

## PROLOGUE: STARTING HERE

IT HAD TO BE THE SHOCK of the moment, Ryan thought. He seemed to be two people at the same time. One part of him looked out the window of the lunchroom of CNN's Washington bureau and saw the fires that grew from the remains of the Capitol building—yellow points springing up from an orange glow like some sort of ghastly floral arrangement, representing over a thousand lives that had been snuffed out not an hour earlier. Numbness suppressed grief for the moment, though he knew that would come, too, as pain always followed a hard blow to the face, but not right away. Once more, Death in all its horrid majesty had reached out for him. He'd seen it come, and stop, and withdraw, and the best thing to be said about it was that his children didn't know how close their young lives had come to an early conclusion. To them, it had simply been an accident they didn't understand. They were with their mother now, and they'd feel safe in her company while their father was away somewhere. It was a situation to which both they and he long since had unhappily become accustomed. And so John Patrick Ryan looked at the residue of Death, and one part of him as yet felt nothing.

The other part of him looked at the same sight and knew that he had to *do* something, and though he struggled to be logical, logic wasn't winning, because logic didn't *know* what to do or where to start.

"Mr. President." It was the voice of Special Agent Andrea Price.

"Yes?" Ryan said without turning away from the window. Behind him—he could see the reflections in the window glass—six other Secret Service agents stood with weapons out to keep the others away. There had to be a score of CNN employees outside the door, gathered together partly from professional interest—they were newspeople, after all—but mostly from simple human curiosity

at being face-to-face with a moment in history. They were wondering what it looked like to be there, and didn't quite get the fact that such events were the same for everyone. Whether presented with an auto accident or a sudden grave illness, the unprepared human mind just stopped and tried to make sense of the senseless—and the graver the test, the harder the recovery period. But at least people trained in crisis had procedures to fall back upon.

“Sir, we have to get you to—”

“Where? A place of safety? Where's that?” Jack asked, then quietly reproached himself for the cruelty of the question. At least twenty agents were part of the pyre a mile away, all of them friends of the men and women standing in the lunchroom with their new President. He had no right to transfer his discomfort to them. “My family?” he asked after a moment.

“The Marine Barracks, Eighth and I streets, as you ordered, sir.”

Yes, it was good for them to be able to report that they'd carried out orders, Ryan thought with a slow nod. It was also good for him to know that his orders had been carried out. He had done one thing right, anyway. Was that something to build on?

“Sir, if this was part of an organized—”

“It wasn't. They never are, Andrea, are they?” President Ryan asked. He was surprised how tired his voice sounded, and reminded himself that shock and stress were more tiring than the most strenuous exercise. He didn't even seem to have the energy to shake his head and clear it.

“They can be,” Special Agent Price pointed out.

*Yes, I suppose she's right.* “So what's the drill for this?”

“Kneecap,” Price replied, meaning the National Emergency Airborne Command Post, a converted 747 kept at Andrews Air Force Base. Jack thought about the suggestion for a moment, then frowned.

“No, I can't run away. I think I have to go back there.” President Ryan pointed to the glow. *Yes, that is where I belong, isn't it?*

“No, sir, that's too dangerous.”

“That's my place, Andrea.”

*He's already thinking like a politician*, Price thought, disappointed.

Ryan saw the look on her face and knew he'd have to explain. He'd learned something once, perhaps the only thing that applied at this moment, and the thought had appeared in his mind like a flashing highway sign. "It's a leadership function. They taught me that at Quantico. The troops have to see you doing the job. They have to know you're there for them." *And I have to be sure that it's all real, that I actually am the President.*

Was he?

The Secret Service thought so. He'd sworn the oath, spoken the words, invoked the name of God to bless his effort, but it had all been too soon and too fast. Hardly for the first time in his life, John Patrick Ryan closed his eyes and willed himself to awaken from this dream that was just too improbable to be real, and yet when he opened his eyes again the orange glow was still there, and the leaping yellow flames. He knew he'd spoken the words—he'd even given a little speech, hadn't he? But he could not remember a single word of it now.

*Let's get to work*, he'd said a minute earlier. He did remember that. An automatic thing to say. Did it mean anything?

Jack Ryan shook his head—it seemed a major accomplishment to do even that—then turned away from the window to look directly at the agents in the room.

"Okay. What's left?"

"Secretaries of Commerce and Interior," Special Agent Price responded, having been updated by her personal radio. "Commerce is in San Francisco. Interior is in New Mexico. They've already been summoned; the Air Force will bring them in. We've lost all the other Cabinet secretaries: Director Shaw, all nine Supreme Court justices, the Joint Chiefs. We're not sure how many members of Congress were absent when it happened."

"Mrs. Durling?"

Price shook her head. "She didn't get out, sir. The kids are at the White House."

