

Megan's Empire Book 1

By Theodore Ro

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Megan's Empire Book 1
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Prologue

It's odd. The scream that wakes me is not my own. It's followed by a splash. I turn to the clock beside my bed. Mother thinks the mouse is cute with a clock in its belly I prefer The Roadrunner.

11 PM. I sense an opportunity.

"Harmony, wake up. They're getting silly already, now's our chance."

"Mufenwafel," my friend mumbles.

I leave a trail of my 'nice pajamas', Nanny Elin's term, on the way to the dressing room. I emerge wearing my 'ninja pajamas', my term, for that is what I am. All black except for my face and feet. No way I'm wearing the skunk slippers with the white stripe and a tail sticking up in the back my mother bought me. And Nanny has hidden my black ski mask. Yet another agent of evil sent to resist me on my mission to save the world 'one contract at a time'.

"There have been too many late-night assaults on the enemy's pastry supply," she says. "Secret agents, if they are to be great secret agents, must be careful not to get fat, *min kjære*." She says the words mean *my dear* in her native Norwegian but no way! It looks so totally different from the way she says it, 'sha-DUH'. It's obvious it's a secret code. I am sooo on to her.

I'm getting impatient. *"Will you come on, Harm,"* I say as I bounce on the bed beside her, *"Tonight's mission, should you decide to accept it, will be exciting. I want to explore more of the mysterious world of adulthood."*

"No, you don't," she says through a yawn, *"you want to see what you can get away with."*

"Of that, there can be no doubt. I am invincible, a finely tuned machine," I say as I jump off the bed. *"An agent of justice and freedom feared by enemies of free enterprise throughout the world. But, if you want to sleep away your life, I'll go without you."*

She sighs. *"No, you'd only make my life miserable when you got back."* She frumps across the floor. She knows nothing of stealth mode.

"Will you be quiet. Someone will hear." I hiss.

"No, I will not. This is stupid. The only people stupid enough to be awake now are stupid adults. They're having another stupid party and tossing other stupid adults into the stupid swimming pool. Sensible people understand the value of a good night's rest."

I open the door a crack and smile. *"See? That silicon stuff I got from the maintenance closet worked. It neutralized the early warning device the enemy planted in the hinges."*

I step into the empty hallway and peer over the railing into the main hall of the family wing. *"No one. All the servants are busy serving drinks to the guests at the party."*

The marble floor feels cool as I tiptoe by Nanny Elin's bedroom to the door of my mother's suite. I push open the door and freeze. The enemy has laid another trap.

"Okay, genius, where's your silicon stuff now?"

I stay motionless, a statue, a true ninja for a full minute. Then open the door just enough to squeeze through.

I glide across the suite to the French doors that open without a sound onto the balcony. *"Figures,"* I say aloud. *"No one's around to care now."*

"Megan, this is stupid."

“*Quit being such a baby,*” I say as I climb up on the railing. I steady myself with a hand against the cool granite of the mansion’s exterior. It’s more like a step than a leap to reach the railing of the upstairs gym. I hop down and walk over to the opposite railing and climb up. Now I need more focus. The distance is greater to the railing of my father’s upstairs office.

“*This is too dangerous, M. Let’s go back.*”

“*Would you knock it off, Harm? I’ve done this a bazillion times!*”

“*Yeah, but you’re not as young as you used to be.*”

“*I’m nine.*”

“*My point exactly. You’ve been in a growth spurt. You’re getting all gangly and gawky.*”

I overcompensate for Harmony’s negativity. The judges will knock off a tenth for style, I’m sure. I land on my hands and knees...hard. The marble floor takes its share of skin.

“*Ouch. I’ll bet that hurts.*”

“*Ya think. It’s your fault. If you weren’t such a scaredy-cat, this wouldn’t have happened.*”

“*Yeah, I know. It’s always my fault when you screw up.*”

I am horrified to see two giant tears splash on the marble floor between my hands. I swallow down the pain in disgust and get to my feet, careful to wipe any evidence of weakness away with my foot.

The balcony of Father’s office has stairs. Once down on the South Lawn, the coolness of the grass between my toes distracts me. I run toward the interior hedge of The Promenade.

“*Security will have us on camera, genius,*” Harmony warns.

