

CHAPTER 1

Washington, DC

National Security Advisor Winfield “Duke” Cage nodded at the two Secret Service agents flanking the entrance to the White House situation room and adjusted the unfamiliar tie that was threatening to choke him.

The last time he’d stepped through this doorway, he’d quit as the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, effectively throwing away a career that had spanned two decades.

He’d sworn never to return. But that was under a different president, and while only eight months had passed, Cage was a different man, and the newly appointed national security advisor.

The room was smaller than he remembered but utterly familiar. The burnished wood of the massive table gleamed in the rays of the overhead lighting and cast its reflection on the flat-screens mounted to the walls. The blue and taupe carpet lay pristine, perfectly balancing the neutral coloring of the walls and the black leather chairs arranged around the room’s perimeter.

His eyes drifted over the faces of the most powerful figures in Washington, men who were responsible for guiding their new president, and Cage wondered if he had enough in him for one last battle.

His aide, Jacob Simmons, made his way through the scrum of

onlookers and as he handed Cage the daily intelligence brief said, "There is a problem. We need to talk."

At six foot four, Cage was built like an all-pro tight end and towered over his short and stocky aide. The two men had been a team since their days at West Point, and their relationship had been tested in the cauldron of battle on more than one occasion. Simmons was the only man on earth whom Cage trusted, and during his brief exile, he was the only man who had his back. He was also one of the most capable intelligence operatives he'd ever known.

"Not now," Cage replied, catching the secretary of defense slipping toward him out of the corner of his eye.

"Duke, we have a serious problem," he hissed.

"Handle it . . ."

"Cage," Secretary of Defense Collins exclaimed, dragging his attention away from his aide.

"Mr. Secretary," he replied formally.

"I was surprised when the president told me he appointed you," he began condescendingly.

"Not as surprised as I was," Cage replied, taking the secretary's outstretched hand and shaking it firmly.

He knew that Collins had fought hard to keep him off the president's cabinet, and while Collins didn't have the balls to come out and say it, the secretary was already working on bouncing him off Capitol Hill. But this wasn't the first time someone had been after his scalp, and Cage was already a step ahead.

His ace in the hole was that he didn't have to be confirmed before Congress and therefore could only be fired by the president. As long as he kept the man happy, he was good to go. Cage felt the SecDef squeeze his hand as he looked searchingly into the ex-general's eyes. He was challenging him already and the day hadn't even started.

One lesson Cage had taken from his time in the Green Berets was that it was important to assert dominance among the pack as soon as

possible, and he did this by slowly crushing his opponent's clammy grip until he could feel the thin, birdlike bones of the man's hand begin to compress against themselves. He pulled the man in close, as if to embrace him, and said, "Be careful, friend."

Just then the president walked into the room, surrounded by his top aides and chief of staff. Cage released his iron grip and stepped back as the leader of the free world looked at him and smiled broadly.

President John Bradley was thin and fit, with a deep tan and more than a passing resemblance to Robert Redford. The American public had been infatuated with his youthful exuberance and trustworthy gaze and he'd been elected in a sweeping landslide. Moving among those assembled, the president began working the room. He drew men to his side like moths to a flame, and Secretary Collins, like everyone else, was unable to resist. With one final stare, Collins turned his back on Cage and made a beeline for the most powerful man in the world.

"What the hell was that?" Simmons whispered, moving closer. "I thought we were laying low."

"Don't worry about him. Stick to the plan and he won't know what hit him."

"Look, we really need to talk. Something's come up in Kona."

Cage saw the president moving his way and wordlessly stepped forward, signaling to his aide that they would have to finish the conversation later. Despite his outward calm, he wished nothing more than to have a moment to find out what the hell was going on. Unfortunately, now wasn't the time.

"Duke," the president said, offering his hand and the famous smile that had gotten him elected.

The president was one of the few people Cage allowed to call him Duke. While it was a small thing to most people, the nickname was something reserved for those who had bled beside him in combat, and he guarded it jealously. The fact that Cage had fought with Bradley's father gave the president a free pass, but more than that,

Cage knew it was bad form to correct the President of the United States.

