



SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 6 >

2:00 a.m. to 4:16 a.m.

1600 Pennsylvania Avenue

Boone pulled the motor coach up to one of the security gates of the White House. It was two in the morning. While Mom and Roger, my new stepfather, packed their overnight bags in the master bedroom, Boone gestured me and Angela to the front of the coach.

“Buddy T. and the band are staying at the Willard Hotel two blocks away,” he explained quietly. “I’ll be at Blair House right across the street from here. The SOS team will be close by. Not that you’ll be in any danger inside the White House. It’s probably the most secure building in the world.”

“Why do you think my moth—” Angela stopped herself. “Malak wanted us to come down here?”

“I’m sure she’ll let us know when she’s ready,” Boone said. “Under no circumstances, and I mean this, are you to disable or turn off your BlackBerrys. We’re past all that. You can’t ditch us again like you did in Philadelphia. We need to know exactly where you are every second of the day from now on. Is that understood?”

Angela and I nodded.

“I’ll be in constant touch with you either by phone, text message, or e-mail. And I expect you to do the same.”

Again Angela and I nodded.

Roger and Mom came out of the bedroom with small overnight bags. They were tired after their concert at the Electric Factory in Philadelphia a few hours earlier, but excited.

“Do you have everything?” Mom asked me.

I gave her a smile and showed her my day pack, which was in a lot better shape than the ratty pack on Angela’s shoulder.

“Let’s go see the president,” Roger said.

I doubted President J. R. Culpepper was going to be greeting us at 2:00 a.m. at the security gate. And I was right. We walked up to the gate and were met by a man and a woman dressed in business suits with big smiles on their faces. They looked like public relations people, but the earpieces in their right ears and the microphones clipped to their shirt cuffs gave them away. They were with the Secret Service. I wondered if they had known Angela’s mother, and if Roger and Angela were wondering the same thing.

“I’m glad you were able to make it down here on such short notice,” the woman said. “You must be exhausted.”

“We’ll have to run you through a little security check before we let you in,” the man said, “but it will only take a couple of minutes.”

It took more than a couple of minutes.

Uniformed Secret Service officers checked our identification against the computer they had in the guard station, gave our

bags a quick search, then ran the bags through an X-ray machine. We walked through a metal detector. I was the last to go, and this is why it took more than a couple of minutes. I had forgotten to empty my pockets.

A security guy handed me a little tray. “You can empty your pockets into this.”

No, I couldn’t.

I had six pockets. I always wear cargo pants (cargo shorts in the summer). I pulled out four decks of cards. Three lengths of rope. Silk hankies. Seven magic coins. One BlackBerry. Flashlight. Camera. Sunglasses. Baseball cap. *Goldfinger* by Ian Fleming (paperback). My Leatherman tool (the security guy confiscated it—like I was going to stab or pinch the president of the United States with tweezers—but I guess you can’t be too careful). A stack of “special” dollar bills.

“Good grief!” the security guy said.

Four and a half trays later I removed the final item—an origami crane folded from a yellow McDonald’s cheeseburger wrapper.

“That’s mine!” Angela said. “You made it for me.”

“I borrowed it back.”

It took me longer to put everything back in than it did to take it out because each item had its special place. The only thing that didn’t make it back into a pocket (aside from the Leatherman) was the origami crane. Angela grabbed it from the tray while they were wandering me.

“You’re all set to go,” the man in the suit said.

“We are very excited to have you here,” the woman said. “I simply love your music.”

“Thank you,” Mom said.

“The president has put you and Roger in the Lincoln Bedroom, on the second floor,” the woman told Mom.

“Really,” Roger said flatly.

I think it had just dawned on him that he was going to spend the night in a place where his (presumably) dead wife, Malak Tucker, had spent so much time guarding the last president.

“Where are Q and Angela sleeping?” Mom asked enthusiastically, not yet aware of Roger’s mood shift.