“*Relax, Colin’s working tonight. We’re buds. We watch old TV shows together on the big screen in the security office.*”

“*And you think the guy you call Barney Fife won’t rat us out, huh?*”

I smile when I recall the ring I gave him last year to celebrate the five years he’s been on my protective team. A single gold bullet surrounded by black onyx.

I crouch down next to the hedge and listen. Adults often pair off from the party to ‘stroll along The Promenade’. Funny, what I’ve seen going on here many nights before doesn’t seem like the strolls I take with Nanny Elin. Is it called strolling when two people mash their lips together? Yeah, yeah. I know what it is. I’m not stoopid.

Silence. I ignore the pain from my hands and knees as I crawl through a tunnel in the hedge. I cross The Promenade and crawl through another tunnel in the hedge opposite. A quick scan tells me we have the South Grove to ourselves. No one from the party has decided, yet, to skip the whole walk pretense and get right down to business.

I love the long run in the warm night air to where there is a large bulge in the outer hedge. Here, in The Grotto, there are changing rooms, a lap pool, a spa and, for my purposes, a bar. The enemy never forgets to secure their favorite drink containers in the main house. Yet, reconnaissance reported seeing Mother wobbling from The Grotto this afternoon. Could there have been a lapse in security I can exploit for the betterment of humankind?

The hedge is thick and wide, and the tunnel widens out in the middle to form my secret fortress of solitude. Here, I can observe the enemy in their lair while they are unaware of my presence.

Jackpot!

Security here has been lax and I have two easy targets for tonight's mission with no one around. There is a bottle of De Luz XO cognac and a bottle of Grey Goose XV. I am a shadow, less than a blur. James Bond himself could not have done it better. In the blink of an eye, I am back in my hideaway with the enemy's potion. Now the brilliance of my plan all comes together. I will rob the enemy of their secret formula for global mind control and smuggle out samples for analysis in Q's lab. Even more clever, I will hide where no one will ever find it.

First, the cognac.

I take off the cap, tip the bottle back and drink. In the middle of the third swallow, I realize the enemy has duped me. They replaced their latest batch of the secret formula with molten lava. I spit out what remains in my mouth and it soaks into the front of my pajamas.

"Pee-ew!" Harmony says, "*That will blow your cover big time. The enemy will smell you coming a mile away.*"

I'm expecting to see my pajamas have caught fire. If the stuff I spit on them hasn't set them alight, then the stuff consuming me from the inside out will. The clear liquid in the other bottle must be the antidote. I open that bottle and take a quick gulp.

Another trick, but I catch on a tad quicker this time. I manage to spit it out without getting all of it onto my soon to be flaming pajamas.

"*This stuff is poison, Harmony!*"

"*Awesome. You'll die, and I can get some sleep.*"

"*I am already feeling the effects of the poison. I will die here in the fortress of solitude. In the morning, the garden staff will discover what's left of my acid eaten and dissolving corpse.*"

"*Cool!*"

"*Gee, thanks. My friend, always a source of compassion and comfort.*" I hiccup. "*It's interesting, though, the effect I'm getting suggests this may not be a bad way to go.*" I take another sip of the brown stuff. It's getting better. I smile and have a sudden urge to bond. "*You know, Harm...*" I begin in a loud voice.

"*Shush, someone's coming,*" she says. She has this awesome hearing. She has ears like a...like a...hmm my brain isn't working at the moment...like a thing that can hear a lot! My smile broadens. I was pretty clever to come up with that one.

Then I recognize the voices and frown.

"*Big deal,*" I say, "*it's my parents hiking all the way down here, so they can fight in private. Can't let the guests know how much they hate each other.*" I take another sip, a bigger one. Maybe I won't die. If not, this drinking thing could be fun. I wonder if there is any place I could get work as a professional drinker.

"I can't believe you, John!" As always, when they fight, Mother's shrillness makes me wince. Yet, Eureka! I have the means to counteract the effect. I take another drink and shrug. Can't sneak back to my room now so I'll sit back, have a drink and I take in the show. Yup, I'm turning out to be quite an adult.

"I never could count on you to be reasonable, Caroline. That's why I don't bring you into any of my business affairs, especially ones as delicate as this."

"John, she's our daughter! How can you negotiate for her as if she were the stakes in a penny ante poker game?"

