
Prologue

Hai Phong Port, Vietnam – April 2017

Carlos approached the docks with his heartbeat drumming through his ears. He scanned the area for signs that his cover had been blown with his hand resting on his holstered Glock. Something was going to happen today. He could feel it in his bones.

He caught the gaze of his undercover colleague, Vikram, who gave him a slight nod. Agency headquarters had picked up chatter that their mark, Duc Nguyen, knew he had a leak within his crew. Carlos swallowed hard, although his throat still felt like sandpaper. What he wouldn't give for an icy Coke or a cold beer. He and Vik were living on borrowed time, but they still didn't have the necessary evidence to pin the illicit arms deals on Nguyen. His connections with higher-ups in the CIA, at MI-6, and within French military intelligence—*la Direction générale de la sécurité extérieure*—kept him from being targeted, and it didn't hurt that a portion of his profits ended up in Pentagon slush funds like the Red Sea Trading Company. This operation had taken months to set up and it was about to disintegrate. Their only hope was to gain access to the ledger before Nguyen figured out their true identities. With the ledger, they would have an account of every arms sale that Nguyen had orchestrated, along with names of the consultants who had betrayed their respective governments to line their pockets with Nguyen's funds.

Carlos watched Nguyen's posture as they waited for the last of their three containers from the China Star Shipping Company to be unloaded onto the docks. He'd once seen Nguyen hold a gun to a contact's thirteen-year-old daughter based only on the slight suspicion that he'd been compromised. What would Nguyen do now if he were certain that he had been betrayed?

Carlos took a step back and offered Nguyen's business partner, Seymour, a cigarette before he lit his own. He inhaled the smoke deep, feeling his lungs inflate with the delicious poison that he'd tried

to quit over and over again. He held it long before slowly exhaling. After one last deep drag, he tagged the butt with a mini GPS sticker and reluctantly dropped it to mark the spot where the containers stood.

The forklift creaked as it placed the last container in front of them. Carlos exhaled as their local contact—a short Italian man whose name he wasn't privy to—unlocked the ranger lock and opened the first container using a door-latch handle extender that was longer than his own torso. Once the door was open, he repeated the same procedure on the other two containers while Nguyen, Seymour, Carlos, and Vik examined the contents of the first one.

Carlos picked up an assault rifle and raised it up to his shoulder to inspect the scope. The rifle felt heavy on his frame, a weapon of precision. He recognized it as the more updated model of one he had seen in training six years earlier. He rarely used such weapons in his life as an operative, but the Agency had made sure to train him and his colleagues in their use. He put the rifle down and examined a set of grenade launchers, followed by a bazooka and a napalm rocket launcher.

Carlos suppressed a shudder. Even with all of this evidence, they had no documentation that directly tied Nguyen to the arms deals. All of the transactions were conducted in the names of his subordinates, and he had an army of lawyers to ensure that he'd never be charged, let alone convicted. Not without the ledger. To the public, Nguyen made his money through private equity investments in holding companies around the world. Those companies owned subsidiaries that made other investments—including illegal arms deals that paid their dividends back to Nguyen and his consultants. Through the operation, Vik had learned that each real transaction was recorded in code in a ledger, and a subsequent, aboveboard lump-sum transaction was created on the company books to account for several of the illicit transactions. Since Nguyen didn't keep electronic records of his transactions, the ledger was the only piece of evidence that could provide incontrovertible proof of his involvement in the arms deals.

As Carlos gripped the napalm rocket launcher, he was catapulted back to his high-school classroom, the day he had learned about the Vietnam War. Images of orange and black smoke from the documentary his world studies teacher showed them filled his head, along with terrifying photos of burn victims. He squeezed his eyes shut, willing the images away and lowered the weapon.

Seymour made eye contact with him. “What do you think, Carlos?”

