

ONE

Sayed Zaeef, one of the few members of al Qaeda still unaccounted for and—for the moment—alive, shuffled along with the other passengers towards the boarding gate. The woman at his side, whose name he had come to learn was Aleida, was still talking. She'd been going nonstop for nearly a half hour. He didn't mind a bit. She spoke in her native Dutch; the official language here in the Netherlands. He'd learned it over the last three years, along with another native tongue, Frisian, but hadn't mastered either. All the better that she was dominating the conversation.

Zaeef had picked her out of the crowd shortly after arriving. She was among about two-dozen passengers who had come early and were hanging around, waiting. Some watched the giant airliners out the windows while others tried in vain to catch some rest on the torturously uncomfortable contour chairs. She was one of the plane-watchers. She stood with her arms folded and spoke to an elderly woman sitting nearby whom she obviously did not know. She was the type who would talk to any stranger. Perfect. He set his shoulder bag down and moved alongside her, saying nothing. He adopted a look of almost childlike fascination as the planes came and went, mimicking hers. Eventually, as he expected, she peered over and found him there. When she did, he returned the glance and smiled. She remarked how amazing modern technology was, and he agreed. Their conversation soon moved from airplanes to other matters—the weather, current events, and, ultimately, personal issues. She found him attractive, he could tell. And he *was* attractive. A handsome Syrian in his early thirties. His smile could charm a dying

man out of his last heartbeat. The women were particularly easy, he thought, and this appeared to be a prime example.

As the line moved along, she started offering cutesy little anecdotes about her husband. He nodded and laughed in all the right places. She was probing him now, he knew, gauging his reaction to the fact that she was married. On the outside she was the good and faithful wife, but if the right, discreet opportunity came along, she'd stray. He cultivated the flirtation. For the other passengers, to see him with this woman would create an aura of acceptability. How could you of someone who was so friendly with one of your own?

The little American flag-pin on his lapel sealed it. He'd figured this out quickly enough after September 11, 2001—Americans were far less likely to pay you any mind if you had a flag of some kind on your clothes, flying from your car, or hanging outside your home. He found the gullibility amazing.

They reached the counter and handed over their tickets. The uniformed woman greeted him with a smile, which he returned. A man in a matching uniform stood behind her. Zaeef avoided eye contact. It was important to appear casual. The woman removed something from the envelope, then handed it back and said, "Have a nice flight, Mr. Qari." He nodded and thanked her. Aleida was still talking. Something about her flowerbeds.

They went down the rectangular tunnel and reached the door of the plane. Five more employees stood waiting—two stewardesses and three pilots. They were all smiling, very happy to see everyone this morning. They locked on Zaeef as soon as he appeared, but he pretended not to notice. When he reached the threshold, he laughed out loud and said something in Dutch to his new friend. He appraised the

crew with a single, fleeting glance and made his evaluation. The stewardesses were of no concern. Aging wannabe-models with too much makeup, nail polish, and unjustified arrogance—about as dangerous as houseflies. The pilots had an ex-military scent about them. They kept their hair short and their faces smooth. They would've been equally at home in business suits and ties, sitting in a boardroom with their briefcases on the floor beside them. Two were small, a little paunchy and out of shape. They'd be no problem, if it came to that.

It was the third man—the captain—that made Zaeef nervous; as nervous as he was capable of being. He was older, with a bronze tan and thin, steely eyes. They were watchful, intelligent. This was a man who was not easily fooled. His motto could have been, “Earn my trust *first*.” And in spite of his age, he looked fit and able. He stood akimbo, his hands ready. A deep, primal instinct that had saved Zaeef's hide before told him this man could be trouble. As they started down the aisle, Zaeef felt his eyes boring into him, studying him.

Aleida found her seat first. Checking Zaeef's ticket for him, she realized he would be more than ten rows back.

“Maybe I can come back and see you once we are in the air,” she said in Dutch.

“That would be nice.”

He moved on, inwardly thankful to be away from her for awhile. He made a point of looking carefully at every number on every row, hoping to appear a little helpless and vulnerable. He found his seat and scanned the area. A heavysset white-haired woman was in the seat on the opposite side of the aisle, reading a copy of

People. She looked at Zaeef the way most people look at snakes in a zoo. *This is an American*, he thought. “Hello,” he said with a quick nod.

As he expected, she did not reply. Instead, she shrank back slightly and brought the magazine a little higher, as if using it as a shield.

Ignoring the slight, he opened the overhead compartment and stuffed in his green shoulder bag. Then, in another calculated move, he took off his suit jacket and set it carefully in the adjoining seat. He wanted the people around him to see that he was concealing nothing—no knives, no boxcutters, no plastic explosives. They were all appraising him, he knew, even if they were trying to appear as though they weren’t.

He took his seat. The plane was almost full now and would be in the air in a matter of minutes. It would take nearly nine hours to reach Washington. He glanced at his watch; it was just after seven-thirty. A personal thought crept in—*I’ll never see another seven-thirty in my life*. He pondered this for only a moment before the years of training and mental discipline kicked in and erased it.

The plane shuddered as it pulled away from the dock and began a slow taxi towards the runway. A single electronic note rang through the overhead speakers, and a disembodied voice reminded everyone to buckle up and turn off their cellphones and laptops. People around him began chatting with their neighbors. Idle talk, useless talk, the talk of the small-minded.

As soon as they were in the air, he set the seat back, closed his eyes, and folded his hands across his stomach. Then another personal thought crept in, and it surprised him—he remembered the time he had spent a Sunday helping his mother make bread. Back in those days in Damascus, it was not uncommon for a

mother to make bread for her family, but it was unusual for a son to help. Young boys in Syria were not supposed to busy themselves with domestic chores. But for some reason he had wanted to help her that day, and what was strange was the fact that his mother hadn't seemed the least bit puzzled or surprised. She rarely showed any emotion, but he had hoped he would see something then. Less than a month later she was gone, the victim of an American bomb meant for an ammunition warehouse that had gone astray.

Surely she would approve of what he was doing now.

TWO

“This is for Patrick, but only if he eats everything else first,” Karen said, holding up a small container of chocolate pudding. Brown hair, medium height, attractive enough although not to her own satisfaction. She wore a cream-colored business suit, one that never seemed to fit quite right.

“I made him a baloney-and-cheese sandwich, which he likes, at least this week. There’s also some milk in here, a bag of pretzels, and a nice big—” She rummaged frantically through the bag, then her shoulders drooped. “Oh no...I forgot the orange. I’d better go to Acme right now and g—”

Nancy took her arm. “We’ve got oranges, sweetheart. Don’t worry.”

“Oh, no, you already do so much for—”

“Karen, we’ve got plenty.”

Karen finally relented, but Nancy knew it would bother her for the rest of the day. She would probably bring two oranges tomorrow—one for Patrick, and one to replace the one Nancy had given him today.

“Okay, well there’s also some money in here in case the ice-cream truck comes around. And I packed their swimsuits just in case Bud wants to take them on the boat.”