"*What was that? Harmony, did you hear that?*"

"Yes, your wobbliness, I did. Now, will you please put your newest career choice on hold for a second and pay attention."

"Nothing is penny ante about Megan, Caroline. It was a long and careful negotiation and we've made an awesome deal. The best ever, if you stop to think for a second." My father is the calm one, his voice steady and even, all the time and every time. Mother hates that. I think it's cool.

"All I can see is my baby girl bargained away like she's a piece of meat!"

"Megan is far from being a baby. I'm not sure she ever was."

"That's true. I'm a drinker."

"Will you please be quiet?"

"So then why does she still talk to an imaginary friend?"

I stare at Harmony. *"You're imaginary?"*

"Yup."

"Both of you?"

"Uh huh."

"Cool." Both Harmonys ignore me and go back to observing the drama in The Grotto. It seems the bottle's contents have powers. It makes extra Harmonys. Also, it seems to be moving around all on its own. Odd. Somehow, I get my mouth around the moving target and take another drink.

"She is not another commodity to on the open market, John?"

"There is no open market for my daughter. Company agents approached the Chinese eighteen months ago. It was soon obvious to all parties that an agreement between us could be very beneficial. It was further agreed that the ultimate seal to put on the ultimate deal of all time was a marriage contract. A binding agreement between my daughter and the premier's son once Megan turns twenty-one. All perfectly logical."

"Oh, sure. All so logical but without a single drop of love and compassion to written into even the fine print!"

"It will be fine, Caroline. Megan is almost as intelligent as me and that's saying something. When the time comes, she'll jump at the chance to marry the premier's son."

"Not a chance. I'm a drinker, not a marry...uh...er. Unless he's a professional drinker too."

Harmony looks at me with a scowl. *"I think you should put down the bottle and listen, M."*

"No way that will happen. I have discovered wondrous things this night. I have become Wonder...er...Ninja Girl!"

"Er...right." She rolls her eyes and turns away to peer out at the scene that is unfolding on the patio.

"Why worry about it now, anyway, Caroline? A lot can happen by the time she's eighteen. Chairman Li could be out. The Company could fail to maintain its compounded year over year growth projections. But if it works, think of the possibilities! An alliance between the two most powerful organizations the world has ever seen. All other countries would have no choice but to fall into line. No monarch in history has bargained his or her offspring for a bigger piece of the pie!"

"It's despicable. It's child prostitution. You've pimped our daughter out for the best price you could get."

“Oh, give me a break. How did you get so high and mighty, miss former super-model? Did you forget where you came from? Did you forget how much you were getting per night from the uber rich? You, more than anyone, should understand. I went all in to make sure you were mine alone. I thought you were someone incapable of these troublesome dalliances into morality. But don't fool yourself, you're still what you were then. It's only a some chemical twisting around in your skull that convinces you that somehow you've become a real mother. But it's all an illusion, a fantasy. Face it, Caroline, you're nothing more than an egg donor and eye candy.”

I'm getting bored so tip the bottle back right when there is a sharp crack. My coordination is off. I pull the bottle away from my mouth without tipping it up straight and more stuff gets on my pajamas but, pffft! who cares. Leaning forward, I try to peer out between the leaves of the hedge, but they keep moving around. It's weird because I don't feel a breeze. When I set the bottle down and put both hands on the ground, the leaves steady themselves and I can see between them.

There is a bright redness on my father's cheek where his beard doesn't grow. Blood is trickling from his nose. He ignores it. There is a cold fury in his eyes that makes me gasp. He hears and turns in my direction. He smiles, and I smile back. My mother is too terrified to notice anything but that terror. She leans back against the bar and stares at the floor.

While still looking at me, my father continues. “Caroline, Megan will be fine. In her, I see myself. I see immense intelligence, courage, and toughness. I see the strong will it takes to run a great company. With the right training, she'll make a history for herself beside which all others pale. She is everything, Caroline, that you could never be. She is the only good thing you have ever done.”

Mother sags but I peer deeper into his eyes, far beyond the terror that has cowed my mother and so many others. I see something that surges through me and thrills me more than anything anyone could ever put in a bottle. It's power with no limit and I feel a craving for it beyond all other things. Father turns and walks away, leaving behind a gaping hole in the universe where he had been standing.