“Looks good to me,” he answered. Carlos quieted an urge to flinch, glad that his training kept those involuntary reflexes at bay. Seymour’s hooked nose and nasal voice always cut through to his core. Seymour seemed even more ruthless than Nguyen because he looked at people, even those he trusted and liked, as if they were tools to be manipulated.

Seymour nodded at Nguyen and they exited the container. They followed the same inspection procedure for the other two containers, which held more of the same weaponry. Once the inspection was completed, Seymour handed a wad of cash to the young Italian, who then locked the containers once more.

“Vik, go ahead and transfer the money,” Seymour said.

Vik nodded and tapped on his phone, as Carlos watched from a few feet away. When the two of them had started this operation, they could never have imagined how long or extensive it would be. Vik had joined Nguyen’s team first, and Carlos didn’t even know how the Agency had established his cover. He only knew that Vik had installed himself as one of Nguyen’s front men.

Carlos had heard whispers about how they had done it—that Vik first became buddies with one of Nguyen’s contacts in Turkey, and slowly segued into the inner circle. Carlos’ process was much easier. Vik had given the Agency enough intel to know Nguyen was seeking a specialized weapons expert, and once the Agency had created the cover, all Vik had to do was slip Carlos’ cover credentials into the pile. Even so, Carlos was never privy to the inner workings of any of the deals. Vik knew more than Carlos, but he seldom knew the actual locations or buyers until hours before a deal went down.

They had considered an attempt to turn one of Nguyen’s men instead of continuing the climb through his close associates, but the Agency had dismissed it as too risky. Nguyen’s men appeared fiercely loyal. He kept them in line by showering them with gifts in their chosen vices; women, booze, weapons—whatever ensured their allegiance. While they’d accumulated quite the bounty over time, they were still no closer to securing the ledger.

Once the Italian finished closing up the containers, he scurried down the pier and disappeared into the darkness. Carlos’ adrenaline spiked, they were alone again—Nguyen and his inner circle of three. If something were to happen, now would be the time.

Carlos lit another cigarette and stepped to the side as Seymour and Nguyen spoke to each other. He took a few steps to move into earshot but could only catch a few words.

“...from Caspian. He doesn’t know...”

“...doesn’t know anything...has to be him.”

Carlos swallowed the lump in his throat and resisted the urge to bolt down the pier.

Seymour turned toward him, “Carlos, I think we’re set. We’ll see you at the hotel bar in an hour.”

Carlos tried to calm his trembling hand as he brought the cigarette to his lips for another drag. He nodded, desperate to mask his fear, and inhaled deep. “See you in a bit.” When he felt as if he were safely out of their sight, he ducked into the shadows alongside another cargo ship and crept back toward the group with his Glock in hand. He still couldn’t hear anything from the group that he’d left. *Maybe I was wrong?* His pulse raced, and he compelled his legs forward. Perhaps they didn’t suspect either of them, but he had to find out.

He had reached the end of the container ship when he heard the crack of the gun—a single shot. He covered the remaining distance in a couple of seconds, fighting his instinct to break from the shadows to move faster. He stopped behind a supply truck and peaked around the corner. Seymour held a gun in one hand and his phone in the other. Vikram was lying on his back, not moving. “Send a cleanup crew to the docks,” Seymour said and hung up.

Carlos waited, his throat constricted, until Seymour and Nguyen disappeared down the dock. He ran toward Vikram’s body and dropped to his knees. There was a hole in Vikram’s chest and a small pool of blood spread from beneath him. Carlos bit down on his lip until he tasted blood.

“Vik? It’s me. It’s Carlos.” He pressed one hand to the wound and searched for a pulse with his other, but he knew it was futile. “Come on, wake up, buddy. Please...Vik!” he cried out again as he found no pulse.

Carlos scrambled to the edge of the pier and vomited into the water below. *The cleaners are coming.* He retched again and caught his breath as he leaned against a pylon. He steadied himself and staggered back to search Vikram’s body for any Agency identification. When he came up empty, he pulled out Vik’s phone. He opened the phone sync app on his own phone and touched the two phones together to copy the data and files. When the sync was

complete, he wiped the memory on Vik's phone and hurled it into the water. He shut his eyes for a moment. "Bye, buddy," he whispered, "I'm so sorry. I'll make sure they pay for this."