The two boys bounded into the sunny Holgate kitchen, bursting with springtime energy. Patrick, four, was the older. He was as skinny as a rail and as fair-skinned as a ghost. Michael, three, was dark-haired, pudgier, and wildly freckled. He considered his brother something of a god and shadowed him ceaselessly. This didn’t seem to bother Patrick in the least.

“What are we going to do today, Mrs. Erickson?” Patrick asked, grabbing hold of Nancy’s floral dress and jumping up and down. Michael did likewise.

“Boys, boys...” their mother pleaded.

Nancy smiled and looked down adoringly at her steed. “Well, your mother brought your swim trunks along, so I guess you’ll have to go out on the boat at some point.”

The boys cried gleefully—Karen was amazed at how much noise two small children could make—and jumped some more. Nancy beamed down on them, not the least bit put off by the intensity of their enthusiasm, while Karen thanked God once again for bringing Nancy Erickson into her life. She was nothing short of an angel.

The women had met in 1979, when ten-year-old Karen Marie Thompson walked into a dusty Beach Haven Elementary School classroom on the first day of sixth grade. Nancy Erickson was writing her name on the blackboard (which was actually pea green) as Karen slid quietly into a seat in the second row. Their mutual fondness was instantaneous—Karen was a well-behaved, hard-working student, and her new teacher was patient, gentle, and nurturing. Karen cried when the school year ended and she had to move on to another grade, another room, and another teacher. After college she moved away from LBI, but, like so many others, she eventually returned.

She spotted Nancy at Holy Innocents’ Episcopal Church, on Marine Street, shortly after she got married, and the two women essentially picked up where they’d left off. Having lost her mother to breast cancer two years earlier, Karen

adopted her former teacher as something of a surrogate. Nancy, accepted the role without hesitation.

Nancy started watching the boys sparingly at first, when Karen and Mike were in a jam and needed someone quick. She soon found that after almost ten years of retirement she not only missed the interaction with youngsters but looked forward to Patrick's and Michael's exuberant presence. She and Bud had three children of their own, but all were grown and had long since moved off to build their own worlds. Only one of them, a son who designed industrial-application software in California, had children, and visits were infrequent. Patrick and Michael filled an emotional void.

When Nancy first proposed the idea of watching them all four days a week that Karen worked at Tarrance-Smith Realtors, just a few miles past the Causeway on the eastbound side of 72, Karen resisted. She was concerned that the boys would run the couple ragged. Nancy was in her early sixties, Bud pushing sixty-five. But Nancy would hear none of it—she said she felt as fit as a cheerleader. That was only part of the truth. The rest was based on an opinion that she and Karen shared—that daycare just wasn't what it used to be. Nancy wanted to make sure these two boys that she had grown to love received a solid foundation. Under her care they never sat zombie-eyed in front of a television set. Instead, they were taken on nature walks and slow rides around the bay behind the house in Bud's little motorboat. They were taught how to use a computer, and given basic lessons in math and spelling.

For Karen and Mike, Nancy and Bud were a dream come true. They were overjoyed to the point of guilt. Karen insisted on paying Nancy at least the same

amount she would have paid to put them into daycare. Nancy refused the money at first, but agreed to take it once she realized Karen would have it no other way. She had taught Karen to be proper and decent, and she had taught her well. In fact, Karen was still uncomfortable referring to Nancy by her first name, which Nancy insisted on. In her heart, Karen could not think of the woman as anything other than “Mrs. Erickson.” Most of the time she simply formed her sentences and questions in such a way that using a name was unnecessary.

“Okay, I’ve got to go,” she said, looking at her watch. “Mommy’s going to be late.” She crouched down and opened her arms. “Come give me a kiss.”

The boys charged over and nearly knocked her down, smothering her with affection.

“I love you guys.”

“Love you, too, mommy,” they replied in an uneven chorus.

“We’ll walk out with you,” Nancy said, following the ritual.

Karen stepped out the door and into the bright spring day. On the other side of the quiet street, an elderly woman was trudging across the field of rounded, cream-white stones that substituted for a front lawn—*crunch, crunch, crunch*—and put a handful of letters in her mailbox. Mrs. Hammel seemed to be growing tinier every time Karen saw her, and her hunch was becoming more pronounced. She had a craggy, apple-doll face that was nearly calico with brown discoloration.

Nancy said she was loaded and planned to leave most of her money to the Popcorn Park Zoo. She never said hello to Karen and rarely waved to Patrick or Michael, even if they waved first. To the casual observer she seemed little more

than a grumpy old woman, but Karen always had the gut feeling her failing health kept in her more pain than she allowed anyone to see.

“Call me if you need anything,” Karen said, pulling the keys from her purse as she walked away, backwards.

“We’ll be fine,” Nancy told her. The boys were already waving. They looked perfectly happy. Maybe too happy, Karen thought. *Aren’t they supposed to be sad when I go?* They certainly were when Mike left for that meeting in Seattle three days ago. They cried until she had to distract them with ice cream and a Disney movie.

She climbed into her ’97 Nissan Maxima and waved back through the windows. She continued waving as she pulled away. Watching the three of them grow smaller in the rearview mirror, she felt the sting of tears that hadn’t diminished even slightly over the last two years.

In the brightly lit office of Long Beach Township Mayor Donald J. Harper, a trio of attorneys sat in their conservative suits and waited. On the opposite side of the enormous, L-shaped desk, Harper was hunched forward, elbows on the glass, hands together, forefingers raised like a church steeple. He paid his guests no mind. It was as if he’d forgotten they were there.

They sat like a judgment panel, left to right, in three chairs. At one end, a young man with dark hair and GQ features was reviewing some papers that had nothing to do with the mayor’s case. As far as he was concerned, Harper was yesterday’s business. He knew a lost cause when he saw one, and J. Quentin Taylor—a third-year attorney who already owned a new BMW and a 32-foot

yacht—didn't waste his energy on lost causes. He had come today only because due process and professionalism demanded it, but in his mind this was nothing more than the final viewing of a corpse.

Next to him was the only female in the group. Susanna Graham had been with the firm less than a year, had in fact been out of law school less than two, but she already knew how to carry herself like the frigid corporate bitch she'd always longed to be. With one leg crossed over the other, she stared down Harper and wondered why an elite firm such as hers had ever gotten involved with such a loser.

Jay Bennett was the senior member of the coven, a full partner in Thomasen, Smithfield, Bennett and Clarke. It was one of the largest firms in South Jersey, handling everything from divorces to personal injuries to criminal litigation. Forty-nine and in perfect health, Bennett had silver hair and wore small, round glasses set in tortoise-shell frames that cost more than most people made in a week. He was single, had no major vices, and was so introverted that people who had worked with him for years had no idea how he felt about anything. That was just how he wanted it.

Bennett allowed another moment to pass, and then, realizing they might end up sitting there all day if someone didn't say something, offered, "Mr. Mayor, Judge Hadley will be expecting a decision on our plea in about—"

"You know," Harper interrupted, "there was a time when I wouldn't have even stolen a paper clip." He let out a little laugh that seemed more like a cough.