“Mr. President,” he replied, taking his hand and shaking it warmly.

“I can’t tell you how happy I am that you agreed to help me out.”

“Well, Mr. President, I didn’t figure you’d take no for an answer.”

President Bradley had naively promised the American people that he would end the war in the Middle East while restoring the country’s honor. But he needed Cage’s help to make good on the promise.

“I’m just thrilled to have you on the team,” he said, staring Cage deep in the eyes. “We have a lot of work to do.”

Cage nodded as the president’s chief of staff leaned in and said, “Mr. President, we are on a tight schedule.”

President Bradley winked and, releasing Cage’s hand, turned and walked back to his place at the head of the table.

CHAPTER 2

----- Marrakech, Morocco

Mason Kane checked his watch and tried not to scratch the sutures sewn into the bottom of his arm. The neat row of black lines looked like a hairless centipede crawling its way toward his elbow, but worse than that, it itched like hell.

He was a wanted man, disavowed by his own country, the only American to earn a kill-on-sight order.

Mason knew the Mideast better than any Westerner, but he was running out of places to hide. The day before, a man he hadn't seen in years had tried to assassinate him in Kona, and Mason had come to Marrakech looking for answers.

The clock was ticking, and with every intelligence agency in the Mideast looking for him, irritated sutures were not a priority.

The Berbers had named the city Mur Akush, or "land of God," and from a distance the name made sense, but deep inside the medina, where Mason was waiting, there were no obvious signs that God had ever been there.

Zeus, one of few allies he had left, had warned him to let the situation "breathe" before coming to Marrakech, but Mason was tired of running and knew the game had changed.

There was only one way Decklin could have known where to find him. Someone had talked, and the amount of money it must

have cost to scuttle the op in Kona told him that whoever it was had deep pockets.

Hate or greed was usually the only motive needed to kill a man, and it hadn't taken Mason long to figure out who was trying to smoke him. It had to be connected to Colonel Barnes, but he couldn't get his head around why the colonel was suddenly so serious about putting a bullet in his head.

He'd first met the colonel in 2006, after it became obvious that America was losing the war in Iraq. The president was looking for a win, and it was up to the Department of Defense to bring it to him. Their answer was the Anvil Program, an old concept ripped out of the CIA's playbook.

During Vietnam, it was called the Phoenix Program, and it had used Green Berets and the CIA's Special Operations Group, or SOG, to conduct asymmetrical warfare against an insurgency outside the military's legal boundaries of war. In the Middle East, all the CIA needed was the right man on the ground, and that's where Barnes came into the picture.

Barnes was a freshly minted colonel at the time of his appointment, and his marching orders were simple: Train a team to fight like the enemy, and then set them loose on the insurgency. Forget the rules of engagement, forget the media, just start stacking bodies—and that was exactly what they did.

Barnes was given the authority to handpick any soldier from any unit to accomplish his goals, and finding the right men was paramount. He pulled the file of every Delta operator, navy SEAL, and Green Beret he could get his hands on, and when he came across Mason Kane, he knew he'd found an operator born for this type of mission.

Mason had taken pride in being a soldier. He'd come from nothing, a half-breed who'd grown up on the streets, surrounded by pimps and dope boys. But the army didn't care that his mother was a drunk or that his father had abandoned him and had later blown his brains out with a cheap Walmart shotgun. The only thing the army cared about was whether he was good at his job, and Mason had been

one of the best. There was a box somewhere filled with awards, and they all had citations that read, “For selfless service and bravery under fire,” but Mason didn’t care about that.

When the colonel found him, Mason was using his particular skill set to conduct deep-cover operations in Iraq. His ability to blend in with the civilian population and his mastery of Arabic made him a critical piece of the Joint Special Operations Command’s eyes on the ground. He was everything the colonel needed and more.

Like the rest of the soldiers on the team, Mason had his demons, and it was only later that he realized the colonel sought out broken men.

Mason scanned the street. He knew he couldn’t stay out in the open for long; too many foreign agents used Morocco as a base of operations. North Africa wasn’t as stable as it had been fifteen years ago, and after the Arab Spring, many intelligence agencies were still focused on the region.

