

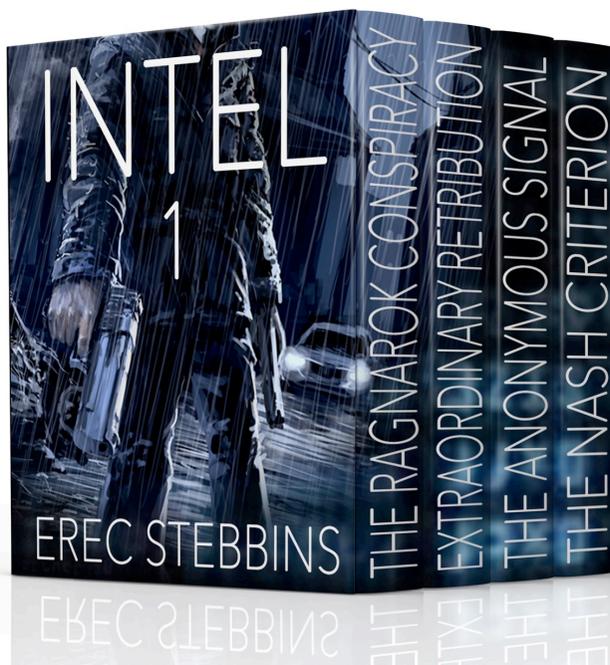
THE
**NASH
CRITERION**



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The

NASH CRITERION

Book Four in the INTEL 1 Novels

Erec Stebbins

New York, NY, USA

Only one thing is impossible for God: to find any sense in any copyright law on the planet. —Mark Twain

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*To Pete and Michelle:
I try to keep an open mind*

*O Conspiracy,
Sham'st thou to show thy dang'rous brow by night,
When evils are most free?*

—William Shakespeare,
Julius Cæsar

PART 1

*"Behind the ostensible government sits enthroned
an invisible government owing no allegiance
and acknowledging no responsibility to the people."*

—Theodore Roosevelt



1

“WILL THERE BE anything else, Elaine?”

Tipping her bifocals down, President York looked up from the mass of papers on her desk in the Oval Office. Before her stood a lanky man in a formal business suit, white hair and blue eyes staring back.

“No, George,” she said, rubbing her eyes. “A crazy week. I’m sorry about the Senate vote. It’s a slap in the face to me that they held it up as long as they did. In the end it wasn’t even close. You deserved better.”

George Tooze nodded. “Homeland Security is a macho position. They don’t want some academic heading it. But it’s done. Onward.”

“Onward indeed, George,” she said, gesturing to her desk.

Tooze motioned to leave but caught himself, turning back to the president.

“It was something today, Elaine. I remember when Obama was sworn in. First African-American president. Now this. No one will forget your speech. It will be in the history books.”

“We’ve come a long way, baby. But if I hadn’t been in boots and fatigues? Wouldn’t have scratched that glass ceiling. So much fear out there. They don’t care if you’ve got a law degree from Harvard, served in the Senate ten years, hell, even that your daddy was in that chamber. People need Daddy in the White House. Richard was a genius to use my military photos so much in the campaign. I think I ran mostly as a soldier!”

“You have a large base. A strong one. And we’ll use that, don’t you worry. We just had to convince enough fence sitters. And we did.”

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Congratulations, Ms. President. You've earned it."

He smiled and closed the door behind him as he left. York watched him exit the White House and step toward a black town car idling in the driveway. It was good to have such loyal supporters early on. If you didn't, when things got rough, you were in trouble. And Elaine York didn't fool herself—in this business, sooner or later, things always got rough.

A large phone at the far end of the desk vibrated.

"You're kidding me."

York stared dumbfounded. The device was a military-grade smartphone, a one-of-a-kind custom gadget with cutting-edge voice and data encryption, designed specifically for one job: to serve as the President's communication device of convenience for hotline calls.

Hotline calls.

More than twenty bilateral hotlines existed between the United States and other nations. The famous Russian hotline was complimented with many spanning allies in Europe to frenemies in Asia and the Middle East. The phone was not supposed to buzz except when the White House Communications Agency had received and was routing a call from one of these nations' leaders. York felt the weight of her office descend like a mountain on her shoulders.