Taylor removed a silver pen from inside his jacket and scribbled something on one of his papers, apparently unaware his client had spoken. Graham rolled her

eyes and repositioned herself yet again. Bennett nodded noncommittally and studied the beige carpeting.

“Did you know I installed the first direct sewer line to Vol Sedges? That’s right. They said it was impossible. Others tried to do the same thing and failed. I got it done in less than a year, nearly half a million dollars under budget, and I was only thirty-one at the time.” He was glassy-eyed and dreamy. “The schools were a mess, too. The board was run by tired old people with no ideas or enthusiasm. The textbooks were ten years out of date, the best teachers wouldn’t submit resumes, and the students’ test scores were in the twentieth percentile statewide.” He smiled and straightened up slightly, pridefully. “I changed all that. In two years we moved up to the seventieth percentile, renovated both buildings, got all new books, cleaned out the board—and no one’s taxes went up a cent. Not one cent.”

Harper fell silent again, wrung his hands, and stared into space. The smile faded as he returned to whatever mental hideaway he’d been in all morning. For weeks, in fact.

Graham shot her boss an urgent look. Bennett cleared his throat. “Mr. Mayor, you really do need to tell us what it is you want to do. If we don’t contact the judge by day’s end, we run the very serious risk of—”

“My dream—my ultimate dream—was to go to Washington. Did I ever tell you that?”

“Yes, I knew that,” Bennett replied. “I think we all knew that.”

“That’s what I wanted more than anything—to be a U.S. senator. The best senator the Garden State ever had. A legend. The kind of politician who was grudgingly admired even by those who hadn’t voted for him. It was a big dream,

probably an impossible dream, but it drove me. It gave me the strength and the passion to do things I wouldn't have been able to do otherwise. Have you ever had a dream like that, counselor?"

As he looked to Bennett for an answer, he realized it was the first time he'd made eye contact with any of these lawyers today. Bennett didn't reply, didn't appear as though he *had* a reply. Harper laughed again and appraised Bennett's colleagues, then shook his head. He knew about the dreams of people like this—to acquire as much wealth and power as possible while leaving a trail of human casualties in their wake. *What a group*, he thought. *Three Stooges*. And then, from someplace deeper, *How did I ever get mixed up with this crowd? There was a time when I wouldn't have given them a second glance*. Finally, and most chillingly—*Thank God my father isn't alive to see any of this*.

The Harper family had a broad and varied political history on LBI, spanning four generations and over a hundred years. Donald Harper's great-grandfather had been the mayor of Beach Haven before ultimately reaching the state legislature. He authored the state's first environmental laws, some of which were still in effect and had created a power base for New Jersey's conservation groups. Harper's paternal grandfather, while never holding an elected office, was an influential local businessman who had played a key role in early railroad lines to and from the island. His other grandfather had sat on the numerous city councils for more than three decades, while his father, Roy Allan Harper, was the only mayor elected to serve more than one LBI town—two terms in Barnegat Light and one in Peahala Park. When he died of a massive heart attack in June of 1997, nearly five-hundred residents and luminaries attended the funeral.

It seemed only natural that Donald, the oldest of three children, would carry on the legacy. There was tremendous pressure, considering the family's gloried history, but he accepted his role without hesitation. As a young boy he would stand in front of his bedroom mirror and give mock speeches, tirelessly trying to emulate the dramatic gestures of heroes like JFK and Winston Churchill. He joined the student council in sixth grade—the earliest it was permitted—and was president within a month. In high school he won popularity through charm, intelligence, and a fanatic devotion to preparedness. During the debate for that presidency, he crushed his opponent so overwhelmingly that the hapless victim received only nineteen votes.

Harper left LBI to attend Colgate University, went on to claim his masters' degree in political science with a minor in civic management, then did a four-year stint in the Air Force, where he reached the rank of captain. It was during this brief military service that he put the finishing touches on his already considerable leadership skills. When he returned to his hometown, he was ready.

He won his first race for mayor, but it was close. His opponent, a popular moderate Democrat named Brenda Morrison, preyed on his youth and inexperience. But she went overboard and ended up looking like a bully while Harper remained silent and inspired sympathy. The residents also remembered his father, some even remembered his grandfather, and they just plain *liked* the nice young man with all the fresh ideas. Morrison knew her stuff, but she had passed her prime a few steps back and seemed more interested in winning the job than actually doing it. Harper discussed the issues and—perhaps most importantly—appeared to know what was going on in people's minds. Morrison didn't.

Not long after Harper took office, the voters discovered their new mayor also had a gift for numbers. He announced there would be no increase in local taxes and, after some number-crunching and cost-cutting, managed to bring the township budget out of the red for the first time in recent memory, giving the town an actual surplus.

In the years that followed, one success led to another, and Harper's influence and popularity grew to the point where people started calling him the "Mayor of LBI." The other mayors, knowing it was to their advantage, rallied behind him. By the time Harper hit forty-five he had the island in his back pocket and began seriously thinking about going after his Holy Grail—a senatorship. He had the record, the support, and the financial commitments. In Washington, incumbent senator William Lacey was on his way out, having announced his intention to retire after his current term. The New Jersey Republican wheels were already sniffing out Harper as a potential candidate, and they liked what they saw. Republicans traditionally had a tough time in New Jersey, especially on the senatorial level, but Harper had developed a following among moderate Democrats and was considered a potential crossover candidate—something the conservatives hadn't enjoyed in the Garden State in ages. All in all, the current seemed to be flowing in Harper's direction.

And then Gus Riggins entered his life.

Riggins was a slovenly, foul-mouthed creature who had spent his professional life in the construction business. He didn't trust people who wore suits, and felt most of the human race was essentially valueless. He bragged about the fact that he never finished high school yet had more money than anyone he

knew who'd graduated from "one of those so-called institutes of higher learning."

After fifteen years as a laborer, he'd started his own construction company, Riggins Builders, Inc., and cultivated it into the second largest firm in South Jersey, overshadowed only by the almighty Hovnanian empire.

Harper and Riggins were aware of each other and kept their distance through the years. Harper thought Riggins was dangerously ambitious and was glad they never had any direct dealings. Conversely, Riggins felt Harper was just another Ivy-League prick who'd been born on third base and had no clue what hard work was really about. But when the town announced they were going to build a new shopping center on a prime Sixth-Avenue lot that had previously been untouchable due to a litany of legal snafus, Riggins decided, come hell or high water, that the contract would bear his name. And the Honorable Donald J. Harper was the one man who could make it happen.

His first thought was of that business chestnut known as blackmail; it had yielded good results for him in the past. So he did some digging. He hired a small band of sleazy detectives and sank a little money into a Dun and Bradstreet report. One month and three thousand bucks later, however, he was forced to swallow the fact that Harper was as clean as a virgin—there was nothing, absolutely nothing. All this did was inspire him to double his efforts.