Jack nodded bleakly at the additional tragedy, compressed his lips, and closed his eyes at the thought of one

more thing he had to do personally. For the children of Roger and Anne Durling, it wasn't a public event. For them it was immediately and tragically simple: Mom and Dad had died, and they were now orphans. Jack had seen them, spoken with them—really nothing more than the smile and the “Hi” that one gave to another man's kids, but they were real children with faces and names—except their surnames were all that was left, and the faces would be contorted with shock and disbelief. They'd be like Jack, trying to blink away a nightmare that would not depart, but for them it'd be all the harder because of their age and vulnerability. “Do they know?”

“Yes, Mr. President,” Andrea said. “They were watching TV, and the agents had to tell them. They have grandparents still alive, other family members. We're bringing them in, too.” She didn't add that there was a drill for this, that at the Secret Service's operations center a few blocks west of the White House was a security file cabinet with sealed envelopes in which were contingency plans for all manner of obscene possibilities; this was merely one of them.

However, there were hundreds—no, thousands—of children without parents now, not just two. Jack had to set the Durling children aside for the moment. Hard as it was, it was also a relief to close the door on that task for the moment. He looked down at Agent Price again.

“You're telling me I'm the whole government right now?”

“It would seem that way, Mr. President. That's why we—”

“That's why *I* have to do the things I have to do.” Jack headed to the door, startling the Secret Service agents into action by his impulse. There were cameras in the corridor. Ryan walked right past them, the leading wave of two agents clearing the rows of newspeople too shocked themselves to do much more than operate their cameras. Not a single question. That, Jack thought without a smile, was a singular event. It didn't occur to him to wonder what his face looked like. An elevator was waiting, and thirty seconds later, he emerged into the capacious lobby. It had been cleared of people, except for agents, more than half

of whom had submachine guns out, and pointed up at the ceiling. They must have come from elsewhere—there were more than he remembered from twenty minutes earlier. Then he saw that Marines stood outside, most of them improperly uniformed, some shivering in their red T-shirts over camouflaged “utility” trousers.

“We wanted the additional security,” Price explained. “I asked for the assistance from the barracks.”

“Yeah.” Ryan nodded. Nobody would think it unseemly for the President of the United States to be surrounded by U.S. Marines at a time like this. They were kids, most of them, their smooth young faces showing no emotion at all—a dangerous state for people carrying weapons—their eyes surveying the parking lot like watchdogs, while tight hands gripped their rifles. A captain stood just outside the door, talking to an agent. When Ryan walked out, the Marine officer braced stiffly and saluted. *So, he thinks it's real, too.* Ryan nodded his acknowledgment and gestured to the nearest HMMWV.

“The Hill,” President John Patrick Ryan ordered curtly.

The ride was quicker than he'd expected. Police had cordoned off all the main streets, and the fire trucks were already there, probably a general alarm, for whatever good it might do. The Secret Service Suburban—a cross between a stationwagon and a light truck—led off, its lights flashing and siren screaming, while the protective detail sweated and probably swore under its collective breath at the foolishness of their new “Boss,” the in-house term for the President.

The tail of the 747 was remarkably intact—at least the rudder fin was, recognizable, like the fletching of an arrow buried in the side of a dead animal. The surprising part for Ryan was that the fire still burned. The Capitol had been a building of stone, after all, but inside were wooden desks and vast quantities of paper, and God only knew what else that surrendered its substance to heat and oxygen. Aloft were military helicopters, circling like moths, their rotors reflecting the orange light back down at the ground. The red-and-white fire trucks were everywhere, their lights flashing red and white as well, giving additional color to

the rising smoke and steam. Firefighters were racing about, and the ground was covered in hoses snaking to every hydrant in sight, bringing water to the pumpers. Many of the couplings leaked, producing little sprays of water that quickly froze in the cold night air.

The south end of the Capitol building was devastated. One could recognize the steps, but the columns and roof were gone, and the House chamber itself was a crater hidden by the rectangular lip of stones, their white color scorched and blackened with soot. To the north, the dome was down, sections of it recognizable, for it had been built of wrought iron during the Civil War, and several of the pie-slice sections had somehow retained their shape. A majority of the firefighting activity was there, where the center of the building had been. Countless hoses, some on the ground, some directed from the tips of aerial ladders and cherry-picker water towers, sprayed water in the hope of stopping the fire from spreading further, though from Ryan's vantage point there was no telling how successful the effort might be.

But the real story of the scene was the collection of ambulances, several knots of them, their paramedic crews standing with bitter idleness, folding stretchers before them, empty, the skilled crews with nothing to do but look at the white rudder fin with the red crane painted on it, also blackened from the fire, but still hatefully recognizable. Japan Airlines. The war with Japan had ended, everyone thought. But had it? Was this one lone, last act of defiance or revenge? Or just some hideously ironic accident? It hit Jack that the scene was very much like an auto accident, at least in kind if vastly different in scale, and for the trained men and women who'd responded, it was the same story as with so many other calls—too late. Too late to stop the fire in time. Too late to save the lives they were sworn to rescue. Too late to make much of a difference at all.