She grabbed the device and keyed in her unique code. "President Elaine York on Direct Link."

Static only. York engaged several additional security clearance codes. Nothing. Her heart began to pound. They checked this line every hour of every day! How could it be malfunctioning?

A pop of static startled her. A man's voice spoke.

"President York. It is so good to finally be able to speak with you."

York felt cold. She had run simulations with the hotline communication system. Procedures were followed, protocols in place. She should be speaking with White House Communications. She should be briefed and transferred to the incoming hotline call. What the hell was happening?

"Please don't be alarmed."

"Who is this? You aren't WHCA."

"No, we are not. We are not a formal part of the US government. Or

any government.”

York stared slack-jawed for a moment. “How the hell did you get this number? Who are you?”

“The answers to both questions are intertwined. You need to discover those answers before your presidency continues much further.”

“Look, I don’t know what this—”

“There is someone waiting for you underground. At the new Cogcon Line. I think that he will peak your curiosity.”

“How do you know—”

“We know and we have access. Which should tell you all you need to know.”

York blinked. “You have access to the train line?”

“Rest assured, Ms. York, your gleaming new railway is still a secret, known only to the proper governmental agencies. And our group.”

“Who are you?”

“It is best we explain in a different setting.”

“Why should I trust this? You could be luring me into a trap. I’m going to call—”

“Friendly fire, Ms. President!”

Her face paled. Elaine York stared forward wildly and swallowed. “What did you say?”

“Battle of Khafji. Terrible accident. Was it eleven servicemen died? You were assigned to that unit, weren’t you?”

“In a non-combat role. Everyone knows that! Women weren’t allowed to serve in combat roles then.”

“But we both know the truth, don’t we, Ms. York? Your actions were noble, truly. But of course it’s not me you would have to convince. You and several other soldiers resisted some men in uniform who were out of control. The ensuing firefight was a tragedy.” He paused. “And easily misconstrued. It would be terrible for your presidency if certain information were released to the public.”

She squeezed her fingertips to her temple. This wasn’t happening!

“The Cogcon line, Ms. President. Try at least that far. Someone will be waiting for you.”

The connection closed.

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In a near panic, York opened the trap door underneath her desk and descended into the Horsepower command post. It was empty. She searched for the Secret Service staff who manned the post, but found no one. Monitors around her displayed camera footage from inside and outside the building. Communications equipment crackled and blinked. A filled coffee pot steamed beside several unopened sandwiches.

“What the hell?”

Continuing was insane. This was an attack on the Presidency. Only an idiot would follow the directions from that cipher on the hotline.

Friendly fire.

She couldn't escape it. It would ruin her, strip her presidency of all moral authority and hand her opponents the perfect weapon to discredit her. Whoever had been on the other end of the line, they had terrible knowledge—dangerous knowledge, and the power that came with it. She had nowhere to go but forward, into the trap they had set for her.

She made her way through several of the hidden passageways leading to the classified rail line. Outside the deepest military and governmental circles, the new train was only a distorted rumor. The line served to secrete the president and staff deep underground, away from the White House in the event of a national catastrophe. As she opened the final doorway with a retinal scan, she saw the gleaming metallic surface of the presidential car in front of her, the hum of the electric motor purring softly.

A tall black man in a sweater looked down at her solemnly.

“Hello, Elaine,” came his deep voice.

York stared up at the former community organizer, his hair completely grayed, his shoulders stooped and his gait limping. He looked old. He looked defeated. He looked mournful.

“Barack?”

2

“THOSE WERE *SOLDIERS!*” said Houston. “We need to go back!”

The three stood in a stairwell, two flights down from Intel 1. The hacker Fawkes had just been killed in the office of John Savas—his head blown open from a sniper shot through the window. Sara Houston and Francisco Lopez had fled along with the remaining FBI agents, only to have Angel Lightfoote pull them to the side and toward a glowing EXIT sign.

“*Trust me!*” she had whispered without further explanation.

For reasons Houston would never fully understand, she had. In a split second decision, she had followed the bald woman into the stairwell, Lopez behind them. They glimpsed at the last moment a group of soldiers pour from the elevators with weapons drawn.