He considered threats, then realized that would be too risky. A guy as popular as Harper had allies everywhere; he'd likely pay a hefty price without reaching his objective. Bribery appeared to be out of the question, too. So what was this man's weakness? Which button needed to be pushed?

Riggins decided to utilize a tool he despised—charm. He had it but didn't like to use it. It was a little too close to ass-kissing, and Gus Riggins was no ass-kisser.

But in this case he was willing to make an exception. He paid Harper a visit on a sunny summer morning wearing a suit and tie he'd bought off the rack the night before. His hair was swept back in lush, greasy strokes and his face was smoother than it'd been in years. His immediate objective was to shatter whatever negative image Harper had built of him through rumor and reputation. He wanted to show this upper-crust Boy Scout that he had not one, but two sides to his character—the rough-hewn, blue-collar side that had enabled him to claw his way through the cutthroat ranks of the construction industry, and the classier, urbane side that made him every bit as refined as anyone in Harper's world.

Much to his surprise, Riggins found himself actually liking Harper. As easily as Riggins could play the role of an elitist, Harper could curse like a millworker and produce jokes that were so off-color they'd make a hooker blush. Riggins soon realized what this man's true gift really was—he could connect with *anybody*. And it wasn't all smoke and mirrors, either—somehow, he really *knew*. By the end of their first meeting, Riggins felt Harper was someone he could deal with.

And best of all, he'd found the Achilles' heel he'd been looking for—Harper *loved* money.

The first trip Harper took to Atlantic City on Riggins' tab occurred less than a month later. Riggins had done some work for a number of smaller casinos and was friends with all the owners. He went out of his way to make sure the mayor had a grand old time—free room, free meals, thousands of dollars in credit,

a few shows. Harper brought his wife on the first trip, but afterwards he always went alone, usually with the aid of a pair of sunglasses and a baseball cap. He was a smart gambler, able to stay afloat longer than most, but in the end he always walked away a loser. That didn't matter ultimately—Riggins kept sending the cash, and Harper kept accepting it. He lost track of the grand total after awhile. Some of it went to AC, some straight into his pocket. It seemed to be flying around everywhere. Riggins even taught him some of the basic principles of creative accounting, and Harper, to his own shock and surprise, found himself occasionally making use his of new talents. It was like an addiction over which he had no control. The sickness was always there, but he had managed to keep it at bay on his own. Once Riggins appeared, that resolve was stripped away. Part of Donald Harper hated himself for what he was doing, but another part was having the time of his life.

Four months after their initial meeting, Riggins got the contract. Subsequent deals followed, and Harper continued to enjoy himself. Years later, in hindsight, Harper realized Riggins had slid the knife in so skillfully that he wasn't even aware of it. By the time word of their little arrangement leaked out, it was too late to deny it.

The local media picked up the story first. Initially they kept direct allegations to a minimum and buried the text in places where it would be generally overlooked. When some of Riggins' enraged competitors pressed for more information, however, *The Star Ledger* became interested, and the beginning of the end was at hand.

Like any seasoned politician, Harper denied all charges until there was no other choice. When that time came, he declined to issue any comments and hired a legal team. His wife, embarrassed and humiliated, left him and went back to her parents in rural Pennsylvania. They had no children, so there was no messiness on that front. The public, feeling confused and disillusioned, unplugged themselves from the debacle and simply waited for a successor. After awhile most people weren't even sure Harper was technically still in office, he maintained such a low profile.

Now, six months and a string of follow-up articles later, on the eve of what surely would be his last significant appearance, he was being asked to sharpen the blade for his own professional execution. It was the only option left. At least the media and the courts didn't find out *everything*, he thought. Yes, he would lose his job and maybe end up indicted, but he was certain he would go down for much less than he had actually done. And even now, a part of him was still genuinely baffled by how it all could've happened in the first place.

Once again Jay Bennett, Esq. shook him out of his daze.

"Mr. Harper, we have to have a decision," he said firmly, showing more emotion than was usual for him.

Harper paused for one last, precious moment, savoring the position he'd worked so hard and so long to achieve. Then, with a heavy sigh, he wrote the first word in what surely would be the darkest chapter in his family's political history.

Leaning back in the leather of an office he knew he would not occupy much longer, he said, "Tell the judge my plea will be 'guilty.'"

"Thank you, Mr. Mayor."

News of Harper's plea traveled like lightning along the following path: first it went to the courthouse, where it was entered into the public record. Two minutes later it traveled from the municipal clerk through a phone line to the home office of E. Gordon Davis, III, attorney-at-law. Davis lived in Loveladies, in a fairly intimidating three-story monstrosity overlooking the ocean.

Davis did not answer the phone when it rang. Instead it was picked up by one Thomas T. Wilson. Small and bookish with neatly combed dark hair and round glasses that added an air of intellect to his otherwise boyish face, Wilson was, technically, Davis's political advisor. He had no formal degree in politics, nor did he have any firsthand political experience. He was commonly known as a 'natural'—one who possessed an innate gift for knowing what worked and what didn't in a particular field without the aid any official training or education.

Wilson had been Harper's righthand man since the day Harper's name first appeared on a ballot. Outwardly, Wilson hated everything political—he hated the underhandedness, the sleaze, the corruption, and the rampant, unchecked incompetence. He favored no party; only truth and honor. To that end he resented any elected official for not using their granted power to inject more good into the world. Anyone who had the opportunity to do something decent and chose not to, he felt, should be stripped of their power and humiliated. He was as honest as the day was long.

He got behind Harper because he felt Harper had similar qualities and beliefs, and because local history suggested Harper's family did likewise (his personal theory was that the Harpers never rose above a modest local level because

New Jersey's corrupt upper echelon intentionally kept them down). He believed Harper possessed the seeds of greatness and, with his help and a little luck, could reach dizzying political heights. In truth, deep down, he loved the political system of America because he believed it was the only one where a person even had the *chance* to do great things; in other systems such opportunities simply did not exist. He never considered running for any office himself, for he knew he didn't have the required traits. It simply wasn't part of his destiny.

Harper, on the other hand, had them all—he was handsome, commanding, sure of himself without being cocky, a scholar, and a reassuring leader. He was also an excellent speaker with tremendous public presence and charisma. Women liked him, men wanted to *be* like him. He came from a solidly middle- to upper-class family: he wasn't *too* rich. He was active in extracurricular activities during his school years and retained close friendships with people from a wide variety of backgrounds and races. He worked hard and didn't complain about it. In short, he was blessed with what most called the 'X factor'—that indefinable quality that makes people follow and believe in you. Politically speaking, he was built for speed.

The two men fit together seamlessly. Wilson covered Harper's blind spots, and Harper covered his. They trusted each other, and their egos never clashed. They were comfortable in their respective roles, and both focused on the same objective—getting Harper into the U. S. Senate.

When the scandal first reared its head, Wilson didn't believe it. He was sure one of Harper's political rivals had fabricated the story. When bits and pieces of what appeared to be solid evidence began surfacing, Wilson decided it was an elaborate setup, and that Gus Riggins had been a plant.