Slipping into one of Marrakech’s many nameless narrow alleys, he pulled his Glock 23 from its holster and quickly screwed on a suppressor. It was bulky and made the pistol heavier, but it was better than the alternative. After jamming the Glock into his jacket pocket he headed to the three-story apartment building he’d been watching. It reminded him of East Los Angeles, where he’d grown up and learned to blend in. Being the only non-Latino boy in the barrio had taught him the value of keeping a low profile and that, combined with the dark complexion he’d gotten from his mother, helped him blend in among the natives of North Africa.

His feet scuffed over the worn cobblestones as a woman appeared at the edge of a balcony. She shook a threadbare rug over the metal railing and Mason shot her an annoyed glance as he stepped out of the way of the dirt shower. The woman ignored him and began to beat the tightly woven fabric on the metal railing with titanic blows that caused the rusted metal to shudder.

With a final disdainful snap of her wrist, the woman turned and

disappeared into her apartment, allowing the American to continue to his destination.

Mason ducked as he walked under the low archway of the apartment building. Keeping a firm grip on the butt of his pistol, he carefully ascended the exterior stairs. The apartments were old and brown, just like everything else in the city. Chunks of flaky concrete had fallen out of the walls and masonry dust littered the cracked brickwork of the stairs.

Once he reached the third floor, he pushed open the thin metal door that led into the hall and made his way to a nondescript wooden door. Thick gray paint peeled beneath the flickering light, which struggled to draw power from the overworked grid.

Mason used a bump key to force the lock and stepped quickly through the door. The apartment was small and cramped and smelled like saffron and cooking oil. A small couch sat in the main room next to a neat pile of sleeping mats, while an overhead fan turned lazily above his head.

No one was home, and the American shut the door behind him and walked over to the sliding glass door. He slid it open and stepped out onto the balcony, looking down over the tightly packed neighborhood to see if anyone was watching before shaking the metal railing to see if it would hold. The bolts securing it to the wall were rusted but seemed to be in decent shape, so after a final check he climbed up and jumped over to the next apartment.

He pulled the pistol from his pocket and peered through the glass into the apartment. A cursory check around the edges of the door frame didn't turn up any wires, and once he was sure it wasn't booby-trapped, Mason slipped out a knife. He was about to pry it open when he realized the sliding glass wasn't locked.

The pungent smell of kif drifted out into the air, alerting him to the presence of his target.

So much for tradecraft, he thought to himself as he stepped through the window.

Mason brought the pistol up and quickly cleared the main room. Moving to the bedroom, the smell of hashish grew stronger, and he followed the smell to its origin before stepping into the small room.

“What’s up?” he asked in Arabic.

The Algerian sitting on the bed looked up from the large hookah, his eyes wide with surprise. He reached across to the table for his pistol and Mason raised his Glock and said, “Don’t do it.”

The man ignored his warning, and just as his fingers were about to touch the weapon, Mason shot him in the hand. The suppressor didn’t make the pistol silent, but it did muffle the report to a dull *thwack*.

The bullet hit Karim’s hand below the knuckles and sprayed the wall with blood. He instinctively snatched his hand back to his torso and began to scream in pain.

“I told you,” the American said with a shrug as he snatched the pistol off the table. It was a Russian Makarov and had been freshly oiled.

“Mason, I—I . . .,” he stammered in Arabic.

“I’ll never understand you people. You clean your gun, then get high and forget to lock your back door. I guess you figured I wasn’t coming back.”

The man just stared at him blankly.

“Karim, I thought we had a deal. I mean, that’s why Ahmed paid you, right? To make introductions and watch my back?”

Mason adopted a casual air as he scanned the room for any more weapons that the spy might have lying around. He thought he knew why Decklin wanted him dead, but he couldn’t figure out why the Algerian had betrayed him.

“For the last six months, I’ve been running around every shit hole in Africa, dodging the Americans, the French, and your jihadist friends. Hell, everyone wants to kill me, and all you had to do was take the money and keep your mouth shut.”