Browning in hand, Houston began to climb the stairs. The muscled arm of Lightfoote held her back.

“We can’t!” she said. “There isn’t time! They’ll be looking for us. They’ll know soon we’re not with them.”

Houston nodded. “We’re wanted fugitives, I get it. But they’ve risked everything with us. I’m not going to abandon them now.”

Lightfoote shook her head. “Not for you. For me!” She removed a thumb drive from her pocket and brandished it at Houston. “Fawkes’s email and attachment. They want this! We can’t let them have it. Not until we know what it is.” Houston’s pause was all the assent Lightfoote required. “Now, let’s move!”

The FBI agent bounded down the stairs like a spider. Houston

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glared at Lopez who shrugged, and they followed after her, both struggling to keep up.

“Subbasement?” rasped Houston, glancing at the signs over the doorways.

Lightfoote landed heavily from a jump. “Yes.”

A door was ajar, the stairway ending in a dank and musty corner. The smell of rotten eggs assaulted them. Lopez grabbed Lightfoote with his good arm, the sling on the other soaked in sweat.

“Where are we going?”

Houston scowled at the dimly lit passageway in front of them. “The goddam sewers. That’s where.”

Lightfoote nodded. “These huge buildings produce a lot of shit. There’s got to be a connection to New York’s underground rivers. If we can get access, we can follow it to some of the manhole connections—maybe find one they haven’t welded shut. Come up on street level somewhere a little downstream.” She turned on the flashlight app of her smartphone. “There has to be an access door down here somewhere.”

There was. After several tense minutes of searching around pumps and other machinery, they found an iron hatch opening to the main sewer line. It required all the strength Lopez had left to pry it open, but soon they scrambled into the dark bowels of the city. A knee-high river of waste greeted them.

“Glad we skipped lunch,” said Lopez, holding his hand to his mouth.

Houston stopped Lightfoote with her hand.

“Okay, before we go any further, hacker girl, what the hell is going on? Who were those soldiers? What do you know?”

Lightfoote cocked her head to the side. “I don’t know. I feel it. Fawkes opened up Pandora’s Box, Sara. Bad things came out. The soldiers came out. They’re part of it. We have to see what’s in this file. That’s what they want. That’s why he was killed.”

“But you don’t even know what’s in that file!”

“Fawkes was a crazy bastard. That’s what I know. But we had a kind of sick relationship.” Lightfoote stared down into the darkness of the tunnel. “Whatever’s in this, it was everything to him. It’s why

he did it all, brought the fucking world to its knees. He was trying to kill something. Something in this file.”

“This Bilderberg?”

“Maybe,” said Lightfoote.

Lopez shook his head. “And you think he’s right? You think his death and those soldiers are somehow related to this?”

“Yes,” she said. “Let’s just give ourselves the chance to find out, get a look at this, okay? Before they whisk us off to some dungeon somewhere.”

Houston stared into the green eyes before her. “Some dungeon? So that’s what’s going to happen to them? We left them to that?”

“I don’t know for sure.”

“But you feel it.” Lopez crossed himself. “God be with them. I know what the monsters do in those dungeons. I’ve seen the product up close.” He passed his finger over the stigmata on his forehead.

“All right,” said Houston. “Let’s get out of here. Get back to the apartment in Harlem. We’ve got computers. Internet access—to whatever’s left of it. We’ll see what we can find out there. And we better find something. Or we abandoned them for nothing.”

An old Chinese couple crossing the street jumped backward and scampered away as a manhole cover rocketed into the air and landed several feet away from the dark hole. The iron disk wobbled like a giant coin to a ringing stop.

A bald woman in combat fatigues leapt out of the manhole, landing heavily on her feet. She drew a pistol and scanned around her, body in a tense crouch. Two others followed: a second woman covered in black, giving a hand to a large man in a flowing coat nursing his left shoulder.

Chinatown was empty, the old couple having thought better of continuing their walk. Shops around them were boarded up, many looted, debris and trash littering the roads and sidewalks. As the sun began to dip below the ridge of buildings in lower Manhattan, the three of them raced out of the road and into the alleyways, disappearing like silent shadows into the falling night.