Then the night came when Harper, alone with Wilson late in his office, confessed that it was all true, every word of it, and that he had no explanation or defense for his actions. He said he got caught up in a current and was unable to free himself. Wilson was stunned, speechless at the ugly fact that his idol was not only human after all, but no better than the legions of crawling maggots who polluted the current political scene. He was just another one of *Them*.

Wilson stormed from the office and never spoke to Harper again. He drifted for awhile, unsure of everything he had ever known. Ten years of his life shot to hell. How could Harper have done this to him? How could he be so evil? (Maybe he *did* still have a bright political future, Wilson thought—he was, after all, obviously a master of deception. In today’s political climate, he’d fit in perfectly....)

Harper tried repeatedly to contact his old friend, tried to make amends and attempt to explain himself. Wilson wanted nothing to do with it. He didn’t want to hear Harper’s story because Harper had had plenty of time to compose it. It would be good, for sure, but it wouldn’t be honest. It’d paint him in a sympathetic light, somehow make him out to be the victim. Wilson believed *he* was the only victim here—he and all the people who had believed in Harper and given him their support. On an island that was largely Republican but still had its fair share of Democrats, Harper got nearly eighty-six percent of the vote. *Eighty-six percent*. It was a record, and a confirmation of Harper’s mass appeal.

What did the electorate think now?

Roughly three months after their last conversation, Wilson decided his future. As he had played a key role in putting Harper in power, it was his duty to the people of Long Beach Island to take him back out. In addition, he had to make

sure some other lowlife didn't take Harper's place. He had to find someone with genuine integrity, someone who was already high-profile enough to slip painlessly into the job.

Elliot Davis became the man. Davis was small and heavy, with a charming, impish way about him. He smiled easily and enjoyed the company of others. He had been the president of First Union for nearly ten years and was active in community affairs. He had earned a reputation of unprecedented decency and compassion as a bank president, working out cautious but generous loans for private citizens and businesses after they'd been rejected everywhere else. He seemed to be a shining example of the now-famous 'compassionate conservatism' ideology, which appealed to much of the island's populace. He most assuredly did not possess Harper's many other, smaller political gifts and certainly would never get anywhere near the U. S. Senate in this or any other lifetime. But he would be an easy replacement for Harper. He would competently mind the store while the people of Long Beach licked their wounds. At least this was how Wilson envisioned it.

Davis was amenable to Wilson's plan because, as Wilson knew, he had often flirted with the idea of running for mayor. He was born and raised on LBI and loved every inch of it with all his heart. Davis knew Harper well and felt genuinely bad for him when his career began to unravel. He knew nothing of the details aside from what was printed in the local papers, and Wilson never offered any. So he simply accepted the situation and went forward, letting Wilson be his guide. This guy had a proven track record, after all.

Wilson, perched on the edge of Davis's desk, snatched up the phone when it rang on this sunny spring day. He'd been staring out one of the windows at the back of the house. Sandy Island was hazy but visible in the distance.

"Elliot Davis's office. Yes? Oh, hi, Freddie. What's up?"

Davis leaned forward, his eyebrows raised. Wilson held up a finger.

"Really? Are you certain? Okay, thanks. I'll talk to you a little later."

Wilson's expression did not change. In fact it rarely ever did—he was as stone-faced as they came. If you were to draw a picture of his mouth, a short, straight line would be more than sufficient.

Davis was about to crawl out of his pants. "Well?"

Wilson permitted himself a rare smile in this instant—one side of that short, straight line curled upward almost a millimeter.

"Congratulations, Elliot. You're going to be our next mayor. Our current one just figuratively tipped over his king."

Davis stood and shook Wilson's hand.

"Great, Tom, just great. Sad that it had to happen this way, but..."

Wilson nodded, tried to appear empathetic. Inside he was savoring the victory.

"Yes, very sad. Very sad indeed."

Mark set the cellphone gingerly on the passenger seat and pressed the foam-covered bud into his ear. The microphone hung about six inches farther down the coated wire, bouncing off his neck. He worked the tiny buttons without

taking his eyes off Bay Avenue, cruising past Marine Street in central Beach Haven.

Jennifer picked up on the first ring.

“Hello?”

“Hi, sweetheart.”

“Hi!”

Warmth flooded into him; a nourishing, soul-caressing warmth. He had grown addicted to the joy in her voice whenever she picked up the phone and found him on the other end. That unabashedly *I'm-so-glad-to-hear-you* tone that made him feel like he was truly wanted. They'd been together nearly a year now, and it was still as bright and sincere as ever. *I love her so much*, he thought.

“What’s going on? Are you almost there?”

“Yeah, almost. I just wanted to call and say hello, tell you that I loved you, and make sure everything’s still on for later.”

“You bet it is. I wouldn’t miss it for anything.”

“Great.”

“And I love you, too, Mark.”

He paused, stiffened slightly. His foot went to the brake pedal on its own as he drew too close to an elderly woman pattering along in a rusting red something-or-other from the sixties.

“You do?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Really? I mean...really?”

“Yes,” she said through a laugh that sounded more like an attempt to clear dust from her nose. “You silly, of course I do.”

He relaxed, smiled. “Okay. Sorry, I don’t mean to be so needy.”

“That’s all right.”

It is? Are you sure about that? The words were there, in that echoey place in his brain where all his words were manufactured. But he clenched his teeth and kept them in. He didn’t want to push, didn’t want to turn her off. If he pushed too much she might...

Disappear like your dad did? Or maybe just stop loving you like your mom? Stop loving you and pretend you’re not even there? No...please God, no. Not with Jen. Not that. Anything but that. Anything...

“Uh...what time? Twelve thirty?”

“Right, twelve-thirty,” she said. “I’ll bring the food, you just bring your wonderful self.”

“Great. I’ll see you then.”

“Okay,” she replied, kind of singing it—o-KAY-ee.

“Bye.”

He pressed the button that disconnected all calls and removed the bud from his ear. He tried to return his attention fully to the road as he entered Holgate, but it was hopeless. For nearly twelve months he had examined and re-examined the mystery of why a girl as sweet and as wonderful and as...*normal* as Jennifer King would want to dispose of her precious hours with the likes of him. She came from the kind of sane, stable world he only dreamed of—a nice home in a middle-class town, with parents who were still together and, from all outward appearances, still in love with each other. She was ‘good stock,’ a girl any mother would want her son to marry.