The HMMWV pulled in close to the southeast corner of the building, just outside the gaggle of fire trucks, and before Ryan could step out, a full squad of Marines had him surrounded again. One of them, the captain, opened the door for the new President.

“So, who’s in charge?” Jack asked Agent Price. For the first time he noticed how bitterly cold the night was.

“I guess one of the firemen.”

“Let’s find him.” Jack started walking toward a collection of pumpers. He was already starting to shiver in his light wool suit. The chiefs would be the ones with the white hats, right? And the regular cars, he remembered from his youth in Baltimore. Chiefs didn’t ride in trucks. He spotted three red-painted sedans and angled that way.

“Damn it, Mr. President!” Andrea Price fairly screamed at him. Other agents ran to get in front, and the Marines couldn’t decide whether to lead the group or to follow. There wasn’t an entry in anyone’s manual for this, and what rules the Secret Service had, their Boss had just invalidated. Then one of them had a thought and sprinted off to the nearest ladder truck. He returned with a rubberized turnout coat.

“This’ll keep you warm, sir,” Special Agent Raman promised, helping Ryan into it, and disguising him as one of the several hundred firefighters roaming around. Special Agent Price gave him an approving wink and nod, the first moment of almost-levity since the 747 had arrived at Capitol Hill. All the better that President Ryan didn’t grasp the real reason for the heavy coat, she thought. This moment would be remembered by the protective Detail as the beginning of the management race, the Secret Service vs. the President of the United States, generally a contest of ego against cajolery.

The first chief that Ryan found was talking into a hand-held radio and trying to direct his firefighters closer into the flames. A person in civilian clothes was close by, holding a large paper roll flat on the car’s hood. Probably plans of the building, Jack thought. Ryan waited a few feet away, while the two men moved hands left and right over the plans and the chief spoke staccato instructions into his radio.

“And, for Christ’s sake, be careful with all those loose stones,” Chief Paul Magill finished his last command. Then he turned around and rubbed his eyes. “Who the hell are you?”

“This is the President,” Price informed him.

Magill's eyes blinked. He took a quick look at the people with guns, then back at Ryan. "This is pretty damned bad," the chief said first.

"Anyone get out?"

Magill shook his head. "Not from this side. Three people on the other side, all beat up. We think they were in the Speaker's cloak room, someplace around there, probably the explosion just shot them through the windows. Two pages and a Secret Service guy, all burned and busted up. We're conducting a search—well, we're trying to, but so far even the people who weren't roasted—they had the oxygen sucked right out of them, asphyxia, you're just as dead." Paul Magill was Ryan's height, but a barrel-chested black man. His hands were mottled with large pale areas that gave testament to a very intimate battle with fire sometime in his professional past. His rugged face showed only sadness now, for fire wasn't a human enemy, just a mindless thing that scarred the fortunate and killed the rest. "We might get lucky. Some people in small rooms, doors closed, like that, sir. There's a million damned rooms in this place, 'cording to these here plans. We might get a couple people out alive. I seen it happen before. But most of 'em . . ." Magill just shook his head for a moment. "The line's holding, ought not to spread much more."

"Nobody from the chamber?" Agent Raman asked. He really wanted to know the name of the agent who'd been blown clear, but it would not have been professional to ask. Magill just shook his head in any case.

"No." He stared off at the diminishing glow, and added, "It would have been real quick." Magill shook his head again.

"I want to see," Jack said impulsively.

"No," Magill replied at once. "Too dangerous. Sir, it's my fire, and my rules, okay?"

"I *have* to see," Ryan said, more quietly. The two pairs of eyes met and communicated. Magill still didn't like it. He saw the people with guns again, and decided, wrongly, that they would support this new President, if that's what he was. Magill hadn't been watching TV when the call had come.

"Ain't gonna be pretty, sir."





IT WAS JUST after sundown in Hawaii. Rear Admiral Robert Jackson was landing at Barbers Point Naval Air Station. His peripheral vision took note of the well-lit hotels on Oahu's south shore, and a passing thought wondered what it cost to stay in one of them now. He hadn't done it since his early twenties, when two or three naval aviators would share accommodations in order to save money for hitting the bars and impressing the local women with their worldly panache. His Tomcat touched down gently, despite the lengthy ride and three aerial refuelings, because Robby still thought of himself as a fighter pilot, and therefore an artist of sorts. The fighter slowed down properly during its run-out, then turned right onto the taxiway.

"Tomcat Five-Zero-Zero, continue down to the end—"

"I've been here before, miss," Jackson replied with a smile, breaking the rules. But he was an admiral, wasn't he? Fighter pilot *and* admiral. Who cared about rules?

"Five-Zero-Zero, there's a car waiting."

"Thank you." Robby could see it, there by the farthest hangar, along with a sailor waving the usual lighted wands.

"Not bad for an old guy," the backseater noted as he folded up his maps and other unnecessary but gravely important papers.