The woman who birthed me searches along the bar, her face one of desperation, of weakness. Not seeing what she wants, she rips open a cupboard door and takes out another bottle of the goose. She opens it and tries to drink straight from the bottle but gags and spits it out. She sobs and tries again with the same result. The third time, she holds it down and a large part of the bottle's contents soon disappear down her throat.

Everything becomes clear and it hits me. The main ingredient of the bottles is a rot that ruins the heart and soul from the inside out. It leaves behind it a despicable shell, its effects obvious on the face of the woman before me.

Disgust mixes with the alcohol in my belly and turns it to acid. I arrange the two bottles side by side to forever remain in the hedge as a kind of headstone to the old me.

Within me is a power beyond that of all others but one. Tomorrow, and every day after, I will learn at the feet of that one and, someday, I too will tower above entire nations.

My mind made up, I curl up on the ground and drift off until, somewhere nearby, there is another splash, another scream.

But, this time, the scream is my own.

Megan The Target

I wake up from the scream grateful it stayed in my head. There have been times it was more and brought me security team running.

Something is still not right. I feel something . . . someone.

“Stay calm, M,” Harmony reminds me, *“think back to your training.”*

“Your eyes are not the only way to see,” Elin, my nanny, and bodyguard since I was a newborn, tells me. “Listen to your other senses, your instincts, that quiet voice you can only hear if you quiet the noises of fear and doubt.” I control my breathing and my mind quiets.

“Oh!”

I open my eyes into slits and see her crouched by a window near my bed and know this isn't a drill.

“That’s no paintball gun in her hand, M.”

I remain still, breathing controlled, eyes locked on her searching for any expression that might give me a clue about what's happening. I am in shadow, but she'll know I'm watching. She always knows.

Still scanning the grounds through a crack in the heavy drapes, Elin switches the pistol to her right hand, puts the index finger of her left to her lips, motions downward, palm toward the floor then brings it back up toward her.

I slip out of bed without a sound and stay as low as I can as I creep across the floor.

Once I'm beside her, she pulls me close and holds her lips to my ear. “Exterior sensors went dead. The estate's perimeter people have gone silent so whoever the bad guys are, they're close. Something's different this time. I'm worried that your father isn't the primary target. Get to The Sanctuary. Now.”

I hate this; leaving that my team but they have drilled it into my DNA that to question anyone of my protective team is to endanger all. To fight well they need to maneuver. If I remain out in the open, they will gather to my side to shield me.

In the bathroom, I cross the tile floor, lie on my back next to the toilet and punch a code into the number pad that hides in a recess in the back. Only I know the code. It will work only once. A small door slides open near the floor and at the end of a six-foot tunnel an LED light has come on. Cynthia, who is the disciplinarian of the team and well-earned the call sign Torch, has made me fear failure more than my claustrophobia and visions of her scowl carry me through the tunnel and into the safe room. At another number pad, I punch in a different code and the tunnel ceases to exist as a slab of reinforced concrete six feet thick slams into a pocket made for it in another six feet of concrete that is now my floor.

My isolation is complete, and I work hard to squeeze down the terror that threatens to crush me.

The Sanctuary is no sanctuary to my mind. I call it The Tomb because if they die; my team, the commanders of the 1st, 3rd, 107th and 721st legions that are stationed within ten minutes of the estate and my father, I'm living out the rest of my life in my grave. It's self-contained with enough food and water for a week. The air supply provided will last longer than that if I stay calm, lie on the cot and control my breathing. But if the worst happens, no one will know where I am. I will starve to death or die of dehydration if I observe the oxygen preservation protocols. I'd rather do what exercises I can in the small space until the oxygen is used up and go to sleep.

My training remains. Another code punched into the pad and the door of a box hanging beside it pops open. When I reach for the pistol inside I stop and stare. It's amazing how violently my hand is shaking.

"It's just a room, M."

"Yeah, you say that every time. Need I remind you that the tunnel stayed open through every drill and I still barely kept it together. How is this better?"

"You've done your part. Now let them do theirs. Think of them. Think of the people who are risking their lives to protect, as Cynthia loves to put it, Dein magerer Hintern?"

