

MR. PRESIDENT

"Mr. President," Jared said, as soon as he picked up the phone. And because Jared used those two pompous words, words which at times still had the power to make him feel like an imposter, the President knew what it was about. And even half-awake he felt trapped—a man supposed to control events being controlled by them.

"Tell me."

"They finished. Yes and yes."

He looked across the bed. Fran was awake. "Jared. Details."

"Yes, prisoners. One a Syrian. The other, yeah. Coyle."

"Fuck."

"Fog of war, Rick."

It wasn't just the fog of war but Jared knew that; he meant this should be the approach. "Let's meet early. Seven. You, Nicole, and the new guy. Ephraim. He's working on this?"

"Finishing up. See you then."

And if he was tempted to leave it at that, he summoned the nerve to ask about what he had dreaded doing since yesterday. "Wait. Who calls the parents?"

"They have a liaison," Jared said, carefully.

"They shouldn't hear it from him. How about you?"

Silence.

"Please."

"Sure."

As he replaced the phone he heard a soft knock. "We're okay, Frank," he said.

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Okay? Then why couldn't he close his eyes? Why was his chest still suffused with fear?

Why not even say a word to Fran who at times like this was patient enough to wait?

Besides, he already knew what most likely lay ahead. He approved the strike partly because everyone was so exuberant. ("Four mid-level bad guys! C'mon!") At first the news was good. The drone had hit the house dead on. No chance any of the four survived. An hour later a sober Jared gave him more. The drone had been streaming back "data." There weren't four bodies. There were six. Maybe—Jared paused, knowing how he'd react—hostages.

His stomach flopped like a fish. "Why hostages?"

"Well, they bring the bodies out of the, you know, bunker. Very carefully. Then two more they dump on the ground. One they leave alone. Ignore. The other, they start kicking."

"Coyle."

"Still analyzing." A beat. "Maybe."

But he was already sure. Coyle, the 24-year old refugee camp worker, pulled from a car outside the compound three months before and accused of being a spy. "We will get him out," he had told Coyle's parents the day after they'd snatched the kid.

"You can't be sure, Mr. President," the father said, coldly.

For a second he'd felt angry—wounded. He didn't let it show—the man had caught him in a lie families were usually too intimidated to dispute. Besides, by then he already knew something

that would devastate Coyle and his wife. It had turned out the kid *was* an agent, reporting back every few days on two Afghans working with him.

He'd let Nicole deny it that time. "Denial's good. Makes beheading him a little harder," said the CIA guy whose name he had trouble remembering, staring to make sure the President saw talking to him didn't make him too nervous to make a wiseass remark. But in the three months since that day no intelligence, no bribes, backchannels, or torture had uncovered where Coyle was.

Yesterday, a few hours after the hit *they* announced it with the usual fulminations, including the fact that the drone had killed "Roger Coyle, the American spy."

He'd left this for Nicole, too. He watched her from the Oval, the CIA guy on speakerphone, Jared sitting beside him. "We don't know whether this *is* Coyle, Wolf," she'd said, "We hope not. And the accusation that this innocent, idealistic camp worker was a spy is simply ... *outrageous!*"

He felt a twinge of guilt; they had decided not to tell her the truth.

"Convincingly angry," the CIA guy said.

"She is angry. You've kept her in the dark."

"Maybe that's why she's so convincing."

Let it go. Eyes on the screen, he said, "We still deny it, right. If it's him."

"Sure. They don't have proof. If they did we'd know it."

"You didn't know where he was," Jared said, louder than he needed.

"True."

He made a thumb and forefinger circle. *Asshole*, Jared mouthed back.

"What if they have a confession?"

"Coerced."

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"I talked to them," Jared said now, meeting him at the elevator.

"How'd it go?"

"Awful. For them and me."

"Sorry."

"Why I'm here."

"Tell you this. They can bring him back from the dead to confess. I'm sticking to the story."

But then they stopped talking because Nicole and Ephraim were sitting in the Oval. And Geraldine, the photographer, already squeezing off shots. Who told her to come? Walking in, he shook his head. She left, fingers wrapped around her camera, lens pressed up against her collarbone. "Quiz me," he said sitting behind the desk.

Nicole did it, challenging him like a reporter. Why did they take such pains hiding him? The best guess: they hoped they could get Coyle to turn. Was this an intelligence failure? We're investigating. Why would they call him a spy? We don't know. But it's a lie.

"Bastards," she said.

They should tell her. But all he said was, "Right. Nice job yesterday."

"Very nice," Jared said. "Also, we have a statement."

Ephraim jumped up. He slid it onto the desk. "Just a draft."

God! How old was this kid? "Thanks for your work, Ephraim," using his name to show he knew it. The only trouble was, as he skimmed, hoping to like it, what he read was impossible to praise.