Chapter 1

Kyoto, Japan – Nine years later, April, 2023

Petra Shirazi watched the sun rise to her left as she jogged down the path along Lake Biwa Canal. “I’ll race you to the bridge,” she said to the man running alongside her before sprinting away.

She covered the three remaining blocks in several seconds and leaned over the bridge rail to catch her breath as Kasem caught up with her.

“I told you I wasn’t going to race you,” he shook his head.

She flashed a smile and shrugged, “What can I say? I’m not going to stop trying.” They spent a few minutes stretching along the rail in silence.

“It still takes my breath away.” Kasem put his arm around her waist and the two of them looked toward the water, “I’m so glad you’re here with me.”

“I’m glad to be here with you,” Petra rested her head on his chest and inhaled deeply. A moment later, she stepped away to stretch her hamstrings.

“Do you want to get some breakfast?” he asked.

“Sure, why not?”

Petra followed him toward one of the local grocery stores in the Higashiyama neighborhood. They picked up a couple of green tea and taro flavored rolls, along with two hot coffees and sat down on a bench outside the store. Petra tore a piece off the taro roll and popped it in her mouth.

“I can’t believe that’s your favorite flavor,” Kasem took a giant bite of the green tea roll. “Is there anything that you want to do today?”

“Not really,” Petra sipped her coffee and pulled her feet up onto the bench. “You?”

“We can play it by ear,” Kasem fidgeted as he finished the roll. “Let’s get cleaned up and go for a walk. I want to see the cherry blossoms again.”

“Didn’t you see enough of them while we were running?”

“Come on. You know it’s different. Let’s take a stroll and smell the roses. Or in this case, the blossoms.”

A short time later, Petra stepped into the shower in their traditional Japanese *machiya* house. She turned the water to its hottest and winced as it hit her skin. She adjusted the temperature and leaned against the stone wall of the shower.

Petra splashed water on her face and confronted her dread. Recently she had been avoiding long walks or talks with Kasem. Anything romantic, really, to steer him away from the idea. A ring hidden in his sock drawer? *Isn’t that a bit cliché?* She had been trying to find a way to bring it up. She grimaced and wished for the thousandth time that she hadn’t gone looking for his navy sweater a few days earlier. He asked her to bring it before she met him at the gym. If only he hadn’t asked her to grab it, she never would have been searching in his dresser. She’d opened the sock drawer by mistake, but before she could close it, she saw it—a ring box, barely hidden, tucked in between two pairs of rolled up dress socks. *Did he want me to find it?*

Petra sighed. In another time, maybe in another life, she would have been happy or excited. *If only it were just about the ring.* The ring was lovely. A slim oval shaped solitaire diamond on a platinum band. She had even tried it on. It fit perfectly, both in terms of size and how it looked on her hand. The heart of the issue was that she had no answer for Kasem. She loved him. She had no doubt about that, but how could she marry him? They had never been together in the real world. Their life in Kyoto was like being in a bubble. A beautiful one, but a bubble nonetheless. She missed teaching in Paris. She missed her family in New York. She’d already left so much of her life behind because she’d run from her career as a spy after she caused Kasem to be captured and almost killed. She shouldered the blame for much of what had gone wrong with his life, but she wasn’t sure that she could reconcile him—the man that she loved—with all of the terrible things that he had done. After his capture in Iran he had been forced to work as a terrorist and an assassin, and in doing so,

had become the Ahriman, responsible for killing hundreds in an attack at the Suez Canal. While he had been tricked into carrying out the Suez attack, he had pulled the trigger numerous other times in cold blood. Petra had even seen him do it in front of her eyes as he executed a Russian operative who had held him captive, an operative whom they could have arrested and turned, who could have helped them capture the real ringleaders of a terrorist attack in Washington DC.