"Your vote of approval is noted." *I was never this stiff before*, Jackson admitted to himself. He shifted himself in the seat. His butt felt like painful lead. How could all feeling be gone, yet there still be pain? he asked himself with a rueful smile. *Too old*, was how his mind answered the question. Then his leg made its presence known. *Arthritis, damn it*. He'd had to make it an order to get Sanchez to release the fighter to him. It was too far for a COD to take him from USS *John C. Stennis* back to Pearl, and the orders had been specific enough: *Expedite return*. On that basis he'd borrowed a Tom whose fire-control system was down, and therefore was non-mission-capable anyway. The Air Force had supplied the tankers. So after seven

hours of blessed silence, he'd flown half the Pacific in a fighter—doubtless for the last time. Jackson moved again as he turned the fighter toward the parking spot, and was rewarded with a back spasm.

"Is that CINCPAC?" Jackson asked, spotting the white-clad figure by the blue Navy car.

Admiral David Seaton it was, and not standing erect, but leaning against the car and flipping through messages as Robby cut the engines and opened the canopy. A sailor rolled up a stepladder, the sort used by mechanics, to make Robby's descent easier. Another enlisted man—woman, actually—extracted the arriving admiral's bag from the storage compartment underneath. Somebody was in a hurry.

"Trouble," Seaton said the moment Robby had both boots on the ground.

"I thought we won," Jackson replied, stopping dead still on the hot concrete of the ramp. His brain was tired, too. It would be a few minutes before his thinking ran at the customary speed, though his instincts were telling him that something unusual was afoot.

"The President's dead—and we got a new one." Seaton handed over the clipboard. "Friend of yours. We're back to DEFCON Three for the time being."

"What the hell . . ." Admiral Jackson said, reading the first page of dispatches. Then he looked up. "Jack's the new . . .?"

"Didn't you know about him becoming VP?"

Jackson shook his head. "I was tied up with other things before I got off the boat this morning. Holy God," Robby concluded with another shake of the head.

Seaton nodded. Ed Kealty resigned because of that sex scandal, the President persuaded Ryan to take the vice presidency until the elections next year, the Congress confirmed him, but before he could enter the chamber well, you can see what happened. Plane hit down center. "The JCSs are all gone. The deputies are stepping in. Mickey Moore"—Army General Michael Moore, the Deputy Chairman of the Joint Chiefs—"has put in a call for all the CINCs to come into D.C., ASAP. We have a KC-10 waiting for us at Hickam."

“Threat board?” Jackson asked. His permanent job, insofar as any uniformed posting was permanent, was Deputy J-3, the number-two planning officer for the Joint Chiefs.

Seaton shrugged. “Theoretically, it’s blank. The IO’s calmed down. The Japanese are out of the war business—”

Jackson finished the statement: “But America’s never been hit like this before.”

“The plane’s waiting. You can change aboard. Neatness doesn’t count at the moment, Robby.”

AS ALWAYS, THE world was divided by time and space, especially time, she would have thought had she a moment to think, but she rarely did. She was over sixty, her small frame bowed down by years of selfless work, made all the worse because there were so few young ones to give her rest. That wasn’t fair, really. She’d spelled others in her time, and those of generations past had done the same in their time, but not now, not for her. She did her best to put that thought aside. It was unworthy of her, unworthy of her place in the world, and certainly unworthy of her promises, made to God more than forty years before. She now had doubts about those promises, but she’d admitted them to no one, not even her confessor. Her failure to discuss them was more troubling to her conscience even than the doubts were, though she vaguely knew that her priest would speak gently to her about her sin, if that’s what it was—was it? she wondered. Even if it were, yes, he’d speak gently about it. He always did, probably because he had such doubts himself, and both of them were of the age when one looks back and wonders what might have been, despite all the accomplishments of a productive and useful life.

Her sister, every bit as religious as she, had chosen the most common of the vocations and was now a grandmother, and Sister M. Jean Baptiste wondered what that was like. She’d made her choice a long time ago, in a youth she could still remember, and like all such decisions it had been made with poor reflection, however correct the

choice itself had been. It had seemed simple enough at the time. They were respected, the ladies in black. In her distant youth she could recall seeing the German occupation troops nod politely to their passing, for even though it was widely suspected that the nuns aided Allied airmen, and maybe even Jews trying to escape, it was also known that the nursing order treated everyone equally and fairly, because God required it. Besides even the Germans wanted their hospital when they were wounded, because you had a better chance there than anywhere else. It was a proud tradition, and even though Pride was a sin, it was one the dark ladies had committed after a fashion, telling themselves that perhaps God didn't mind, because the tradition was in His Holy Name. And so when the time had been right, she'd made the decision, and that was that. Some had left, but the critical time for her to make such a choice had been difficult, what with the condition of the country after the war, and the need for her skills, and a world that had not yet changed enough for her to see her options for what they were. So she had thought about leaving, briefly, and put the idea aside, and stayed with her work.