“That’s what I’ve been doing, believe me,” the man begged.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought too, but then I ran into an old friend in Kona. How the hell did Decklin know I was there?”

“Mason, there has been a misunderstanding, let me explain—”

The American cut him off by holding the pistol in the air and slowly pointing it at the man’s knee.

“C’mon, Karim, a mistake? You’re going to sit here and tell me that Barnes’s triggerman just happened to stumble into Kona and try to put a bullet in my head? You know how this works; we’re both pros, so do me the courtesy of not lying to my face. I’m going to give you one more chance to tell me the truth, and then I’m going to put a bullet in your kneecap.”

The man nodded as blood ran down his mangled right hand and onto his soiled gray shirt. Mason knew he was weighing his options.

As a child, Mason had been soft, and he’d paid for it. Growing up in a tough neighborhood meant that he had to get either stronger or smarter. He had taken more than his share of beatings, but that person was gone now, purified and hardened by the cauldron of war. There was nothing soft in him now, and if not for the constant struggle to keep his humanity, he could easily have been just like Decklin.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” the Algerian said finally.

Mason steadied the pistol and squeezed the trigger, firing a round into the Arab’s kneecap. Karim was already screaming before the expended brass tinked off the concrete floor.

“Karim, you’re smarter than this. Don’t make me be an asshole.”

“Mason, I swear to you—”

The American lined the Glock’s sights up with his other knee and slowly moved his finger to the trigger.

“Okay, okay, I’ll tell you. The man with the CIA.”

“Vernon?” Mason asked.

He had never trusted the man, but he’d never expected him to sell him out—especially not to Barnes.

“Yes, there was never a job. This was all about delivering you to Decklin.”

Mason stepped away from the bed, struggling with what he knew he should do next. Karim deserved to die, but the American was trying to get free of all the death.

He grabbed a towel off the floor near the door, and tossing it to Karim, he said, "I don't ever want to see you again. If I do, you're dead."

Mason took the back way out of the apartment. The heat of the day had not yet fallen on the city, and the streets were crowded as he headed toward the Gueliz district. The "new city" attracted American tourists and wealthy Europeans, and he walked as quickly as possible through the sea of faces without attracting any unnecessary attention.

He'd had a rough life but had never been one to blame his situation on others. Mason wished he could say that his mother had done her best, but that was a lie. The only thing she ever cared about was getting wasted, and while most kids had childhoods full of good memories, he had the sullen days and violent nights of an alcoholic's son. His mother might not have loved him, but she'd made him into a survivor from day one.

Tossing the Makarov into a trash bin, he took out his phone and dialed a number. A moment later a man answered in Arabic.

"Yes?"

"You were right, it was Vernon. Have you finished the download?"

"I'm just leaving. I will send what I have to your phone," the man replied.

"Good. He's at the Emirates Café. Bring the package with you."

Ten minutes later, Mason was standing in the shadows, near the front of the Emirates Café, scanning the documents stolen from Vernon's computer. A pair of sunglasses hid his dark eyes as he glanced at the target's table.

The glare made it hard to read the smudged screen, and he was

just about to hold the phone up when something clicked. It had taken less than a millisecond for his brain to interpret the two words that his eyes had seen, and he frantically swiped backward until he saw them again.

“Operation Karakul,” it read.

He felt his heart skip in his chest, and a wave of adrenaline washed through his nervous system. He was barely able to steady his finger enough to open the message.

Mason’s time in Anvil had given him access to more classified data than the entire analyst division at Langley. It was important that his team could track threats as they evolved, and he had come across the name “Karakul” before—it was the code name for Hamid Karzai, the president of Afghanistan.

The e-mail was from Razor 5, which he knew to be the call sign attached to the Joint Special Operations Command, but it was the content that floored him. It was simple and to the point: “Razor 5 confirms Operation Karakul is a go. Prosecute target ASAP.”

Mason couldn’t believe it. His mind scrambled as he slipped the phone back into his pocket and stared at Vernon, who was sitting at an outside table in front of the café methodically wiping the inside of his empty glass with a white napkin.