And him? *Well, we know all about that, don't we? We know this bubble's going to pop sooner or later. You'll wake from this dream and find yourself back in reality, chump. You're so far out of her league it isn't even funny. You've got some nerve—carrying this thing as far as you have. Why waste the time? Why waste her time? If you really love her so much, do her the favor of her life and cut it off now. Give her a chance to find someone who deserves her.*

He knew she'd have a fit if she got wind of these thoughts. And he felt bad keeping them from her—they had agreed not to keep secrets from each other, and for the most part he'd kept his end of the bargain. But these feelings of inadequacy were proving harder to shake than a shadow. Jennifer had a mother and a father who doted on her. He had a mother who barely noticed he was there, and an overbearing brute of a stepfather who wished he wasn't. She had a good education and a bright future. He had a high-school diploma and six credits at Ocean County College. She had an older sister she spoke with almost every night. He had no relatives he could stand, much less communicate with. He couldn't suppress the notion that he wasn't *contributing* anything to the relationship, that he brought nothing to the table. She had so much, he had so little. The disproportion riddled him with guilt. And depression. And, most of all, *fear*—the stark, white terror that one day she would wake up, realize she could do so much better, and toss him like a toothpick. *What was I thinking?* she'd wonder as she walked off, arm in arm with someone else. *Just what in hell was I thinking?*

He shivered at this image and doubled his determination to concentrate on his driving. The entrance to the Edwin B. Forsythe Wildlife Refuge came up at the end of Long Beach Boulevard. He eased into the parking lot and discovered, with a certain selfish pleasure, that he was the only one there. *Makes sense—how many other*

people would be visiting a Long Beach Island wildlife refuge on a Monday morning in mid May?

He grabbed his camera bag from the back seat and got out, not bothering to lock the tired '92 Honda Accord that served as his sole mode of transport. *And she drives a new Nissan. Another way she outclasses me hands down...* He slung the bag over his shoulder and began to walk.

The air was warm and sweet. He loved nature, loved being in the middle of it. He spent the first few moments just looking and touching, feeling and admiring. Then the professional side of him remembered why he had come, and he took out the camera. It was a basic model—Pentax K-1000, the camera high schools give to their Photography 101 students—but it was all he could afford. Much to his surprise, it had served him very well. It had no automatic features, but he came to love that. Having full control gave him more room to express himself, and the dependency forced him to stretch his abilities to their limits.

He brought the camera to his face and turned it sideways. All shots would be taken this way today—portrait instead of landscape. They needed covers back at the *SandPaper*. Mark's boss, the paper's photo editor, told him to shoot at least a hundred. The theme was spring, with a nod towards the coming summer. Mark had worked there for nearly two years now, as both a writer and photographer. The exposure had made him something of a minor local celebrity.

He spotted a prothonotary warbler atop a little shrub. It was the first one he'd seen this year. He attached a zoom lens and eased towards it.

When he felt close enough, he brought the camera up and twisted the lens into focus. Through the viewfinder he found a beautifully composed frame—the animal's primary yellows against the burning blue of the morning sky. He was awed

by the sheer austerity of it and found it impossible to click the shutter for a moment.

The bird took flight when his cellphone twittered. He tried to get the shot anyway but he knew he'd missed it. He pulled the phone from his belt and flipped it open, then closed it when a voice on the other end asked if he'd be interested in having his kitchen remodeled. So much for the National Do-Not-Call List.

As if to punish the device for disturbing his work, he turned it off.

Ricki Lake would be on first, then Sally Jessie. And then, best of all...*Jerry*.

BethAnn Mosley thought Jerry Springer was a god. He wasn't exactly a celebrity in her mind. He wasn't cute enough, like Tom Cruise or that hunk of all hunks, Brad Pitt. (She in fact had several pictures of Pitt stark naked, and in suggestive poses, on her computer. She'd downloaded them from the Web and wasn't even sure they were really him—they might have been faked, with his head imposed on someone else's body. Nevertheless they sufficiently served her purposes.) No, Jerry Springer was a god because his show had the best content, the best conflicts, the best...*hate*. Even though she would never admit it to anyone, she *loved* hate. It was as addictive as the Doritos, Coca-Cola, and Ben and Jerry's ice cream that formed her staple diet. This was to say nothing of marijuana and, when she could afford it, a bit of ecstasy.

Sometimes she would tape Springer, and if it turned out to be a particularly violent episode, she'd watch the explosive moments over and over. She loved the enraged look on people's faces when their resolve finally gave way and they tried to kill each other. God, how she loved that. Why didn't that happen more often in

real life? She supposed it did, but not in *her* life. She liked pushing people's buttons, liked trying to get them to those heights of irritation, but even in her best moments she couldn't seem to inspire the kind of rage Jerry provided. She'd heard somewhere that a lot of his shows were scripted, so maybe that was why they seemed so perfect. She didn't care. The pleasure she harvested far outweighed any concerns over artistic integrity.

The Ricki Lake Show paused for a commercial break, so she raised the remote and began flipping. To her right was an open bag of Fritos. To her left, a pint of Chunky Monkey with a spoon sticking out of it. A can of Coke was trapped between her flabby legs. The rest of the six pack was in an ice chest on the floor, awaiting its fate. All the curtains in the trailer were drawn, all the windows shut tight, both doors locked. A giant metal cocoon.

Ricki ended ten minutes later and BethAnn sighed. It would be exactly four minutes and thirty seconds until Sally started her monologue. She glanced down at the cordless phone and felt a familiar sense of dread. She'd put this off as long as possible. There were no spare minutes left.

Brian picked up on the second ring. "Hello, Beach Haven Acme, this is Brian Donahue, how can I help you?"

"Brian...it's me."

She sounded feeble, elderly. An old woman on her deathbed imparting her final thoughts.

"BethAnn? You sound terrible."

The sincerity was still there, she thought, and that was good. She'd held onto this job for almost fourteen months now—a personal record. Most of her

other employers caught on pretty quick. But not this guy. He seemed utterly clueless.

“I feel terrible. I’ve been throwing up, and I’ve had diarrhea, and—”

“Well, just stay home then. We’ll hold down the fort.”

Hold down the fort. What a Brian phrase that was. So gung-ho, so all-American.

What a schmuck.

“Thanks, I really appreciate it. And I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. We don’t have control over these things.”

“I just feel bad because it’s inventory day. There’s so much work to be done.”

“Don’t feel bad. Just feel better.”

Another Brianism; her stomach knotted. She wanted to choke people like this.

“Thanks. I’ll call tomorrow.”

“Righto.”

She turned the phone off and tossed it aside. It landed at the other end of the couch, buttons up. If it rang she’d ignore it; she wasn’t expecting any other calls today.

She smiled. It was a horrible, demonic smile. She knew who Brian would call to take her place—Jennifer King. Jennifer was the only other person in the store who knew how to use the inventory computer. That damn thing was ancient. Monocolored screen (black with glowing amber characters) and so slow to respond to commands that half the time you wondered if you had entered them correctly.

But Jennifer went to the trouble of learning how to use it. Didn't complain that it was out of date or that it was slow. Just sat in the lunchroom in the back, on her own time, and read the manual over and over until she'd mastered it. Another gung-ho schmuck. Her and her nonstop talk about her beloved boyfriend, the bigshot writer and photographer for the *SandPaper*. She was another one who should be choked to death.