I laugh. Maybe it's just nerves. *"Torch's reference to my skinny butt notwithstanding, why do you always get her accent right. I never can."*

"Because you haven't learned how to think as a KSK Kommando Spezialkräfte."

"Right." I sit on the edge of the cot and begin thumbing the safety of the big 45 on off, on and off. Torch would chew me out for that.

* * *

Ninety-seven minutes. I know it's been that long because I've counted every one of them. I didn't want to, I told myself at the beginning to wait five minutes before checking the time. When I was sure it had been at least that long, I looked.

Sixty-seven seconds, just over a minute. Okay, I told myself, I'll wait three minutes. I can wait for three lousy minutes.

Fifty-three seconds.

I gave up, it's obvious to me that if anyone wants to live forever, they only need to lock themselves in a concrete box with a clock. Time grids like sandpaper on your brain.

At ninety-seven minutes and twenty-seven seconds, I pick up faint sounds in the crushing silence of my tomb. Drilling and then small, controlled detonations.

"Why has it taken so long?"

"I don't know, M."

"Why are they going so slow?"

"I don't know that either."

"I'm terrified at what I might find out there."

"Look on the bright side, M."

"There's a bright side?"

"Always."

"Okay. If it's the bad guys, they wouldn't be so careful, right? They'd just blast away."

"Meh, it's a theory."

"That's your idea of looking on the bright side?"

"I've changed my mind. I don't think there really is a bright side."

"Is this a joke?"

"Kinda. I'm trying to lighten the mood. Did it work?"

"No."

"Too bad. I fear that might be as close to a laugh as you're going to get for a while."

"Yeah, I know."

I check that my weapon is off safe. If it's the bad guys, I'm going to prove that I have been trained by the best, that all the time and effort my team has put into me, into toughening me up, has not been wasted.

My aim will be better if I force myself to relax my grip on the pistol...again, and I make a conscious effort to control my breathing...again.

After two hours of the sounds getting closer, the tapping begins. I focus on the taps and measure the pauses. The first one is my father's sequence.

My gut tightens, and I check that my weapon's off safe. No, wait. I did that already.

"Relax, M."

I resist the urge to pull the hammer all the way back. The tapping has changed.

"That's Torch's code! At least she's okay." I safe my weapon.

"I don't know, M. Something's not quite right."

"Okay, err on the side of caution." I ease the safety off again. So this is real tension, the kind where you are wound up so tight you can feel every sinew, every muscle, every bone.

Pieces of concrete begin to fall from the wall and a hole appears with my father's face framed within it.

"We'll have you out in a few minutes."

He pulls back, the hammering resumes and, a short time later, he steps through and stands before me.

"No wonder it took so long, M. He couldn't lower himself to crawl through a tunnel, they had to dig a thruway for his ego."

"I know what my father is." I don't move, just state, and he gets the hint.

"Is your pistol on safe?"

"Where's Torch?"

"Don't you trust me?"

Not moving, I continue to stare straight into his eyes. He smiles before looking over his shoulder.

"Baton Lock!"

Andrew Lock, call sign Dancer, is a mountain of a man and the guy Torch calls the crazy Aussie whose beer isn't half bad. Makes sense. He was Torch's backup and drilled with us. He's also been asking her out since the first day he saw her.

But every muscle, every thought in me is still wound tight, focused on my father, Dancer's watching me. He senses the tension even if he doesn't know its cause. He clears his throat once, a second time but louder.

I remember when nine years ago I gazed into the power that is my Father and worshiped him. It's different now, I've seen enough of what he is to know better than admire him. I feel the weight of the gun. I've got more power over him now than I've ever had, maybe ever will.

Dancer makes a slight move in my direction, nothing quick, and uses a voice meant to let me know who's in charge. "Give me your weapon, Knowles." I automatically respond to someone I regard as a deserving superior. I slide the safety on and hold out the pistol butt first.

"Aye, Baton." My eyes never leave my father's.

Dancer takes it, pops the clip out and puts it in a vest pocket then clears the round from the chamber. I still stare at my father and Dancer tries again.

"Torch made me repeat her code three times like I didn't have it down pat after all those practice sessions." The smile has none of the positive, happy Aussie in it. "Only then would she let them take her into surgery. She says she'll be fine." There's a tremor in his voice that makes

me break eye contact with my father to look at my superior. Dancer pauses, swallows. There's more, but he's going to wait.