“This motherfucker,” Mason muttered, running his hand quickly over his dark, slicked-back hair. Flicking the cigarette into the street, he made his way to the front door and disappeared inside.

The surprise on the CIA agent’s face when Mason appeared before him told the soldier everything he needed to know.

The Algerian had told the truth; Vernon had betrayed him.

“Sorry to drop in like this, but it’s been a hectic couple of days.”

Vernon smiled sickly and tried to stall by taking a sip of water. “It’s good to see you. I was just . . . having some lunch. I didn’t know you were back,” the spy stammered honestly.

“You gave me a job and I did it. Now I’m back for your end of the bargain,” Mason said as he studied the spy’s reaction.

“Uhh, yes, of course.” Vernon turned white and scanned the crowded café, looking for a way out and trying to tell whether Mason was alone.

The waiter approached, and Mason ordered coffee and hummus and lit a cigarette with a battered Zippo while the man squirmed across the table.

“You aren’t going to order anything?” he asked innocently.

“No, I’m not really hungry.”

Mason watched tiny beads of perspiration appear on the spy’s forehead. His pupils dilated and he shifted often in his chair as he struggled to get comfortable.

Who the fuck is Razor 5? he wanted to scream at the man, but he had to play it cool if he hoped to use the spy. Vernon was a slippery son of a bitch who might have been short on brains, but he was long on cunning. In fact, he was slick enough to make a career out of what had started as a joke.

The first time someone suggested arming a drone, everyone had laughed, but Vernon saw value in the idea and managed to gather enough support to get his own team. Five months later, the room was packed as Vernon’s armed Predator smoked a house full of jihadists. He went from zero to hero before the shrapnel ever hit the ground, and soon after, he was charged with populating the kill list the drones would use for targeting jihadists. It was a good job, with zero oversight, which made him a perfect match for Barnes.

How had he not seen it coming, Mason thought. Vernon and the colonel fit together like pieces of a puzzle, but he’d been so desperate, so eager to trust, that he had let his guard down.

Vernon was back to inspecting the glass when the waiter returned to the table, and Mason spoke to him in Arabic.

“He’s afraid of germs,” Mason said, blowing a cloud of smoke toward the glass.

“Fucking Americans and their germs,” the waiter replied before walking off.

Mason slipped the sunglasses off his face and stared at Vernon. “We had a deal. I work for you, and you get me back to America. You remember that, don’t you?”

“The deal is still on, I promise. This has to be a mistake. Let me make a call . . .” Vernon started to reach into his pocket and Mason slammed his palm down on the table.

“Hold on there, boss. If you are trying to call Karim, let me save you the trouble. I just killed him.”

The man froze, his hand an inch from the light jacket he was wearing. Mason could tell he was trying to figure out whether Mason was going to kill him in the open or let him live. The agent loved war by proxy, but when the conflict was right in his face, he became very uncomfortable.

The waiter dropped off the plate of hummus, and Mason tore a strip off the pita bread and used it to spoon some of the hummus into his mouth. He knew just as much about Vernon as the spy knew about him.

“The job was compromised. I think you tried to burn me,” Mason said.

“Now hold on, I don’t know where you’re getting your information, but someone is filling your head with a bunch of bullshit.”

Vernon was reaching, and they both knew it. He was buying time—hoping he could regain control of the situation.

“Really? For the last six months I’ve put a fucking continent between me and Decklin. For all he knew, I was dead, but the moment I show up in Kona, there he is. Are you saying that he’s clairvoyant or that I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing?”

The spy tried to go on the offensive. “You had a bad op—it happens—but don’t try to put this on me. Five different countries want you dead, including the US. Before you start making accusations, I think you might want to take a second to remember who your friends are.”

“Friends like Barnes? Is that whose dirty work you’re doing?” It

was a gamble, but Mason couldn't give the man an inch of traction. He had to push him now, or he'd never get the truth.

"What?" Vernon was frozen by the question, and Mason knew he had him.

"I know what you're up to, and it's never going to happen," Mason lied.