Sister Jean Baptiste was a skilled and experienced nurse. She'd come to this place when it had still belonged to her parent country, and stayed after its status had changed. In that time she'd done her job the same way, with the same skill, despite the tornadic political changes that had gone on around her, no matter that her patients were African or European. But forty years, more than thirty of that in this same place, had taken their toll.

It wasn't that she didn't care anymore. Certainly it wasn't that. It was just that she was almost sixty-five, and that was just too old to be a nurse with too few aides, often as not working fourteen-hour days, with a few hours for prayer tossed in, good for her soul but tiring for everything else. In younger years her body had been robust—not to say rugged—and healthy, and more than one of the physicians had called her Sister Rock, but the physicians had gone their way, and she had stayed and stayed and stayed, and even rocks can be worn down. And with fatigue came mistakes.

She knew what to be wary of. You could not be a

health-care professional in Africa and not be careful if you wanted to live. Christianity had been trying to establish itself here for centuries, but while it had made some inroads, it might never make others. One of those problems was sexual promiscuity, a local proclivity that had horrified her on her arrival nearly two generations earlier, but was now just . . . normal. But all too often lethally so. Fully a third of the patients in the hospital had what was known locally as “the thin disease” and elsewhere as AIDS. The precautions for that ailment were set in stone, and Sister Jean Baptiste had taught them in courses. The sad truth was that, as with the plagues of old, all that the medical professionals could really do with this modern curse was to protect themselves.

Fortunately with this patient, that was not a concern. The boy was only eight, too young to be sexually active. A handsome boy, well formed and bright, he’d been an honor student at the nearby Catholic school, and an acolyte. Perhaps he’d hear the call someday and become a priest—that was easier for the Africans than the Europeans, since the Church, in quiet deference to African customs, allowed priests down here to marry, a secret that was not widely known through the rest of the world. But the boy was ill. He’d come in only a few hours earlier, at midnight, driven in by his father, a fine man who was a senior official in the local government and had a car of his own. The doctor on call had diagnosed the boy with cerebral malaria, but the entry on the chart wasn’t confirmed by the usual laboratory test. Perhaps the blood sample had gotten lost. Violent headaches, vomiting, shaking of the limbs, disorientation, spiking fever. Cerebral malaria. She hoped *that* wasn’t going to break out again. It was treatable, but the problem was getting people *to* treatment.

The rest of the ward was quiet this late at—no, early in the morning, actually—a pleasant time in this part of the world. The air was as cool as it would get in any twenty-four-hour period, and still, and quiet—and so were the patients. The boy’s biggest problem at the moment was the fever, and so she pulled back the sheet and sponged him down. It seemed to calm his restless young body, and she took the time to examine him for other symptoms. The

doctors were doctors, and she but a nurse—even so, she'd been here for a very long time, and knew what to look for. There wasn't much really, except for an old bandage on his left hand. How had the doctor overlooked that? Sister Jean Baptiste walked back to the nurses' station, where her two aides were dozing. What she was about to do was properly their job, but there was no sense in waking them. She returned to the patient with fresh dressings and disinfectant. You had to be careful with infections down here. Carefully, slowly, she peeled off the bandage, herself blinking with fatigue. A bite, she saw, like one from a small dog . . . or a monkey. That made her blink hard. Those could be dangerous. She ought to have walked back to the station and gotten rubber gloves, but it was forty meters away, and her legs were tired, and the patient was resting, the hand unmoving. She uncapped the disinfectant, then rotated the hand slowly and gently to fully expose the injury. When she shook the bottle with her other hand, a little escaped from around her thumb and it sprinkled on the patient's face. The head came up, and he sneezed in his sleep, the usual cloud of droplets ejected into the air. Sister Jean Baptiste was startled, but didn't stop; she poured the disinfectant on a cotton ball, and carefully swabbed the wound. Next she capped the bottle and set it down, applied the new bandage, and only then did she wipe her face with the back of her hand, without realizing that when her patient had sneezed, his wounded hand in hers had jerked, depositing blood there, and that it had been on her hand as it had swept across her eyes. The gloves, therefore, might not have mattered at all, a fact that would have been of scant comfort even if she had remembered it, three days hence.

SHOULD HAVE STAYED put, Jack told himself. Two paramedics had guided him up a clear corridor on the east steps, along with the gaggle of Marines and agents, all moving upward with guns still out in a scene of grimly obscene humor, no one knowing quite what to do. They then had encountered a nearly solid line of firefighters and hoses, spraying their water, much of which blew back

in everyone's faces in the sort of chill that ran straight into the bones. Here the fire had been smothered by the water fog, and though the hoses continued to wet things down, it was safe for rescue personnel from the ladder companies to creep into the remains of the chamber. One didn't have to be an expert to understand what they found. No lifted heads, no urgent gestures, no shouts. The men—and women, though one couldn't tell at this distance—picked their way carefully, more mindful of their own safety than anything else, because there was plainly no reason to risk one's life on behalf of the dead.