Father shows his impatience, checking his watch with an exaggerated snap of his wrist. He's probably formulating a plan to take advantage of what happened here today, something that will need coordination between PR and Marketing. Whatever the cost finance won't like it. Yada, yada.

"They should surgically implant a watch in his brain, Harm."

"I think he already has one. He's only checking now to see if he needs to get a better watch."

The thought uncoils a spring in me half a notch and I decide to move things along. I smile and glance at my father hoping my face isn't betraying my 'I'm on to you' feelings. Still saying nothing I look back at Dancer, trying to get answers to questions that will have to wait.

With a last look at his watch, Father turns, "You take care of her, Lock." At the entrance to the tunnel, he turns to look at me, "When you have quite recovered your wits, come to see me in my office."

"Yes sir," I answer, my eyes still on Dancer. The pain I see on his face, in his posture, is terrifying. He glances down the opening in the wall and, seeing no one, sits beside me. Swift had been requesting an increase in the size of my protective team and Dancer had been on her short list to join us so I trust him. He hands the pistol, magazine and loose round back to me.

"Take care of your weapon, Knowles."

"Aye, Baton." Hearing a command from someone who has it together helps a lot. I slap the clip in and rack a round into the chamber, safe the weapon but keep it cocked because the 1911 style automatic doesn't have a rebounding hammer. Then I drop the clip, top it with the loose round, slam it in back in the butt of the pistol and put it in the box on the wall, making sure the door is locked. Then I turn with my hands behind my back. This stuff I know. In knowledge is safety.

"Prepare yourself, Megan, it got ugly." He's trying to find the voice of command, for the sake of discipline, and compassion, for the sake of humanity, all at the same time. It's not easy. "Swift is critical, and Torch probably is but she wouldn't let me stay long enough to find out. Five of your team didn't make it and Elin's not probably not going to make it out of surgery. Her sister is waiting for me to bring you to the family medical center downstairs. Swift and Torch have been taken to the estate hospital."

Colin, who loved old TV shows and changed his call sign to Barney after I started calling him that.

Carl, call sign Joker, Colin's best friend, and perpetual prankster.

Susan, call sign Pinks, the short one of astounding physical strength with the dazzling smile who could outshoot everyone on the team but Torch and who blushed so easily whenever her husband turned his adoring eyes to her and affected a French accent to say 'très magnifique'.

John, call sign Ax, with the narrow face and intense eyes who terrified everyone who didn't know how funny he was or about his volunteer time at animal shelters and who had finally convinced his Pinks to marry him a year ago.

And Darlene, call sign Shyness, who preferred to stay in the background but, having been raised in Quebec, found Ax's lame attempts to sound French grating on her ears. 'Votre supposé

dire c'est magnifique, vous brute!' she would say to which everyone else at a team meeting would say 'yeah, it's c'est, not très, you brute!' and laugh uproariously while Shyness tried to suppress a smile and Pink's coloring grew deeper.

And Elin. Always there, never doubting me but always watching just in case. She had been my mother's best friend. It had been Elin who found the body and broke the news to me because Father was closing the deal with the Chinese. And it had been she who recruited Angela from the South African branch of Protective Force, with its roots in the Recce, and Cynthia from Germany with a heritage steeped in the KSK. Together, the three of them had to agree before anyone else was allowed to join the team. My team. The team that had been destroyed while protecting me.

I'm frozen, every part of me has stopped functioning. I try to discern a heartbeat but can't pick it up through the paralysis. My lungs scream at me and I take a breath. Dancer studies me and keeps his voice steady even though his guts have got to be in a knot.

"Torch said to repeat these words exactly, 'Spargletarzan, Elin will need to know you are okay. Do your duty dünner Hintern.' She said you would know what that means."

"She calls me Asparagus Tarzan because I was so skinny as a kid and she is telling me to get my skinny butt in gear. Elin needs me."

I heave myself into the tunnel. At the other end, I stop and stare at the floor.