Mistakes inevitable ... especially heinous ... admire those who put life on the line ... Then, in 20 point type:

(PAUSE)

SOME DAYS ARE TOUGH AROUND HERE.
WE ARE UP AGAINST AN IMPLACABLE FOE. DRONES SAVE
LIVES. IN THE FOG OF WAR ... DESPITE OUR BEST EFFORTS
INNOCENT PEOPLE GET HURT.

"Fog of *war*?"

"You've used it before," Jared said, protecting Ephraim.

"*Days are tough*? Christ's sakes, what about Coyle's day?"

"We'll cut it," Jared said.

Ephraim looked terrified. Nicole stared down at her list.

He'd forgotten. The rule was, don't argue with Jared in front of staff. He smiled and looked around. "I mean, Jared's got a point. Acknowledge a mistake but don't make it sound like it's our fault. But Ephraim. Can you see what a reporter would do if I say I *have a tough job*?"

"Yes, Mr. President. But with all respect, Mr. President—"

"I know. You wrote *days* are tough. They hear *my* day is tough."

"Not that it is," Jared said.

He laughed hard to show them Jared wasn't in trouble. "Because of—" pointing at Jared, "this guy. Each day a joy." He looked to make sure he saw relief. "Keep fog. Ditch tough."

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"Fog of war! Bullshit!" Back upstairs, he whipped one end of his tie around the knot, slipped it through, and yanked.

"There's no fog of war?"

"You know what I mean."

"I know you're ambivalent. What this kid wrote hides it."

"I'm tired of hiding."

"Get it out, hon. Vent."

He was venting. How could you help it these days when every packet of press clips was full of photos of dead bodies? How was it possible to keep your imagination from spinning out of control? They had DVDs of every strike. He'd never watched one. Jared said, *Don't let emotion get in the way*. Why not? Was there never a time for emotion?

"I'd like to know more."

"What is it you want to know?"

"If I knew maybe I could find out."

"Oh. For that there's no answer."

"What's 'that?'"

She reached over to help him slip his right arm, the one that hurt every morning, into his sleeve. "Are you right. *Jeff! You dressed?*"

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"You will hear me announce something terrible," he told the kids at breakfast.

Jen barely looked up. Jeff, fourteen, put his spoon down in the oatmeal. "Okay, Dad. What'd you do?"

Maybe it was his fear of what lay ahead: talking to the Coyles, angry and grief-stricken; the uncomfortable questions from reporters—even the friendlies. The flash of anger came right away. "What did I do? *What did I do?* You think anything I announce is my fault?"

Jeffrey turned to Fran, palms spread. "What the hell?"

"Hon. It was a joke."

"He thinks I did something wrong! That calls for an apology!"

"Hon—"

"Yes it does!"

"It's about Mr. Coyle, Jeffrey," Fran said.

"Who?" Jen was looking around.

"A man died, sweetie."

If Jeffrey had only seen what that meant, the sadness of it, things would have been different.

Instead, he made it worse. "Oh. The spy guy. It was him?"

"The spy? The *spy*?" You take their word?"

"Is he or isn't he?"

"A young man killed! You just want to know if he was a spy? What kind of person are you?"

He'd gone too far. He knew as soon as he said it. Take it back. Maybe reach out and tousle his hair.

"Asshole," Jeffrey muttered.

"What?"

"ASSHOLE."

"Really? No videogames for a week!"

"Hon!"

Jeffrey slapped his palm on the table, jumped up and left.

"You should apologize," Fran said. She stood, walking towards Jeffrey's room.

"He can't talk like that!" he called to her back.

Instantly, he was ashamed. Of course he was wrong. It was the things that lay ahead that made him mad. But goddamnit, Jeffrey was wrong too. He had to apologize in a way that made Jeffrey apologize too. And that was the tricky part. Because when they came back out, he who

could cut deals with the Speaker of the House couldn't figure out how to do anything but stay silent, even when he and the kids were riding down in the elevator to the van for school.

At the last second, desperate, he said, softly, "You can play Skyrim." Jeffrey just stared at him and climbed into the seat.

Tricked. But as he turned to go back, Jeff jumped back down, ran around to catch up, and put a hand on his back. "We're with you, Dad," he said gravely, keeping his voice low.

His eyes stung. "Thanks." Then he did reach out and tousle Jeffrey's hair because if he said more the President might not be able to get out the words.

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"They're here," said Mrs. Clark, someone so old and wizened he couldn't use her first name.

They'd *lost* their son. As they came through the door, he would stand, stride across the room give them both hugs, and murmur his sorrow, whatever they thought of him. But when they entered, Frank behind them, stretching out his arm to hold the door open, Mr. Coyle, overcoat open over a black suit, took two steps inside and said, "How did this happen?" his voice so accusing it would have made a hug look false.