She tried to envision the sinking look on Jennifer's face when Brian broke the bad news. She knew Jennifer was supposed to meet Mark for lunch today at Forsythe. She knew that because *everyone* knew it. Jennifer was always giving updates; the Mark and Jennifer fucking newsletter. This would shatter those plans. Jennifer would be sad, but she wouldn't complain. Nope, not her. All-American girls like her never did. She'd just carry on like a trooper and keep the disappointment to herself. But it would be there, and knowing that was good enough for BethAnn Mosley.

Sally finally came on. Then the Fritos ran out. BethAnn cursed and got up with a groan. She kept her stash in a chest-level cabinet so she wouldn't have to bend or stretch. It was jammed—potato chips, pretzels, popcorn (all three varieties—plain, cheese, and caramel). This was one of the practical advantages of working in a grocery store. She chose Munchos this time.

Jerry was next, so it was a good thing she got the new bag when she did.

THREE

Zaef kept his eyes closed and his hands folded the entire trip. He thought about many things, but mostly about the paradise that awaited him. What fools these people were. If they only knew. They cherished and clung to their mortality as if it possessed true value, never suspecting there was a better world waiting on the other side. *This* was the hell and the purgatory. Obliterating the nonbelievers was Allah's work, Allah's will. The Americans were the greatest heretics. They not only clung to their lives, they clung to their money and their material goods with equal fervor; sometimes more. They were soulless and godless. Zaef believed this with every ounce of his soul and felt no remorse for what he was about to do. In fact he felt excited about it. Excited and eager. This was the high point of existence. It would earn him passage into the great kingdom. It would exalt him in the eyes of the Almighty. Once the videotape he left behind—the one where he explained what he was doing and why—was found and played on news channels across the world, he would also be a hero of his people. Not that heroism interested him. Well, that wasn't completely true—it interested him inasmuch as it would encourage others to choose a similar course. That was something to be thankful for. But he could not dwell on it for long.

The plan was so simple and yet so powerful—smuggle a radioactive device onto a plane bound for Washington DC and detonate it upon landing, and in turn render the city uninhabitable for a few decades. The hardest part, he and the others had reasoned, was getting it on board. But even that turned out to be ridiculously easy—they bribed an airport employee to do it for them. They'd searched for months for just the right candidate, finally found him when Schiphol laid off nearly

a hundred people in a cost-cutting move. They were given a month's pay and three weeks to find work elsewhere. With so many embittered workers, the stage was set. An offer of ten-thousand dollars and a story that the box contained a hundred pounds of cocaine was all it took. They even gave the guy some as a 'bonus.'

Airport security in America had tightened like a vice. But that didn't mean it had tightened everywhere else. Perhaps the Americans could increase their control over planes that left their soil, but they couldn't do much about the flights coming in. Some nations, like Great Britain, tried to increase their own security anyway. They were high-profile countries that maintained strong relations with the U. S. That's why the Netherlands was chosen for this operation—it was smaller, quieter, easier to overlook. No one would suspect a flight from Amsterdam posed much of a threat. Once again the devil would be caught with his guard down. Zaeef smiled at this and allowed himself the very mortal sensation of personal gratification. He had watched tapes of terrified Americans reacting to al Qaeda's victory of September 11, 2001. Thinking it would happen again, and that *he* would be the cause of it, was very gratifying indeed.

He opened his eyes and checked his watch—eighty-thirty four. The pilot had announced a few moments earlier that they were not only right on schedule but in fact about ten minutes early. That suited him just fine. *The sooner the be—*

The plane rocked violently and Zaeef was almost thrown from his seat. Others tumbled into the aisles. A woman screamed, compartment lights flickered, and then a second and more violent jolt came. Overhead compartments flew open, vomiting their contents.

Zaeef had purposely left his carry-on bag unzipped. The plan once they'd landed in Washington was to simply get up from his seat as soon as they stopped moving, reach inside, and press the button on the detonator that had been disguised as a can of shaving cream. The bag now rolled out and fell onto his head, then to the floor, spilling items everywhere.

He cursed in Arabic and lunged for the can. Some of the other passengers forgot about the turbulence and trained their eyes on him. For a flicker of an instant the personal charm was gone and the terrorist stood before them.

No one moved. Time dragged and warped, became meaningless. Zaeef knew his cover was blown, knew it was time to improvise. But he waited anyway, just in case. If there was a move to be made, he wanted one of them to make it first.

Someone did—one of the fashion-model stewardesses. She'd been at the far end of the aisle helping an older woman to her feet. She rose slowly and, keeping her eyes locked on the Syrian, knocked on the cockpit door. She had a brief exchange with someone on the other side, then the door opened and the captain appeared. *The only one who looked like he had a brain in his head*, Zaeef thought bitterly. The man studied him for only a moment, but in that moment Zaeef could see the intelligence working, the years of training being accessed. He also noted that one of the co-pilots was on the radio, no doubt sending a distress call to the ground.

The captain approached cautiously. He didn't appear to have a weapon, but Zaeef sensed danger nevertheless. There were people all around him, many of

them Americans who would be more than happy to take part in a heroic effort. He had no intention of letting that happen.

The revolver he pulled from the bag was a modified Glock, the notorious ‘plastic gun’ that had anti-firearms activists in a state of perpetual frenzy for years. They were made from high-tech polymers and were often used by government agents working undercover. Although some of their internal parts were metal, these parts could be replaced by plastic substitutes by an expert—especially one who planned to use the weapon just a few times. They could then be easily smuggled onto planes because they wouldn’t register on metal detectors.

There was a collective gasp and more screaming. Everyone near Zaeef backed away. The captain, whose nametag identified him simply as ‘Casey,’ froze as if he’d been hit with some kind of stun ray. Zaeef’s eyes were wild, insane. He aimed the gun at the nearest window.

“Everyone back,” he shouted twice in passable English, “or I’ll shoot it out!”

He had the shaving-cream can in his other hand, held against his chest with his thumb on the button. The fear in the captain’s eyes reassured him, made him feel more in control of the situation. If he could control this guy, his instincts told him, he could still carry out this mission. Inspired by this, a new plan fell together in his mind.

“This is a detonator!” he said, holding the can up. “I push this, and the plane goes!”

“I don’t see anything here large enough to be a bomb,” Casey said calmly. “I think you’re bluffing.”

“In my suitcase, in the plane’s belly! You stupid fool.” Zaeef permitted himself a tiny smile. “Getting it on was so easy.”

A few passengers were crying, convinced the end was at hand. One elderly man in a plaid jacket went down on his knees and began praying. At the very back, a boy of five watched with a mixture of curiosity and confusion. His mother, an attractive brunette in her thirties, held him close. She was drawing as much comfort as she was giving.

Casey was watching and waiting. Zaeef could tell what was going through his mind—*Just give me one chance. One chance and I’ll take care of this little bastard.* A John Wayne type. A real American hero.

“Turn around,” Zaeef snapped, motioning with the gun. When Casey refused to comply, he took aim at the window again. His was the perfect poker face because there was no bluff—Casey had no doubt this lunatic would be more than happy to get sucked out the window if it meant taking everyone else with him.

