA. That was code for cleaning house.

Despite twenty-three years of service, Kennedy took none of this personally. It simply wasn't worth it. The people had spoken, and in one week there would be the peaceful transfer of power from one administration to another. Her chief focus for this last week would be to purge every possible piece of information that could come back and bite her, or any of her people, in the ass. Part of her unpleasant history with Ross was that he was a vindictive prick. Simply running her out of the job after two brief years as the first female director of the Agency might not be enough for him. Kennedy felt there was a real chance he would want to burn her at the stake, tie her up in investigations for the next decade. She made a mental note to ask President Hayes for that blanket pardon. After all she'd done it would not be out of line to do so.

Kennedy took her eyes off the frozen landscape and checked her watch. They were late. It must be the snow, she thought to herself. It was a Saturday morning, and Kennedy worked most Saturday mornings. At least for another week. For all she knew, they'd take away her pass and cardkey when she showed up for work a week from Monday. That would be Ross's style. He'd make it as painful and embarrassing as possible.

There was an upside to all of this. At least, that was what she kept telling herself. At forty-five, she'd given twenty-three years of her life to the CIA. She had a beautiful ten-year-old son whom she didn't get to spend enough time with. Soon he would enter that stage where he would want nothing to do with her. This premature departure from the Agency would give her a chance to spend more time with him. It was no secret in Washington that she was on her way out. She'd already received two offers from local universities to teach, three from think tanks, and another from a private security firm. That was without lifting a finger. She tried to stay positive. Tried to tell herself they were great options, but in the end nothing else would match the mission and the people she worked with. That was what bothered her most.

There was a knock on the door and then it opened. Kennedy smiled when she saw it was Skip McMahon.

"Sorry I'm late," said the hulking six-foot-four FBI special agent. "People in this town lose their minds when it snows."

"It's a good thing it's a Saturday."

McMahon was holding a large briefcase. He crossed the room and kissed Kennedy on the cheek.

"So what's this all about? Have you finally decided to announce your intention to marry me and make me an honest man?"

Kennedy smiled and gestured toward the sitting area. "Coffee or tea?"

"Since when do I drink tea?"

She poured him a cup of coffee while McMahon sat on the couch. He kept the briefcase close. Kennedy handed him the cup and sat in one of the wing chairs.

The FBI man gestured with his hands and said, "I half expected you to have all of your stuff boxed up and ready to go."

Kennedy sipped her tea. "Do you know something I don't?"

"Funny." McMahon looked around the wood paneled office ignoring her feigned naiveté. The walls were covered with photos of people and places. Some of the photos were self-explanatory: former CIA directors, the Twin Towers, the Berlin Wall. Others were more obscure: a baby's hand wrapped around a father's finger, a demolished building with a man standing in the foreground sobbing, and a group of Arab women covered in black from head to toe walking down a dusty street. McMahon had been to the office many times. A naturally inquisitive person, he had asked Kennedy about some of the photos before. Her response was always the same. She simply smiled and changed the subject. It occurred to him that this might be his last chance to glean the importance of the more cryptic shots.

"The photo of the Arab women in black. Is that Saudi Arabia?"

"No. Yemen."

"Why do you have it in a frame?"

"It's a reminder of the subjugation of women in the Arab culture."

McMahon nodded. "That's what I thought."

Kennedy began laughing.

"What?" asked McMahon.

"It's not a reminder of the subjugation of Arab women. It's actually a team of Delta Force commandos who were on their way to say hello to an individual who, let's just say, wasn't playing by the rules."

"You're shitting me?" McMahon stood up so he could examine the photo more closely. "Who were they going after?"

"That's classified."

"Did they get him?"

Kennedy nodded.

"Good." McMahon settled back into his spot on the couch. "So what's the deal with the meeting this morning?"

"Do you know Cap Baker?"

"The Republican strategist."

"Yes."

"He's the mystery person you dragged me out here to see?"

"He assured me it was in your best interest."

A scowl of irritation fell across McMahon's leathered face. "Why in the hell would I want to spend two minutes with a political whore, especially a Republican one?"

Kennedy looked at her watch and ignored the question.

"Why the hell didn't he just come see me at the Hoover Building?"

Before Kennedy could answer, there was a knock on the door. A second later it opened and Cap Baker entered. If it weren't for his signature shock of gray hair they might not have recognized him. They were used to seeing him on TV wearing suits, expensive shirts, and fancy ties. He was rumored to charge eight hundred dollars an hour for his advice and lobbying skills. This morning he was dressed in boots, khakis, and a plaid flannel shirt. A puffy winter jacket was held under his right arm. A second man, wearing a suit, followed him into the room.

"Sorry we're late," announced Baker in his deep baritone voice. "The roads are horrible."

Kennedy stood to meet the visitors. "That's all right." She extended her hand. "Cap."