Petra let out another sigh and tilted her head back to wash out the shampoo in her hair. She and Kasem had only scratched the surface on what they had to work through. Could they really build a new life together? Their time as a couple in Kyoto had been nigh-on perfect, but she was petrified of leaving the bubble, no matter how much she wanted to. He was the first man that she'd ever really loved, but when it came to taking the plunge, to trusting in him and what they had, she wasn't sure if she could take that step. His past as the Ahriman lurked in the background, like the elephant in the room.

She shut her eyes and a memory came over her, of the last man that she'd been with before she had fallen in love with Kasem. Even though it was years ago, she could still feel his breath on her neck and how he'd touched her. She'd trusted him implicitly and given in completely, in a way that she still couldn't with Kasem. She felt her heartbeat increase and she exhaled slowly, trying in vain to let go of the memory.

Petra turned off the shower and toweled off. On her way upstairs to the bedroom to dress, she passed Kasem making some more coffee in the kitchen.

“You look great,” he said.

She blushed under his gaze. “Thanks.”

He put his arms around her and gave her a peck on the lips. “I love you.”

Petra wiggled out of his grasp. “I love you, too.”

He grabbed her towel so that it slipped off her and she giggled as she tried to retrieve it. He stopped her and kissed her again, deeper this time.

“Come on.” She looked up at him with a sparkle in her eyes and led him up to the bedroom.

Chapter 2

Kyoto, Japan

Kasem Ismaili stroked Petra's hair as she lay with her head on his shoulder. *Should I do it today?* He looked toward his dresser where he had hidden the ring. He wanted to ask her, but something in the back of his mind bothered him. They had spent an amazing six months together in Kyoto, but for the past few days, things had been different, although he couldn't quite put his finger on what was bothering him. He turned to Petra and braved the question, hoping a direct approach would work, "Petra, is everything okay?"

She raised her eyebrows and looked up at him. "Everything's fine. Just like this." She nestled further into his chest and closed her eyes.

Kasem exhaled, still unable to quell the uneasy feeling. He lay still and when Petra started to fall asleep, he kissed her forehead and extracted himself from her embrace. He stood up, pulled on his boxers, and padded downstairs. He checked the French press, which had now brewed some very strong coffee, and poured a cup. He grimaced at the bitterness of the first sip but forced the caffeine down his throat. Sleep had been elusive over the past few years, and he had become increasingly reliant on caffeine. Insomnia was still a welcome change from the nightmares that had haunted him when he was living in San Francisco, though. He only wished that he didn't have to hide it from Lila. *Petra*, he reminded himself. Even after all of this time knowing her real name, he still slipped sometimes and wanted to call her Lila.

He sighed. The fact that she had been undercover when they first met was just a reminder of the many obstacles they currently faced. They had so much baggage, and he wanted more than anything to put it all in the past. To shove it into a box. To make it disappear, as if it didn't exist. At least he didn't blame her anymore, although he was certain she still blamed herself.

Kasem poured another cup. *Almost like an espresso*, he thought. He set the mug down and frowned. Their time together in Kyoto had been something out of a dream, better than he could possibly have imagined. Everything with Petra had been fine until a few days earlier. *Did something happen?* He grabbed his laptop from the side table in the living room and opened his calendar. There was hardly anything marked on it, but instinct told him that he was on the right track. His eyes wandered to her laptop charging on the bookshelf, but he redirected his attention to his screen. *No snooping*. His eyebrows narrowed, and he helped himself to the last bit of coffee in the French press. *She started acting weird that day we went out to dinner*. He sat down again and thought through the evening. He'd gone to the gym and they'd met at the restaurant afterward. She had seemed on edge when she handed him his navy sweater. *My navy sweater. From my dresser. Oh boy*. He set the cup on the table and let out a long exhale. He knew exactly what had happened. *Crap*. Petra had been acting uncomfortable ever since that evening. *She must have found the ring. Does she not want me to propose?* It seemed like they were so happy.