He turned around.

“Now, back to the cockpit. Anyone moves, I kill them.”

They began forward, roughly ten feet apart. The other two pilots, who had been watching from the narrow rectangular perspective of the open doorway, leaned back to allow their captain to pass.

As he did, he said to the one on the left—the same one who’d informed ground control of their situation—“Charlie, you got that pocketknife of yours?”

Charlie did. He rarely went anywhere without it. He could feel the shape of it in his pocket, against his thigh.

His reply—a quick “Yep,”—was so low it was almost inaudible.

“Good, get it out and hand it to me. Tony, empty out the cargo bay.”

A brief pause. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. Let’s get rid of the big problem first. If this bomb of his blows in the middle of the ocean, no harm done.”

Tony obeyed without another word, never realizing the disaster his captain’s decision would precipitate.

Zaeef appeared at the threshold just before Charlie had a chance to hand over his knife. Tony, however, had already initiated the emptying of the cargo bay. In a matter of seconds there would be hundreds of suitcases falling from the sky. “I want to see all of you. Stand up.”

The three men obeyed, standing alongside each other as if taking a group photo. Except there were no smiles. Just thinly contained anger and obvious hatred. No fear, either, and that irritated Zaeef. *Arrogant American bastards.*

“Take off your jackets and turn slowly.”

Again they obeyed. The sight of the three grown, uniformed men revolving like ballerinas would’ve looked oddly comical under other circumstances.

None were armed. Zaeef was relieved and allowed himself to relax slightly. Then he made his fatal mistake.

“Now get back behind the controls and keep flying.”

The pilots, astonished, exchanged glances that transmitted the same message—*He doesn’t know how to fly the plane.* When Zaeef realized his error, he felt an overwhelming desire to push the button and kill all of them right then.

“*Get back there!*” he screeched.

It was the captain—of course, Zaeef thought—who spoke for all of them.

“No.”

“I will shoot you dead and your passengers will all die!”

His small audience offered no response, which served only to enrage him further. The captain even went so far as to put his hands in his pockets and look smug.

It was their easy willingness to die for their principles that pushed him to the breaking point. For him, that mindset required years of training, discipline, and propaganda that he'd always known was largely fictional. For them—beings of a far-superior ideology—it required a decision-making process that took all of about five seconds. He had never been so acutely aware of his true place in the world.

He took aim at the one on the left—Charlie—and fired. A splash of blood leaped from his chest, and he slammed into the controls.

Amid the screams of the other passengers, he said, “You will be next! Fly the plane! Fly the—!”

An arm slithered around his neck like a tentacle. It was thick and hairy, and very powerful. The owner, whoever it was, tried to pull him backwards. But he was too experienced in close-quarters combat and managed to stay on his feet. He brought the gun up and shot blindly over his shoulder. More screams, and the arm lost its strength and fell away. Zaeef didn't bother looking back and would never know who the attacker was.

During this brief scuffle, the captain took his chance. One of the last cognizant thoughts the Syrian had was that Casey moved with remarkable speed and agility for a man in his fifties. He came through the door and brought his hands up in one fluid motion, as if he'd practiced it a hundred times. Maybe he

had. Regardless, he wasn't quite fast enough. Zaeef swung the pistol back around and fired again, aiming for Casey's head. It was a foolish move, as the torso was a much bigger target, but he was possessed only by hatred now and wanted the satisfaction of seeing the man's face disintegrate. But the bullet strayed left, missing its target entirely. It blew out one of the cockpit windows instead.

The sudden depressurization forced the plane into a dive. The terrified screams of the other passengers blended with the sound of violent air displacement to create a deafening symphony of horror. The dead pilot's body went out first, then Casey's. The third pilot—a man named Craig Rodas who was making his first international flight—went along with Zaeef. Both hit the frame at the same time and looked for a second like they were two kids hanging out the sunroof of a limousine. They were already unconscious and would die in minutes. Their bodies left blood stains and strips of flesh around the frame where they had dragged against the jagged edges.

The cockpit door slammed shut with near-sonic force, and for a moment it appeared as though this segment of the nightmare was over. Then the door began to bend like a deck of cards and finally snapped off its hinges, zoomed through the window, and spun into oblivion. Since the plane had been flying at twenty-six thousand feet, unconsciousness occurred in less than a minute. If they'd been cruising a bit lower—say, fifteen-thousand—some people, with the aid of the oxygen masks that now dangled over their seats like snakes from a tree, might have been able to do something.

More bodies went out. One by one, those who hadn't remained in their seats with their belts on sailed down the aisle along with empty soda cans,

magazines, napkins, and paper plates. The woman who had befriended Zaaef at the airport went out at one point. Her head struck the cockpit doorway with such force that the skull cap was sheared clean off. It took nearly three full minutes for the depressurization to complete. Of the original eighty-nine people who boarded the plane, sixty-one remained.

Continuing its kamikaze run, the 747 broke through cloud cover at three-thousand feet. Minutes later, against the paradoxically beautiful spring sky, it drove into the Atlantic Ocean and exploded into bits. When the NTSB combed the site weeks later, they would find almost no trace of evidence that this craft or any of its passengers had ever physically existed. The bodies in particular evaporated like paper maiche, and those who had been drawn out before the plane reached the surface were eventually consumed by sea life.

A few miles away, a well-packed wooden crate weighing more than a hundred and fifty pounds and bearing the stenciled words BONE CHINA AND SILVERWARE—PLEASE HANDLE CAREFULLY hit the ocean and immediately went under. It seemed in a hurry as it cut through the sun-stippled water, down and down into darkness. When it reached a depth of about two hundred feet, the pressure caused the poorly constructed bomb to detonate. The core of it was an almost eight-kilogram sphere of Pakistani-bought plutonium about the size of a baseball. It was crudely refined—what was popularly referred to as ‘dirty’—but packed enough explosive force to create an uninhabitable radius of about twenty miles.

A water column filled with hot gases and bomb residue shot up more than 3000 feet and grew to nearly a full mile in diameter. Shock waves traveled through

the sea in every direction. Most eventually shrank to a whisper, but those that moved downward were met by an unstable barrier—a sea slope nearly four miles long. As in any other instance when one force meets another head-on, a battle for dominance ensued. In this case there were no winners—the inhuman power released by the bomb would eventually be absorbed, but not before jarring a great portion of the slope loose, which triggered an undersea landslide.

According to the laws of physics, when one solid object in a tightly confined space occupied by other solid objects changes position, the position of the relative objects must also change. As the rocks and sediment began their violent journey downward, an equal parcel of the Atlantic Ocean was, in essence, drawn down, and it chose the only available direction to go—up. When the sea level rises, another law of physics states that it must eventually fall again. For that to occur here, the excess had to find a place to settle...

At approximately eighty thirty-four on the morning of April twenty-sixth, a massive tsunami was born roughly six-hundred miles off the northeastern coast of the United States. Then it began radiating in all directions.

Including New Jersey.