*Dear God*, he thought. People he knew were here. Not just Americans. Jack could see where a whole section of gallery had fallen down to the well of the chamber. The diplomatic gallery, if he remembered correctly. Various dignitaries and their families, many of whom he'd known, who had come to the Hill for the purpose of seeing him sworn. Did that make their deaths his fault?

He'd left the CNN building because of the need to do something, or that was what he'd told himself. Ryan wasn't so sure now. Just a change of scenery, perhaps? Or was he merely drawn to the scene the same way the people at the perimeter of the Capitol grounds were, standing silently as he was, just looking, as he was, and not doing anything, as he was. The numbness hadn't gone away. He'd come here expecting to find something to see and feel and then to do, but only discovered something else for his soul to shrink from.

"It's cold here, Mr. President. At least get out of this damned spray," Price urged.

"Okay." Ryan nodded and headed back down the steps. The coat, he found, wasn't all that warm. Ryan was shivering again, and he hoped it was merely from the cold.

The cameras had been slow setting up, but they were there now, Ryan saw. The little portable ones—Japanese made, all of them, he noted with a grunt—with their small, powerful lights. Somehow they'd managed to get past the police lines and the fire chiefs. Before each of them stood a reporter—the three he could see were all men—holding a microphone and trying to sound as though he knew more than anyone else did. Several lights were trained his

own way, Jack noted. People all over the country and the world were watching him, expecting him to know what to do. How did such people ever adopt the illusion that senior government officials were any brighter than their family physician, or lawyer, or accountant? His mind trekked back to his first week as a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps, when the institution which he'd served then had similarly assumed that he knew how to command and lead a platoon—and when a sergeant ten years his senior had come to him with a family problem, expecting the “ell-tee,” who lacked both a wife and children, to know what to say to a man who had trouble with both. Today, Jack reminded himself, such a situation was called a “leadership challenge,” meaning that you didn't have a clue about what to do next. But there were the cameras, and he had to do something.

Except he still didn't have a clue. He'd come here hoping to find a catalyst for action, only to find increased feelings of helplessness. And maybe a question.

“Arnie van Damm?” He'd need Arnie, sure as hell.

“At the House, sir,” Price replied, meaning the White House.

“Okay, let's head over there,” Ryan ordered.

“Sir,” Price said, after a moment's hesitation, “that's probably not safe. If there was—”

“I can't run away, damn it. I can't fly away on Kneecap. I can't sneak off to Camp David. I can't crawl into some damned hole. Can't you see that?” He was frustrated rather than angry. His right arm pointed to the remains of the Capitol building. “Those people are dead, and I *am* the government for now, God help me, and the government doesn't run away.”

“THAT LOOKS LIKE President Ryan there,” an anchorman said in his warm, dry studio. “Probably trying to get a handle on rescue operations. Ryan is a man not unaccustomed to crisis, as we all know.”

“I've known Ryan for six years,” a more senior network analyst opined, studiously not looking at the camera, so as to give the appearance of instructing the more



highly paid anchorman who was trying to report on the event. Both had been in the studio to provide commentary for President Durling's speech, and had read all the briefing material on Ryan, whom the analyst didn't really know, though they'd bumped into each other at various dinners during the past few years. "He's a remarkably low-key gentleman, but without question one of the brightest people in government service." Such a statement could not go unchallenged. Tom the anchor leaned forward, half-looking at his colleague, and half at the cameras.

"But, John, he's not a politician. He has no political background or experience. He's a national-security specialist in an age when national security is not the issue it once was," he pontificated.

John the analyst managed to stifle the reply that the statement so richly deserved. Someone else did not.

"Yeah," Chavez grumbled. "And that airplane that took the building out was really a Delta flight that got lost. Jesus!" he concluded.

"It's a great country we serve, Ding, my boy. Where else do people get paid five mill' a year to be stupid?" John Clark decided to finish his beer. There was no sense in driving back to Washington until Mary Pat called. He was a worker bee, after all, and only the top-floor CIA types would be racing around now. And racing around they would be. They wouldn't be accomplishing much, but at times like this you *didn't* really accomplish much of anything, except to look harried and important . . . and to the worker bees, ineffective.

WITH LITTLE TO show the public, the network reran tape of President Durling's speech. The C-SPAN cameras in the chamber had been remotely controlled, and control-room technicians froze various frames to show the front row of senior government officials, and, again, the roll of the dead was cataloged: All but two of the Cabinet secretaries, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, senior agency directors, the Chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, Director Bill Shaw of the FBI, the Director of the Office of Manage-

ment and Budget, the Administrator of NASA, all nine Justices of the Supreme Court. The anchorman's voice listed the names and the positions they'd held, and the tape advanced frame by frame until the moment when the Secret Service agents were shown racing into the chamber, startling President Durling and causing some brief confusion. Heads turned, looking for danger, and perhaps the quicker-minded among them had wondered about the presence of a gunman in the galleries, but then came three frames from a wide-shot camera that showed the blurred displacement of the back wall, followed by blackness. Anchor and commentator were then back on-screen, staring down at their desktop monitors, then back up at each other, and perhaps only now the full enormity of the event finally began to hit them, as it was hitting the new President.