“They’ll be down the hall in the residential quarters,” the woman said. “Their bedrooms are not as historically significant, but they are very nice rooms right next door to each other. You can all sleep in tomorrow. The president and his daughter Bethany have a brunch planned for you at eleven, but if you get hungry before then, all you have to do is call the kitchen and they’ll bring whatever you want to your rooms. The kitchen is open twenty-four hours a day.”

Whatever I want. Twenty-four hours a day.

I was going to order a platter of food with no vegetable matter on it whatsoever.

After a brief tour, Angela and I left Mom and the glum Roger in the Lincoln Bedroom and followed the woman to our bedrooms, which were great. I said good night to Angela, put on my pajamas, and crawled into the biggest and most comfortable bed I had ever slept in. I thought about testing the whatever-whenever-I-want kitchen by ordering a vanilla milkshake and a chili dog before going to sleep, but decided to wait until I woke up.

I closed my eyes, thinking that J. R. Culpepper, the most powerful man in the world, the commander in chief of the United States, aka POTUS, was probably only a few yards away, snoring.

I fell asleep with a smile on my face, but I wasn’t asleep long. I woke to a light tapping on my door and Angela slipping into my room before I was able to sit up.

“What’s the matter?” I asked groggily.

“I just got a text message from Malak,” she said.

I turned on the light and read the short message on Angela’s BlackBerry. I was suddenly wide awake and out of bed. “Did you call Boone?”

“I forwarded the text to him,” Angela said. “He wrote right back and said that he would be in touch.”

“That’s all?”

Angela nodded.

“Did you text Malak back?”

“Yes, but I doubt she got it. She probably destroyed her cell phone right after she sent the text.”

I wondered how much money cell phone manufacturers made on terrorist cells.

“What should we do?” I asked.

“Wait,” Angela said.

Angela sat in one of the chairs. I sat on the edge of the bed.

“Have you been here before?” I asked.

“When I was little,” Angela answered. “The former president had a dinner for the families of his Secret Service detail. There was a tour, but I was too young to remember

much about it. We weren't allowed up to the living quarters, I know that."

"So, Roger's been here too," I said.

"Yes. I don't think he realized where we were actually staying until we pulled up at the gate. He was still aglow from the concert in Philly."

"Buddy T. warned him about that," I said.

"He warned him about staying at the White House?"

"No. He warned him before they went out on tour about the high he'd be on after a performance."

"I remember," Angela said.

Buddy T. was our parents' pugnacious, irritating, arrogant but usually right manager. Before we left San Francisco, Buddy T. said that if he could find a way to bottle the high Mom and Roger were going to get on tour in front of the fans, he'd be the richest man on earth.

"Even my mom was jacked up," I said. "Can't blame them. They did the *Today* show, *Oprah*, and then performed at the Electric Factory last night. That's a lot of attention in one day—actually, in one life. If that had happened to my real dad he probably wouldn't have remembered he had a son if I were standing right in front of him."

"He'd recognize you," Angela said.

I shook my head. Angela had never met my biological father. His name was Peter "Speed" Paulsen. The nickname came about because he could pick guitar strings faster than any human alive. Speed was also the name of his band, which Mom used to sing with before I came along. Oh, and my dad is crazy, which is one of the reasons Mom left the band and

raised me on a sailboat moored in Sausalito, California.

"My point is that Roger and Mom are going to be zoning out on us from time to time, and there's nothing we, or they, can do about it," I said to Angela.

I was kind of jacked up too. I got up and started pacing, expecting Boone to call any moment, but he didn't. Instead there was another knock on my door. I opened it.

Standing in the hallway was a very serious and alert (considering the time of morning) Secret Service agent.

"The president would like to see you both in the Oval Office," he said.

"Now?" I asked. It was 3:00 a.m.

He gave a curt nod.

"Maybe we should change," I said.

"You're fine," the agent said. "He's waiting. Follow me."

I put on my robe and stepped into my tennis shoes.

Angela and I were going to meet the president of the United States in our pj's.