Is it because of what I did? After his capture in Iran, Kasem had been duped into working as an assassin for a rogue Iranian general, all because he thought it was the price he had to pay for Petra's ransom. In reality, she had never been captured, and he was manipulated into doing an evil general's bidding, all for nothing. He had sold his soul to General Majed and become the Ahriman, an international terrorist and assassin. After the attack at the Suez Canal, he had tried to stop counting the number of kills on his head—the guilt had become too much of a burden—but he couldn't get the number out of his head. *Three hundred and sixty-seven*. Three hundred and sixty-eight if you included Anatoli, the Russian operative that he had shot rather than capture in Washington D.C.

Kasem left that life behind when Petra told him the truth after they came face to face in Kuwait two years earlier. He was conducting an operation to assassinate the Kuwaiti monarch, and she was there on behalf of the Agency to stop the assassination. He'd kidnapped her before she could expose him, and the shock that she'd never been captured, that General Majed had tricked him into becoming his puppet, was still raw. All his kills, which he had justified on the basis of keeping her safe, had been for nothing. Kasem had been clawing his way back toward a more legitimate life ever since. He had helped Petra on an Agency op in New York the previous year and had hoped that his actions had set him on a path

toward redemption. During the op, they had slowly renewed their friendship, along with the romantic connection they had once shared. At the end of the operation, he had asked her to join him in Kyoto to see if they still had a shot at something deeper. He'd hoped they could rebuild their relationship as the people they had become, rather than the fragments of who they were when they first met.

Petra had been hesitant to come, but she surprised him a few months later. The time they had spent together since then had been wonderful, but perhaps she still wasn't willing to let go of her old life?

Before he could go too far down that rabbit hole, Kasem heard Petra's footsteps coming down the narrow stairway. She looked a little disheveled, her wet hair matted, but cute and pretty as always.

"Hey," she joined him on the couch and reached for his coffee mug. "Is there more of that for me?"

"Here you go. Fair warning, though. It's pretty strong. It steeped for way too long." He flashed her a grin.

She leaned over and kissed him, "I hope you think it was worth it."

"No, not at all."

Petra elbowed him lightly and took a sip of the coffee. "Wow," she cringed, "strong is right. Can you make me some more? Something that doesn't taste like battery acid?"

"Sure. We'll go for a walk after that?"

Kasem watched as she paused before she answered, "Okay."

A few hours later, Kasem grabbed Petra's hand and walked down the street toward the canal. She gave him a wide smile and he pulled her in closer with his arm around her shoulders.

When they reached the canal, they strolled slowly, once again hand in hand. The sun's rays streamed through the canopy of pink cherry blossoms and danced on the bits of grass and tree moss below, creating playful patterns of light and shadows.

Petra stopped alongside him, "Wow. They're really in bloom today."

"I looked it up online. The weather gods thought they would peak this week."

She linked her arms around his neck, "You're sweet."

Kasem's face lit up as he leaned over to kiss her again, "I want to show you my favorite spot."

"You have a favorite spot?" Petra tilted her head to the side. "Is that where you've been going on your walks?"

"Maybe." He led her down the canal path for a few blocks, and then turned left down Kacho-michi Road.

"Are we going to the park?"

"Just come with me."

They reached Maruyama Park a few minutes later and Kasem led her toward the center of the park. He took her to a path next to a babbling brook nestled within a sea of pink and white tree blossoms.

"Look," Kasem pointed down the lane toward a couple standing about a hundred feet away posing for wedding photos. "Think we could do that someday?" he asked in a tentative voice. Part of him wanted to just ask her—now, here, like he had planned—but his instinct told him not to.

Petra stiffened and dropped his hand, "Kasem, we need to talk."

"I agree. You've been acting strange the past few days. Want to tell me what's going on?"

"I'm not ready."

"You're not ready?"

Petra opened her mouth in obvious hesitation, then blurted, "Okay. Here goes. I found the ring."