Baker took it. "Thank you for seeing me. I know this is a bit unusual."

McMahon stood but stayed silent. Baker turned to the FBI man. "I promise you, Special Agent McMahon, this will not be a waste of your time." As if he could sense McMahon's disdain, Baker didn't bother to offer his hand. Instead, he gestured to the man who had followed him into the office. "This is my attorney, Charles Wright. He won't be staying long. Sit." He motioned with his hands. "Sit."

McMahon and Kennedy took their seats, and Baker and his attorney grabbed two smaller chairs opposite McMahon. Kennedy gestured to the tea and coffee service on the table, but before she could speak, Baker declined.

"No, thank you. I have a plane waiting to take me to Vail. I need to get the hell out of this town before all the crazies start showing up for the inauguration."

"Vail," McMahon said with feigned excitement, "I would have taken you for an Aspen man."

Baker smiled. "Aspen is a Democratic ski town, Agent McMahon. Vail is where us Republicans go."

"Life must be rough," replied McMahon.

Baker stared at the FBI man for a moment. The smile on his face was one of amusement. "I like you. You're an open book. You don't know me, but you don't like me, and that's fine because in about five minutes I'm going to walk out that door and we're never going to see each other again."

"Is that right?" asked an amused McMahon.

"Yep . . . and you're never going to forget this meeting."

"Why's that?"

"Because what I'm about to give you is going to change your life."

"Is that right?" McMahon didn't sound too convinced.

"Yep, but before we get started, there's one piece of business we need to take care of."

Baker looked to his attorney and nodded. The attorney opened his large briefcase and extracted a file. He handed the file to Baker, who opened it and grabbed three contracts. He kept one for himself and handed the other two to Kennedy and McMahon.

"What's this?" asked McMahon.

"Confidentiality agreement," answered Baker. "I'd tell you to read it, but I don't have that much time. Just turn it to the last page and sign and date. Charles will notarize each signature and then we can get this over with."

"This is bullshit." McMahon tossed the contract on the table. "I'm not signing anything."

Baker looked to Kennedy, who was speed-reading through the document. "Irene?"

Without looking up, she asked, "Cap, tell me why it would be in my interest to sign this."

"It's not in your interest. It's in mine. But if you want to see what I have inside that briefcase, you're going to have to sign this contract."

"Why us?" asked McMahon.

"Good question." Baker placed his hands on his knees and thought about it for a second. "Three reasons where you're concerned, Special Agent McMahon. The first, as far as feds are concerned, you're someone who is known for his discretion. The second, what I'm about to show you will have a direct impact on your current investigation."

"And your third point?"

"You're a son of a bitch, you hate politicians, and you can't be bought."

"That's five points," McMahon said flatly.

"Yeah," Baker grinned, "but the last three kind of go together, so we'll just count them as one."

"He's hard to argue with," smiled Kennedy. She then turned to Baker and asked, "Why me?"

"That's easy. I lived in awe of Thomas Stansfield and so did you. He was a good friend . . . a mentor. This town has never had anyone who worked so effectively behind the scenes. Before he died he told me to keep an eye on you. He also told me that you were someone I could trust."

Kennedy pulled off her reading glasses and looked at Baker. Thomas Stansfield had occupied this very office until cancer took his life two years earlier. He had also been a mentor to Kennedy. He was the greatest man she had ever known and he had told her the same thing about Baker. Without further thought, Kennedy flipped the contract to the last page and signed above her printed name.

"What are you doing?" asked McMahon.

Kennedy slid the contract in front of Baker so he could sign. "Skip, just sign it so we can get this over with. I don't think Cap would have gone to this effort if it wasn't something serious."

"But I need to run this by Justice. I can't just go around signing confidentiality agreements while I'm on the government dime."

Kennedy glanced at him sideways. "Since when do you care about what Justice thinks? Just let go of your control issues and sign it."

Kennedy handed him her pen. McMahon hesitated for a second and then took it and signed his name.

"If this comes back and bites me in the ass, I'm going to make someone's life miserable."

Baker laughed as he took the contract from McMahon. "Don't worry, in about two minutes this contract is going to be the least of your worries."

The attorney finished notarizing the contracts and placed them back in the briefcase. Baker stuck out his hand and Wright gave him a legal-size manila envelope.

"Thank you, Charles. Why don't you wait for me down in the car."

The attorney left without saying a word, and when the door closed behind him McMahon said, "This better be pretty fucking good."

"That's going to depend on how you look at it." Baker stared at the mysterious envelope in his hands. "Let me ask you something, Agent McMahon. How is your investigation going?"

"That's confidential."

"I hear it's pretty one-dimensional."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Baker shrugged. "You guys are only looking at this one way."

"When all the evidence points in one direction, that's pretty much the way it works."