3

THE NIGHTMARE BEGAN as soon as they exited the FBI Jarvits building. Savas glimpsed several black vans and military issue trucks parked outside, armed men lining the perimeter. Soldiers marched them in file to the convoy like prisoners of war, hostile eyes tracking their movements, weapons in plain sight and at the ready.

As they approached the vans they were separated, each directed to a different vehicle. Savas had only an instant to stare into Cohen's eyes before the men jerked fabric over his head, leaving him in claustrophobic darkness. They cuffed his arms behind him, then roughly shoved him forward. He stumbled into the vehicle, smashing his forehead. A foot thrust him tightly into the corner and knocked the wind out of him.

“Shut up and don't move, and I won't have to use this.”

Savas could hear the static crackle of a Taser inches from his face.

Several heavy bodies dropped into seats around him before the door slammed shut. The engine turned over and the vehicle lurched forward into the streets of New York.

With no visual input his brain had nothing to offset the choppy movements of the drive. Growing nausea churned his stomach into a painful knot. He tried visualizing images with the movements, always a step behind, the effort hardly compensating. *God help me from getting sick in this bag.*

He tried to guess their direction, the streets taken, hoping to learn where these men were taking them. But he failed. Within minutes,

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the vehicle's jerky maneuvers had scrambled his sense of direction.

He guessed it had been half an hour when the van stopped abruptly, throwing his face into the chair in front of him. The impact gave him a black eye, and he tasted copper from a busted lip. Unable to wipe his face, the blood dripped through the hood.

"He's a bleeder!" cried a man standing over him.

Laughter erupted. Arms hoisted him roughly to his feet and flung him out of the van. He forced himself not to gasp as his shoulder smacked the concrete. Pulling up slowly, he spit blood. *Focus, John.* He tried to slow his heart rate. He breathed deeply.

The sea.

The thick taste of brine and marine life penetrated the hood. The gull cries and sounds of waves told him all he needed to know. He'd been taken to a port, likely in lower Manhattan given the travel time. Boots rang on thin metal as a massive object thudded gently into the space before him.

A boat.

His other senses were primed, hearing and touch sharpened. He sensed the vessel and its weight rocking on the waves, knocking against the dock.

They're taking me out to sea.

They stowed him roughly below deck, his wrists chained to the wall, the pitch of the boat sending another wave of nausea through him. They still hadn't removed the hood, the fabric now glued to his face from clotted blood. He didn't dare show any weakness or ask for aid. Whoever these men worked for, they had been instructed to treat him like the worst terrorist suspect. The implications sent a chill through him as he thought about Cohen and Miller, and what fate awaited them all.

At least he knew they would be together. The three had been split up, either for security or psychological warfare. Perhaps both. But their captors weren't careful enough. He'd heard the high-pitched sounds of a woman's voice—*Rebecca's voice*—as she cried out, an impact sounding from her hitting the deck heavily. *She's on board.* But

he couldn't let himself dwell on what had happened to her. He had to focus, keep his wits about him, and discover all he could that might aid in an escape.

But he wasn't fooling himself. He'd known too many rendered terrorists, read too many reports, and could appraise professionally their situation. Statistically, escape was all but impossible. Only a handful had been recorded. As he fought off the bile climbing in his throat, he forced himself to face the truth—any attempts to escape, should they ever present themselves, would almost certainly end in failure. Probably in death.

We'll have to work with them. A recipe for Stockholm Syndrome. But the only hope for freedom, for survival, lay with their captors. Hope depended on meeting the desires of those now controlling their lives. Part of him wanted simply to resist, to find an opportunity to make a last stand and take down as many of them with him as he could.

But I'm not alone. Rebecca's here. Such a selfish death would not only break her heart, but would seriously endanger her life. He had to swallow his pride, his anger, suppress the desire to strike out. He had to act calmly. Shrewdly. He had to find a way to bring his captors to his side and convince them to release them. But without knowing who had taken him or why, it was impossible to know what to do, or how likely such efforts were to succeed.

The boat moved. He felt the random vectors of pitch, roll, and yaw from the waves give way to a clear direction. The sounds of powerful engines vibrated through the walls of the vessel. Kerosene fumes began to choke him.

The ship left the dock, but headed where, or why, he couldn't guess.