Dancer catches up and places a huge hand on my shoulder. "Shield's instincts were correct, you were the primary target. The bulk of the assault team, something over 250 men, attacked the main part of the mansion but a small team of about 50 lagged behind and veered off to your wing. It's a good thing you were in The Sanctuary or you probably wouldn't be with us anymore. Once your team knew you were safe, they unleashed all kinds of hell on those guys and all of them are dead. If you had not obeyed orders, Knowles, they could not have been as effective. As it is, nobody in the world could have done better. They loved you." He sighed. "And one another."

My eyes alternate between the two bodies I don't recognize, one with his neck at an odd angle, and the pool of blood between them. "Shield was waiting back here by the tunnel," Dancer continues. "The first one she dropped with that big 45 of hers, like the one she gave you, but the second guy shot her in the shoulder and she lost her weapon. His next shot caught her full in the chest, but she was on him before he could get off another shot and broke his neck with her good arm before she collapsed. There's more." He leads me into the bedroom where there's another body I don't recognize.

"They were good. We're pretty sure they were all Russian Spetsnaz. The dead guys in the bathroom did their job well and there was no one left between this guy and you. The Explosive Ordinance Disposal people removed from him a miniature nuclear device like the Davy Crockett the United States developed during the Cold War for their nuclear recoil-less rifle, the kind you put on a tripod that looks like a little cannon. It was a shaped charge of about 75 pounds that would have destroyed the mansion but, to make sure, would've shot a stream of plasma through the concrete walls of The Sanctuary and turned the inside of it into a white-hot furnace, incinerating you. Your father must be putting serious pressure on the guys in the Kremlin for them to mount something like this."

"Who stopped this guy, Dancer?" He turns his head at the sound of command in my voice. He outranks me big time and he only studies me for a moment before answering.

“Carl and Colin were a bloody mess so the bad guys figured they had it made. The first mistake, never assume a Protective Force Baton of any rank is dead until the cremation. They came charging in here to finish the job. Impatience, second mistake and they ran into Shield. In the meantime, Colin came to, crawled through your sitting room to the door and dropped this guy. It’s the last thing he ever did Knowles, think of you and Shield. We moved his body out into the hall. Sorry for all the blood but there hasn’t been time to clean up. When you get out in the hall, do not lift either of the sheets, understood? I want no misunderstandings here about who’s in charge.”

Right. For now. Nodding my head, I whisper, “Aye, Baton.”

Stepping from my suite, it’s easy for me to pick out which heap of sheet and blood is Colin. His hand is exposed and the ring I gave him with the single golden bullet surrounded by black onyx stares back at me. His Barney ring. I never saw him without it from the day I gave it to him.

There is a war going on within me between the command of self and others I will need if I’m ever going to move up in The Company and the feelings I have for others that could get in the way of those ambitions. I kneel and reach out for the ring but stop. Is it sacrilege, a desecration?

Dancer gets it and kneels beside me, removes the ring, takes my hand in his and puts the ring in my palm before closing my fingers over it. “He wore it proudly and called you his little sister. He’d want you to keep it and remember the family who proved today how much they loved you.”

I think of my father. I hate the man but love the power he has.

“Right,” I say aloud. I slide the ring onto my thumb, stand and stride to the elevator without looking back.

In the elevator, I push the button for the sub-basement and place my hand on the palm reader while holding the door for Dancer. He’s watching me with a question on his face but I don’t have time to search for answers I’ll never find.

I don’t notice the beeps the elevator makes as we pass each floor and, mysteriously, the doors open an instant after they closed. Anne, Elin’s sister, is waiting and hugs me because she always hugs. It’s in her fiber to give long warm hugs meant to reach in and encircle you, body and soul. I try to return her affection but it’s meaning is lost to me. It’s somewhere out there in the expanse that is other people’s emotions, not mine.

“You’ll be okay now,” Dancer says, “I’ve got to get to the main hospital to check on Cynthia.” He pushes one of the elevator buttons and the door starts to close. The words echo in my mind.

“Skinny butt!”

I reach out a hand and stop the elevator doors. “Dancer, someone with both of them 24/7. Swift had a list in the top left drawer of her desk. Your name is on it. It’s a list of people she would recruit if Father ever gave permission to increase the size of the team. Pick as many as you think necessary. I want updates of any changes.”

He almost laughs through the pain. “Already taken care of.”

I let the doors close and turn for the operating room.