Except then his face crumpled, leaving him to stand in the middle of the room, making little hiccupping noises, desperately trying to hold back sobs.

Mrs. Coyle reached into her bag frantically rummaging for a tissue, then started to cry herself. He had the presence to reach back for the box on his desk and hold it out until Coyle took one. Then the sobs came from both of them, gulping sobs, tears streaming down their cheeks. He walked over slowly, put his arm around the man, reached out for her and they stood there while their sobs became sniffles and at last stopped and they all stood together in silence.

"So sorry," he said.

"You didn't do it," the man said.

"I gave the order."

"You didn't give an order to ... kill our son."

"Thank you, Mr. Coyle."

"But—" Coyle drew a deep, shuddering breath, "you do send the drones in."

"Yes."

"Are you so sure? Do you watch these things?"

He hadn't expected that. "Enough," he said, feeling vulnerable.

For the next ten minutes, as much as he wanted to be sensitive—comforting!, this meeting became what they usually were: a sentimental exchange of clichés! *I can't undo what happened ... I can't imagine what you're feeling ... We don't want to make things harder for you ... So sorry, Mr. President. Yes. We're so sorry, Mr. President.*

Apologizing to him! Trying to make him feel better! *He didn't deserve to feel better!*

"Thank you," he said, finally. He buzzed for Nicole; she put them through a rehearsal ("So you both stand on the President's right."), and soon they were walking down the hall to the East Room. "I will deny that canard," he whispered as they approached the podium. "The spy thing."

They nodded. The seats were full. There was no banter. Only Faywell, the white-haired, rigidly conservative "dean" of reporters who hated his guts, said, "Afternoon, Mr. President," earning not just a nod but a half-smile, lips closed, because his granddaughter was in Jeffrey's class at school. He looked down at the script, then up. "Sometimes, in the fog of war," he said, "terrible things happen."

He thought he might be over the hard part. But the first question came from Faywell, patting down his white hair, looking nervous in a way he'd never seen, saying, "Mr. President. 'Pologies

to the parents, we have a job to do. They've said this boy was giving us intelligence. Spying. Your people have denied it. For the record. Do you?"

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"Nice," Jared said when the Coyles were gone and they were alone.

"Except for Faywell."

"Bullshit. You handled him. *Absolutely!* Just the right tone."

"I see he wants me on the record. You think he knows something?"

"No. It's a what if."

Jared meant what if someone leaked a confession. He'd have him lying on tape. "Don't dismiss it so easily."

"Who's going to leak something to him? Your kids know each other."

"His grandkid."

"There's nothing incriminating on the tape."

"Oh. The Coyles asked if I'd seen it."

"Seen what?"

"Tape. Record—"

"What did you say?"

"I lied. But I want to."

"No."

"A reporter could ask."

"It's not a good—"

"I'm Commander in Chief, Jared."

"*What will you learn?*"

"I don't know! Get it!"

•

Jared was right. He had no idea what he would learn. All he knew was that when Jared said no, the idea that he had to argue for it made him furious. Telling what he couldn't do in his own house! Sitting there alone, DVD in his hand, he wasn't even sure he wanted to watch the damn thing. Did he even remember how to play it? Everyone always did these things for him. Sitting at his desk, he opened the black plastic cover. **Prop of US Navy. TOP SECRET** it read. He slipped the DVD in, his fingers remembering how.

0358 HOURS. FIRST TRANSMISSION.

There was a silent countdown, white numbers against a black background. 5,4,3,2,1. Suddenly, he saw roofs of houses.

Everything looked grey as if it was just beginning to get light. An orange circle jerked across the screen like the eye of an alien. It stopped. All at once he was staring down at the roof of one house and he began to tremble.

"That's it," a voice said.

That's it. A caption appeared at the bottom.

A house! They said bunker! He didn't know it was a neighborhood! Trembling, he reached out to press Stop, but with no countdown came the dreadful white flowers of explosions, not one but four or five, soundless but bursting around different corners of the house, the flames landing around the house, then, quickly flickering and going out.

His entire body felt weak.

"Damn."

Damn.

They missed! Good! No! He couldn't let himself feel that!

"One more time."

One more time.

0408 HOURS. SECOND TRANSMISSION.

He couldn't move. He couldn't look away. Jerking across came the orange circle. Two men stood outside the house looking up. There must have been a sound. One of them had time to raise his arm above his head. *Run!* But then came four flares of white, this time hiding the entire house and the men, surrounding them, then dying out.

"Got one."

Got one.

"Other guy's crawling."

Other guy's crawling.

0415 HOURS. THIRD TRANSMISSION.

Now the film or video closed in as if he was maybe twenty feet above them and he saw two bodies on the ground and then men in hazmat suits bringing bodies from the house, laying them gently on the ground. One. Two. —*Three! Four!*

Those last two they throw on the ground. And now they are close enough so you can see him, yes it's Coyle, with a beard, and the camera's zoomed in close enough to see a face streaked with blood but still the kid—he was a kid!—and they kick him so hard in the head, it lies at a crooked angle to his body!