"President Ryan's principal task will be to rebuild the government, if he can," John the analyst said, after a long moment's pause. "My God, so many good men and women . . . dead. . . ." It had also occurred to him that a few years earlier, before becoming the senior network commentator, he would have been in that chamber, along with so many of his professional friends; and for him, also, the event finally broke past the shock, and his hands started quivering below the top of the desk. An experienced pro who did not allow his voice to shake, he nonetheless could not totally control the look on his face, which sagged with sudden, awful grief, and on the screen his face went ashen under the makeup.

"God's judgment," Mahmoud Haji Daryaei muttered over six thousand miles away, lifting the controller and muting the sound to eliminate extraneous twaddle.

God's judgment. That made sense, didn't it? America. The colossus that had thwarted so many, a godless land of godless people, at the pinnacle of her power, winner of yet another contest—now, grievously harmed. How else but by God's will could such a thing happen? And what else could it mean but God's own judgment, and God's own blessing? Blessing on what? he wondered. Well, perhaps that would be clear with reflection.

He'd met Ryan once before, found him spiteful and ar-

rogant—typically American—but not now. The cameras momentarily zoomed in to show a man clutching at his coat, his head turning left and right, mouth slightly open. No, not arrogant now. Stunned, not even aware enough to be frightened. It was a look he'd seen on men's faces before. How interesting.

THE SAME WORDS and the same images were flooding the world now, delivered by satellites to over a billion pairs of eyes that'd been watching the news coverage, or been alerted to the event and had changed channels from morning shows in some countries, lunch and evening shows in others. History had been made, and there was an imperative to watch.

This was particularly true of the powerful, for whom information was the raw material of power. Another man in another place looked at the electronic clock that sat next to the television on his desk and did some simple arithmetic. A horrid day was ending in America, while a morning was well begun where he sat. The window behind his desk showed a wide expanse of paving stones, a huge square, in fact, crisscrossed by people mainly traveling by bicycle, though the number of cars he saw was now substantial, having grown by a factor of ten over the past few years. But still bicycles were the main mode of transportation, and that wasn't fair, was it?

He'd planned to change that, quickly and decisively in historical terms—and he was a serious student of history—only to have his carefully laid plan killed aborning by the Americans. He didn't believe in God, never had and never would, but he did believe in Fate, and Fate was what he saw before his eyes on the phosphor screen of a television set manufactured in Japan. A fickle woman, Fate was, he told himself as he reached for a handleless cup of green tea. Only days before she had favored the Americans with luck, and now, this. . . . So what was the intention of the Lady Fate? His own intentions and needs and will mattered more, the man decided. He reached for his phone, then thought better of it. It would ring soon enough, and others would ask his opinion, and he would

have to answer with something, and so it was time to think. He sipped his tea. The heated water stung his mouth, and that was good. He would have to be alert, and the pain focused his mind inward, where important thoughts always began.

Undone or not, his plan hadn't been a bad one. Poorly executed by his unwitting agents, largely because of the Lady Fate and her momentary largesse to America—but it had been a fine plan, he told himself yet again. He'd have another chance to prove that. Because of the Lady Fate. The thought occasioned a thin smile, and a distant look, as his mind probed the future and liked what it saw. He hoped the phone would not ring for a while, because he had to look further still, and that was best done without interference. It came to him after a moment's further thought that the real objective of his plan had been accomplished, hadn't it? He'd wished America to be crippled, and crippled America now was. Not in the manner he'd chosen, but crippled even so. *Even better?* he asked himself.

Yes.

And so, the game could go on, couldn't it?

It was the Lady Fate, toying as she did with the ebb and flow of history. She wasn't a friend or enemy of any man, really—or was she? The man snorted. Maybe she just had a sense of humor.

FOR ANOTHER PERSON, the emotion was anger. Days before had come the humiliation, the bitter humiliation of being told by a foreigner—nothing more than a former provincial governor!—what her sovereign nation must do. She'd been very careful, of course. Everything had been done with great skill. The government itself had not been implicated in anything more than extensive naval exercises on the open sea, which was, of course, free for the passage of all. No threatening notes had been dispatched, no official *démarche* issued, no position taken, and for their part the Americans hadn't done anything more than—what was their arrogant phrase, “rattle their cage”?—and call

for a meeting of the Security Council, at which there was nothing to be said, really, since nothing official had taken place, and her country had made no announcement. What they had done was nothing more than *exercises*, weren't they? *Peaceful exercises*. Of course, those exercises had helped split the American capability against Japan—but she couldn't have known ahead of time, could she? Of course not.

She had the document on her desk at this very moment: the time required to restore the fleet to full capability. But, no, she shook her head, it wouldn't be enough. Neither she nor her country could act alone now. It would take time and friends, and plans, but her country had needs, and it was her job to see to those needs. It was not her job to accept commands from others, was it?