Kasem looked around at the setting and nodded, "You thought I brought you here to propose? Why wait until now to tell me you're not ready?"

"I didn't know how. I don't know how to do this. What would the next step be for us? We've been living in a bubble—an amazing one, but still a bubble."

Kasem's shoulders slumped, "This isn't really about not being ready. This is about you. Are you leaving me? I thought you were happy. I thought we were happy."

She shook her head and placed her left hand on his face, "That's not what I'm saying. I do love you, but I don't know what kind of future we can have, or how to figure it out. We've been here for six months, living off the package the Agency paid you, but we can't do this forever. I am so grateful that we've had this time, but we can't keep going like this."

"What do you want to do? Do you miss teaching? We could go back to Paris."

Petra ran her fingers through her hair, “I do miss it, but I don’t know.”

The tone of her voice told him what she was thinking. “You’re not sure we would survive out there. If we left this *bubble*,” he said.

“Are you really so sure? Maybe I’m missing something, but we’ve never been together in the real world. Doesn’t that scare you?”

“I think we could figure it out. Or is there more to it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Is this about me? About everything...?” Kasem’s voice turned cold and his mind flashed to a vision from one of his old nightmares, with Petra pointing at the flames on the Suez Canal. *Just look at what you’ve done*, she had said in the nightmare. *She hasn’t forgiven me. Maybe she never will.* “There’s nothing more I can do, Petra. I can’t bring back the people I killed, I can’t go back in time and stop myself from working for General Majed. The past is the past. I can’t just forget it, and I’m not expecting you to either, but I thought we were at least beyond blaming each other for it. I guess I was wrong.” He turned around and walked toward the edge of the park, away from the happy newlyweds and away from her.

Petra jogged to catch up and stepped in front of him. “Kasem, stop. Stop!” She raised her arms to block him, “You’re right. I should have talked to you. I wish I had the answers—about you, and me, and us. I don’t know where I am with all of this, and that terrifies me. I know that I love you, and I want to try, but I don’t know what that means.” Her eyes begged for understanding, “As for the past, well there’s enough blame to go around.”

Kasem met her gaze, shook his head, and started to move around her, when she caught his arm. “Please, Kasem. We have to talk about this.”

“If you wanted to talk, why did you wait so long to bring it up?”

“I’m bringing it up now. You can’t really be over everything either. You don’t sleep. You drink more caffeine than I thought humanly possible.”

“I didn’t realize you’d noticed.” Kasem let out a long sigh and gestured toward a park bench.

They sat down facing each other and Petra reached for his hand, “Don’t you ever miss the real world?”

Kasem gave her a pained expression, “I haven’t been in the real world for a long time. I guess San Francisco was sort of the real world, but I still wasn’t the real me. And it was worse there. I don’t sleep these days, but at least I don’t have nightmares anymore.”

“You never told me about that.”

“I had dreams where I remembered the faces. The faces of the people I killed. Where I could see myself doing it again. The worst one was about the Suez. About that night when I thought I was only placing a few bugs, but they turn out to be bombs and then everything bursts into flames, and all those people are dead.” He stopped himself from saying the number of kills out loud—Petra knew about the attack, and how he had been tricked into it, but she didn’t know how many other attacks he’d been involved in or how much blood was on his hands.

“I’m sorry,” Petra gave his hand a gentle squeeze.

“You’re there too.”

“In the nightmare?”

“You show up before the explosions, asking me what I’d done. Then the bombs go off and you disappear.”

Petra looked down at the ground. “I had PTSD too. For a long time. After I thought you died in Tehran, and then again in Paris before the last op. It hasn’t been bad since, but I still have moments sometimes. Flashbacks. I can understand why you would rather not sleep than have the nightmares.”

“It’s not like I was sleeping much then either.” Kasem placed his other hand over hers. “You’re right, though.” He motioned toward the newlyweds who were still posing by the water. “We’re not ready for such a big step. *Yet*. But don’t you think we’re ready to leave the bubble?”