The voice, soft, quavering. Scared. "Oh, God. Why six?"

Oh, God. Why six?

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Did he even deserve to be President? He was shaken, still. Seeing the Coyles, seeing Faywell stand and getting him on record—nothing this day compared to what he'd experienced, sitting alone, watching the screen at his desk. *Run!* How could he react that way? And oh, the men, craning their necks up! The bodies on the ground! His hand trembling so he had to steady it with the other even to press OFF!"

"School good?"

Fran said it to both kids but only Jeffrey answered. "Fine."

You didn't have to see his face to know it wasn't.

"Daddy had a tough day."

Now he knew why they didn't want him to watch. They thought they should shield him so he could order what he needed. Maybe they should! He said, "You watch the announcement?"

"Yes. In Civics."

"You see why I couldn't tell you."

"No."

"Jeffrey," Fran said.

"I wasn't going to blab it all over the place, Dad."

Nothing was going to make him mad tonight. "Never thought you would." A beat. "Kids talk about it?"

"Like the whole *school*."

"Was—was anyone mean to you?"

"Mean? Everybody's *nice*. Mr. Joyce made a joke about it. But you can tell kids are—*nobody likes this thing!*"

"Nobody?"

"Because we killed an American guy. Because you have this *drone* thing which kills people and you don't know who they are. Like yesterday! And some kids say, like, what if he is a spy? Why *not* kidnap a spy? We capture their spies. Right?"

"Of course."

"Yes."

"So like, why shouldn't they catch ours?"

"From their perspective, sure. But you know they are brutal people. They shouldn't win. That's what I think. I hope you do."

"Yeah. I do."

"A front page story all around the world," he said to Fran," and right now all I care about is one kid."

"Who happens to be your son."

"Mom. Dad. Don't change the subject," Jeffrey said. "I just want to know the truth."

Jeffrey's tough," he said to Fran.

"C'mon. But I wouldn't say anything secret. Not a word."

And maybe it was gratitude because they weren't angry with each other. It came to him without any warning, like a drone strike. *Tell him.*

Why not? Wasn't this what bothered him? That these people with their paranoia and infantile jokes about beheadings could tell him what to do? Don't tell Nicole! Don't watch the drone attack because the reality might be too much!

He didn't have to let them control him! Not in his own house! Oh, maybe not now. But maybe just before bedtime. He'd come into Jeffrey's room, sit on the bed, and give him a hug. Tell him how dangerous it was to know classified information. Tell him he only trusted him

because he was a responsible kid. Tell him a lot of people wouldn't approve of telling him *anything—and he couldn't tell everything.*

Jeffrey's smile would disappear. He'd lean in a little closer so he wouldn't miss a word. He'd say, "I know that, Dad."

But everything didn't have to wait till bedtime. Now he said, "You really need to know?"

"I want to know."

"It's—"

"Everyone thinks I know."

"Well—"

"Fact, Priscilla Faywell asked me. Right in class. I told her he wasn't."

He saw Fran's face freeze in a half smile, lips open.

His voice was calm. Casual. As if he was just trying to be sure. "Wasn't a spy? You told her that?"

Jeff was grinning. "Don't worry. I said I couldn't tell her *how* I knew. But I knew."

Fran said, softly, "You told that to Horace Fay—"

"It's okay," he said, fast. "Mom worries because Mr. Faywell isn't my biggest fan."

"I said something wrong?"

"Not at all." But seeing relief and then triumph on Jeffrey's face, saw the fallacy, the naïveté of what he imagined he could do he felt heat rush to his face.

Of course they controlled him. Of course he was at the mercy of people around him. Was there any way, *any* way to be cavalier about the truth—about how he felt about drones or spies, or giving orders to kill people or why he and Jared and everyone needed to spend so much time

spinning a blend of fact and fiction people might accept. But telling the truth to Jeffrey about Roger Coyle?

He picked up his fork, jabbed it into his chicken, but then pushed it across the plate, as if even taking a single bite was far too much to swallow. He stared around at each of them and must have looked fiercer than he meant because Jen looked down at her plate. But then he fixed his gaze on Jeffrey.

"You defended me, kiddo," he said, his voice gentle. "You want the truth?"

In the end, it came down to the way Jeffrey nodded, wordlessly, as if it meant so much to know something the other kids didn't, that you couldn't take a chance he would keep anything secret. "Course, Dad."

"*Anyone*," he said, and while for one panicky moment he thought someday he might be sorry, by then it was too late to change much. "*Anyone* who says Coyle was one of our agents, *not* that that's wrong, is telling a cheap, tawdry lie."

End