"All the evidence? From what I've heard there is very little evidence."

"You know what? I didn't come here to talk about my investigation with you. This meeting was your idea, and I think it's time you put your cards on the table."

"Fine." Baker nodded. He opened the sealed envelope and extracted a series of 8x10 black-and-white photographs. He turned the first one over and placed it on the coffee table so both McMahon and Kennedy could view it. It was a close-up of a woman. The photograph had the slightly grainy quality of a surveillance photo taken from a distance and then blown up.

"That, if you didn't know it already, is Jillian Rautbort. President-elect Alexander's deceased wife."

Baker grabbed a second photo and set it down next to the first. This one was not blown up. It showed Jillian Rautbort and a man. It was evening and they were standing on a terrace. Jillian was in a halter dress and the man was in a suit. Baker put down the next photo. This one was of just Jillian from the waist up. She had a very mischievous look on her face and she was reaching behind her neck with her hands.

Baker glanced at Kennedy. "This is where it gets interesting, and I apologize in advance, but you need to see this."

He laid down the next photo. Jillian Rautbort was now standing with her dress around her waist; her tanned and perfectly sized breasts exposed. Baker put the next photo down. Now Jillian and the man were kissing. The photo after that captured Jillian on her knees, her face buried in the mystery man's groin. Baker began lying the photos down like a blackjack dealer would cards. They showed Rautbort and her lover in an escalation of sexual acts culminating with him on his back on a lounge chair and her completely naked on top of him.

Baker placed the empty envelope on the table next to the photos and said, "That's pretty much it."

"Are you sure," asked Kennedy, "that the woman in these photos is Jillian Rautbort?"

"Yes."

"When were they taken, and how the hell did you get your hands on them?" McMahon asked.

"I think they were taken over Labor Day at the Rautbort estate in Palm Beach, and no, I didn't hire someone to do this."

"Then how in the hell did you get your hands on them?"

"I was contacted by the man who took them," replied Baker.

McMahon scoffed. "So you didn't hire him, but in the end you paid him."

"There is a distinction, Agent McMahon. I'm not going to sit here and tell you I'm an angel. Politics is a rough business. Since you were willing to sign my confidentiality agreement, I'll give you the straight facts. I paid for these photos. I paid a lot of money for these photos, and it was all legal. My only regret now is that I didn't destroy them the moment I received them."

"Why is that?" asked Kennedy.

"Because I allowed my ego to get in the way, and in the end it cost my candidate the White House."

"How could these photos have cost your candidate the White House?" asked a skeptical McMahon.

"There are very few people in the world who I truly despise. Mark Ross and Stu Garret are two of them."

Kennedy and McMahon shared a look, and McMahon said, "You'll get no argument from us."

"Well, with a month to go in the race, my guys had an eight-point lead, which, if you know how polls are conducted -- who answers their phone, who doesn't, who says they vote, and who actually votes, and all these national polls have a built-in bias for the Democrats -- with four weeks to go is huge, especially if you're on the Republican ticket. I never really wanted to buy these photos, and I certainly never wanted to use them. At least, not in terms of releasing them to the press."

"Then why did you buy them?" asked McMahon.

"To take them out of play," Kennedy answered.

"That's right. Elections are about controlling as many factors as possible, and I'll be damned if I was going to allow these things to float around and do God only knows what. The conventional wisdom would be that they would hurt the Alexander camp, but one never knows for sure. The smart thing is to leave nothing to chance. We were flush with cash, so I paid the guy."

"That was the only reason why you bought them?" Kennedy asked in a slightly skeptical tone.

Baker grinned. "There was one other small reason." He shifted in his chair and crossed his right leg over his left. "I wanted to make Garret and Ross sweat."

"You sent them these?" McMahon asked with his mouth agape.

"Only a few. I had them personally delivered to Garret's hotel room during a campaign stop in Dallas."

"Did he know you sent them?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"He may have guessed, but I made sure the delivery couldn't be traced back to me. I did, however, send a message along."

"What kind of message?"

"I only sent three photos. I wrote one word with a black Sharpie on each photo."

"What word?"

"Three words. You'll never win."

"You and Garret have a history?" asked Kennedy.

"You could say that. We've been on the opposite sides of some pretty big battles."

"And let me guess," said McMahon, "one of your favorite sayings with him was, You'll never win."

"Actually, he was the one who was fond of the saying."

"So you thought you'd rub his nose in it."

Baker nodded. "And if I'd just left it alone, I'd be the one getting ready for an inauguration, and they," Baker pointed at the photos on the table, "would still be alive."

"What do you mean, they?" asked McMahon.

"Jillian and the man she had the rendezvous with."

McMahon picked up one of the photos and pointed to the person underneath Jillian Rautbort. "This man is dead?"

"That man is Special Agent Matt Cash of the United States Secret Service."