“Maybe.” Petra turned to survey the park and pointed toward the sea of gray clouds forming across the sky. “We should get inside. There’s a storm coming.”

Chapter 3

Kyoto, Japan

Petra glanced behind her at Kasem as the storm clouds darkened overhead. “Hurry.” She picked up the pace.

He took several long strides to meet her and grabbed her hand. The two of them covered the remaining distance to their house in a combination of speed walking and jogging. By the time they reached their lane, the streetlights had turned on and the drizzle had transformed into a downpour. The stone pavement was slick and slippery. “Be careful,” Kasem said, concerned about Petra’s shoes.

“I’m all right.” His concern brought a smile to her face. He had always been very attentive, even from the first time they met when she was undercover. Somehow, he still managed to be sweet without being overbearing. She was, after all, a trained operative and could handle slick sidewalks.

They approached the house and her subconscious tensed. *Something’s wrong.* She stopped Kasem with her left arm and gestured toward the house. “Someone’s in there,” she whispered. The string trap that they rigged to indicate if anyone had entered their house had been triggered. Otherwise the house looked normal with the small lamp glowing in the living room that came on automatically when the house became dark. She put her arms around him and gave him a kiss as sheets of rain poured down on them. “It’s a pro. No signs of entry other than the string trap, and no shadows in the living room,” she said into his ear.

He leaned forward and placed his lips on the nape of her neck. “Drop your purse.”

Petra made a show of giggling and let her purse slide off her shoulder and fall to the ground. They both knelt to pick it up as Kasem slipped an out-the-front switchblade out of a holster on his ankle.

“Where’s your Colt?” He steadied her shoulders while they stood up.

“Under the bed.” Petra’s throat tightened. They had gone soft in the months that they had been in Kyoto. She had stopped carrying her gun or any sort of weapon after the first few weeks there. Thankfully, Kasem still wore his switchblade—old habits.

He placed his right hand on her face and traced it to her collarbone, “Follow me around to the back. I stashed a baseball bat and a Beretta in the storage box out there when I first arrived.” He motioned down the lane and toward the left with two fingers. The houses on their side of the street were nested tightly together, but there were a few access points to the garbage lane that ran behind the houses.

They ducked into the shadows on the side of the street and moved toward the end of the lane. When they reached the end, they turned into a narrow alley that led to the back of the houses. From there they squeezed through the garbage lane toward the back of their house. Petra shivered. The rain had soaked through her dress and the drops stung her eyes as the wind blew them into her face. She kept her gaze focused on Kasem’s feet, grateful that his tall form blocked at least some of the wind and the rain. The lights from the houses helped them navigate their way. Every few steps, she counted the number of houses that they had passed. They were staying in the sixteenth house.

Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. “This one,” Petra squeezed Kasem’s arm. He nodded, and they took position on opposite sides of the doorway.

Petra pressed her ear to the door. After a few seconds, she shook her head, “I think we’re clear, but it could just be sound insulation. I can’t make anything out.”

Kasem reached down into the shadows on his side of the door and handed her the cold wet grip of a Beretta. She squinted and saw the metallic glint of the baseball bat in his right hand with the switchblade now in his left.

Petra holstered the gun into the belt around her dress, then pulled out her keys and quietly placed her purse on the pavement. She moved slowly to place the key in the lock and prayed that it would be quiet. The lock made a soft clicking noise as she opened the door. With her gun in hand, she leaned sideways to check the hallway. “Clear,” she whispered and motioned for Kasem to follow her.

They crept into the house. Kasem shut the door behind them and they moved down the hallway, past the laundry room and the separated shower and bathrooms. The hallway divided after that—

left toward the living room, which led to the upstairs staircase, and right toward the kitchen from which you could access the stairway down to the cellar and the second bathroom.

Petra gestured with the gun that she would go left toward the living room. With a nod to the right, she signaled for Kasem to check the kitchen and the cellar.