No.

She also drank tea, from a fine china cup, with sugar and a little milk in the English way, a product of her birth and station and education, all of which, along with patience, had brought her to this office. Of all the people around the world watching the same picture from the same satellite network, she probably understood the best what the opportunity was, how vast and appealing it had to be, all the sweeter that it had come so soon after she'd been dictated to in this very office. By a man who was now dead. It was too good to pass up, wasn't it?

Yes.

"THIS IS SCARY, Mr. C." Domingo Chavez rubbed his eyes—he'd been awake for more hours than his jet-lagged brain could compute—and tried to organize his thoughts. He was sprawled back on the living-room couch, shoeless feet up on the coffee table. The womenfolk in the house were off to bed, one in anticipation of work the next day, and the other with a college exam to face. The latter hadn't figured that there might not be any school tomorrow.

"Tell me why, Ding," John Clark commanded. The time for worrying himself about the relative skills of var-

ious TV personalities had passed, and his young partner *was*, after all, pursuing his master's degree in international relations.

Chavez spoke without opening his eyes. "I don't think anything like this has ever happened in peacetime before. The world ain't all that different from what it was last week, John. Last week, it was real complicated. We kinda won that little war we were in, but the world ain't changed much, and we're not any stronger than we were then, are we?"

"Nature abhors a vacuum?" John asked quietly.

"Sum'tim like that." Chavez yawned. "Damned if we ain't got one here and now."

"NOT ACCOMPLISHING VERY much, am I?" Jack asked, in a voice both quiet and bleak. It was hitting him full force now. There was still a glow, though most of what rose into the sky now was steam rather than smoke. What went into the building was the most depressing sight. Body bags. Rubberized fabric with loop handles at the ends, and some sort of zipper in the middle. Lots of them, and some were coming out now, carried by pairs of firefighters, snaking down the wide steps around the fragments of broken masonry. It had just started, and would not end soon. He hadn't actually seen a body during his few minutes up top. Somehow, seeing the first few bags was worse.

"No, sir," Agent Price said, her face looking the same as his. "This isn't good for you."

"I know." Ryan nodded and looked away.

*I don't know what to do*, he told himself. *Where's the manual, the training course for this job? Whom do I ask? Where do I go?*

*I don't want this job!* his mind screamed at itself. Ryan reproached himself for the venality of the thought, but he'd come to this newly dreadful place as some sort of leadership demonstration, parading himself before the TV cameras as though he knew what he was about—and that was a lie. Perhaps not a malicious one. Just stupid. *Walk up to the fire chief and ask how it's going, as though anyone*

*with eyes and a second-grade education couldn't figure that one out!*

"I'm open to ideas," Ryan said at last.

Special Agent Andrea Price took a deep breath and fulfilled the fantasy of every special agent of the United States Secret Service all the way back to Pinkerton: "Mr. President, you really need to get your, er, stuff"—she couldn't go *that* far—"together. Some things you can do and some things you can't. You have people working for you. For starters, sir, figure out who they are and let them do their jobs. Then, maybe, you can start doing yours."

"Back to the House?"

"That's where the phones are, Mr. President."

"Who's head of the Detail?"

"It was Andy Walker." Price didn't have to say where he was now. Ryan looked down at her and made his first presidential decision.

"You just got promoted."

Price nodded. "Follow me, sir." It pleased the agent to see that this President, like all the others, could learn to follow orders. Some of the time, anyway. They'd made it all of ten feet before Ryan slipped on a patch of ice and went down, to be picked back up by two agents. It only made him look all the more vulnerable. A still photographer captured the moment, giving *Newsweek* its cover photo for the following week.

"AS YOU SEE, President Ryan is now leaving the Hill in what looks like a military vehicle instead of a Secret Service car. What do you suppose he's up to?" the anchor asked.

"In all fairness to the man," John the commentator said, "it's unlikely that he knows at the moment."

That opinion rang across the globe a third of a second later, to the general agreement of all manner of persons, friends and enemies alike.

SOME THINGS HAVE to be done fast. He didn't know if they were the right things—well, he did, and they

weren't—but at a certain level of importance the rules got a little muddled, didn't they? The scion of a political family whose public service went back a couple of generations, he'd been in public life practically since leaving law school, which was another way of saying that he hadn't held a real job in his entire life. Perhaps he had little practical experience in the economy except as its beneficiary—his family's financial managers ran the various trusts and portfolios with sufficient skill that he almost never bothered meeting with them except at tax time. Perhaps he had never practiced law—though he'd had a hand in passing literally thousands of them. Perhaps he had never served his country in uniform—though he deemed himself an expert in national security. Perhaps a lot of things militated against doing anything. But he knew government, for that had been his profession for all of his active—not to say “working”—life, and at a time like this, the country needed someone who really knew government. The country needed healing, Ed Kealty thought, and he knew about that.

So, he lifted his phone and made a call. “Cliff, this is Ed . . .”