Vernon stared at him, his mouth hanging open like a broken gate. The spy was stunned, but recovered quickly and pulled an envelope out of his pocket. Passing it across the table, he locked eyes with Mason.

"Look, I didn't tell you to grow a conscience and fuck up your life. You did that on your own, pal. You made a choice and it backfired. I'm sorry the world's not fair."

Mason reached for the envelope, which Vernon was holding down with the tip of his fingers. The spy felt a shift in the momentum; Mason still needed him.

"Do you know what they had us doing out there?" he asked.

"I don't know or care. Mason, you need to grow up. There's a war going on and you need to get over the past. I've read your file, and it's a sad story, but here's a news flash: no one gives a shit. The only reason you're not dead or locked away is because I want it that way." He lifted his fingers off the envelope and let Mason take it. "The only people who care about you are gone. The only record of your existence is in a file that I burned the day I found you. Remember that."

Mason slipped the envelope into his pocket as the waiter returned with the bill and a carafe of water. The young Arab sat the check on the table and began filling Vernon's glass. Mason reached for the check, bumping the waiter's arm, causing him to spill the water across the white tablecloth and onto Vernon's pants.

"What the fuck," Vernon yelled, pushing away from the table as water soaked his pants. Mason's hand flashed to his pistol at the spy's sudden movement, but he quickly regained his composure as the waiter set the carafe on the table and made a big show of blotting the water on Vernon's jacket.

“Jesus, Mason, what is this bullshit?” Vernon’s face was red with anger as he tried to brush off the waiter’s clumsy attempts to help him.

“Calm down, it’s just water,” he said as Vernon finally untangled himself from the zealous Arab.

Vernon sat back down, keeping his chair away from the dripping white linen, and looked accusingly at Mason. “That was some bush-league bullshit.”

It was obvious that the CIA man thought he had done it on purpose.

“Look, I said I was sorry. It was just a little water.”

“Yeah, but I’m the one who looks like he pissed his pants, not you.”

“Fuck, maybe I just need to find someplace to hide out for a while and get my shit together,” Mason said, a plan forming in his mind as he lit another cigarette and the other patrons turned back to their meals.

“You need to do something. You’re falling apart on me. Go get laid or whatever it is you do. I’ll make some calls and see if we can get you back in the States in a few weeks.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry for getting in your face like that.”

Vernon looked across the table and studied him. Mason looked defeated, and that was exactly what the spy wanted.

“I told you that I would take care of you. You’re going to have to trust me, okay?” Vernon’s voice had softened, but it was all an act.

“I know. I’ll take care of the check and then I’m going to get out of here. I think I need a new country. Can you get me some papers?”

“Where are you trying to go?” Vernon asked as he stood up. He wanted to get the hell out while Mason was off balance.

“Maybe up the coast. I’ve got friends in Libya,” Mason replied, lowering his head in false defeat as his mind scrambled to connect the dots. He needed to get Decklin out in the open, and he hoped Vernon would take the bait.

“Let me see what I can do. Give me an hour,” Vernon said, shouldering his assault pack and walking away from the table.

Mason finished the rest of his coffee and pulled a handful of crumpled bills out of his pocket and tossed them on the table. The waiter came back to collect the bill and looked down at the desolate American.

“Do you want some more coffee?”

“Yeah, I’ll take another cup,” Mason said as he reached into his jacket and pulled out a stack of fresh American bills from Vernon’s envelope.

The waiter nodded, took the money from the American, and then placed a phone on the table.

“That was a nice switch,” Mason told him.

“I know.” The waiter smiled as he pocketed the cash and began clearing the table.

Mason had never trusted Vernon and had paid a great deal of money to keep the man under surveillance. The cloned phone was a result of that significant investment. Picking it up off the table, he ran his fingers across the small screen, clearing away a layer of dust. He needed to get out of the country but had to be sure that Vernon had taken the bait.

The American had learned the hard way that there were very few people he could trust. He’d trusted Colonel Barnes once and was still paying for that mistake. Finishing the coffee, he slipped the phone into his pocket and headed to the street.