Chapter 4

Kyoto, Japan

Kasem squinted as he stole past the kitchen. A quick glance at the knife rack showed him that none of the knives were missing, but as he got closer to the staircase leading down to the cellar he stiffened. The stairwell light was off, but he could see the glow of the cellar light at the bottom. He listened in silence and waited at the top of stairs just out of sight. The person in the cellar would have to come upstairs eventually, and he would be there waiting. He knelt slowly and placed the baseball bat on the floor, in the space between the first cabinet and the stairwell wall, careful not to let it roll and make a sound on the ceramic tiles. He wanted the bat to be nearby and available if he needed it, but he preferred to disarm and capture the intruder rather than beat him up—hence the switchblade would be the better weapon for the job.

His patience was rewarded when he heard the bottom step creak and he broke into a sinister smile. *I have you now*, he thought, grateful that the staircase was noisy enough to give him a clear gauge on when the intruder would be upon him. There were fifteen steps down to the cellar—he had counted them when he first moved in—*nine, ten...* He raised his left elbow and readied the switchblade across his body. *Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen.*

As soon as he counted the fifteenth step, he slashed out beyond the stairwell wall with his right forearm, catching his target squarely in the throat. The intruder stumbled and Kasem kicked his knee upward into the man's abdomen. When he doubled over, Kasem grabbed his wrist and twisted it downward to propel the intruder's torso toward the floor. He pushed his right knee into the intruder's back and straddled him, holding the switchblade up to the intruder's throat.

"You better sing like a canary, buddy. Who are you and what are you doing here?"

Chapter 5

Kyoto, Japan

Petra slinked to the side and flattened against the wall leading toward the living room as Kasem disappeared toward the kitchen. She shifted her two-hand grip on the Beretta to get a better feel for the weapon. It was heavier than her Colt pistol, so it would have a larger recoil. She inched her way along and watched the shadows on the other side of the wall, both to make sure that she wasn't giving away her position, and to see if she could spot any sign of an assailant in the living room. Before stepping into the room, she stood still and listened. *No noise at all? Did they see us coming?* She frowned and strode into the room with the gun out and ready, only to find it empty. She moved through it quickly and up the stairs.

When she reached the top of the staircase, she glanced into their bedroom. Everything seemed in order. Even the tatami mats under their mattresses looked as if they were in exactly the same place. *Could they already be gone?* Petra moved to check the other two bedrooms. She slid open the door to the first one and found everything in order before moving on to the second. When she tried to open the door, she found it slightly off its sliding track. *Someone's been up here.* She inched the door a crack to check for any light, but the room was dark. Petra held her breath as she pulled the door open far enough to step inside. She could see a lumpy form under the blankets on the floor mattress. *Sleeping? Seriously?* She moved closer and placed the gun against the back of the person's head. "Who the hell are you and what are you doing here?"

The figure stirred, "Jesus, Petra. It's just me."

Petra let out a long exhale as she recognized his voice and lowered her gun. "Carlos? What are you doing here?"

Before he could answer, they heard a loud thud downstairs. "Don't worry, that's just Nathan," Carlos said.

"You came here with someone else?" Petra turned and sped toward the kitchen. "Kasem, it's Carlos," she called out.

When she made it to the kitchen, she hit the light switch to find Kasem holding his knife to the throat of a young blond guy. "It's okay. He's with Carlos."

Kasem lowered his knife and stepped away. "Sorry, man." He retracted the blade with a sheepish expression.

"I'll live."

Petra turned her head as Carlos bumped into her. "Hey, guys, this is Nathan. He's a friend of mine. Nathan, this is Petra and Kasem," he said in a groggy voice. "Sorry about the intro. What can I say? I was jet-lagged," he shrugged and turned his palms upward. "It's good to see you guys."

Petra rolled her eyes, "Let's go talk in the living room. Four people jammed into this galley kitchen is a bit much. But first, Kasem and I need to change out of these wet clothes."