

REDEMPTION

AFTERMATH *of* THE SIMON TRILOGY



SALLY FERNANDEZ

Redemption
Aftermath of
The Simon Trilogy

A Novel

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DUNHAM

books

“The government’s view of the economy can be summed up in a few short phrases: If it moves, tax it. If it keeps moving, regulate it. And if it stops moving, subsidize it.”

– Ronald Reagan

PROLOGUE

Simon Hall, a notorious terrorist, also known as Mohammed al-Fadl, jumped to his death off the Peace Bridge in Buffalo, New York on April 3, 2017.

A national disaster of gargantuan proportions had been averted.

Twenty-two years earlier, Simon filled a different role as the self-appointed leader of a group of Harvard scholars calling themselves *La Fratellanza* or *The Brotherhood*. These extraordinarily brilliant men had devised a thesis that began as an intellectual game. Later it morphed into a real-life experience with the presidential election of Abner Baari. Then, five months before the end of his second term, Baari resigned in disgrace and fled the country. No one could have foreseen the consequences or its ramifications, especially this group of literati.

The death of Simon brought no closure—for another crisis loomed with the U.S. government reporting the national debt at a staggering \$22 trillion. Although, several economists believed that number to be a gross miscalculation by leaving out certain unfunded liabilities. By factoring in government loan guarantees, deposit insurance, and actions taken by the Federal Reserve, as well as the cost of other government trust funds, the total amount the government owed was, more likely, a staggering \$70 trillion. Now, with entitlement programs on the verge of becoming insolvent, foreclosures again on the rise, and social unrest continuing to permeate the airwaves, the U.S. braced herself once again. At the same time, a crisis of confidence in the newly elected president

had become problematic; the stagnant unemployment rate and massive debt were about to become unsustainable; the threat of an economic collapse was imminent.

1

HAIL TO THE CHIEF

A dark cloud cast a shadow over Washington, D.C., but it was insignificant when viewed against the massive gray sky that loomed over the country. With April temperatures fluctuating between 85 degrees one day and 50 degrees the next, coupled with torrential downpours, a state of gloom and malaise seized the American public.

Granted, Simon Hall was dead to the relief of many, and the national electric grid remained operational despite the constant threats. But the stagnant economy and a job market with no predictable improvement in sight presented a herculean challenge for President Randall Post in his first few months in office.

The weather was of little consequence.

The country, coming off the heels of a world recession, was destined to head back down that slippery slope. The president needed to act. He had retained a slight majority in the House and in the Senate, but it left the opposition enough muscle to oppose any sweeping legislation. There were no guarantees, but it afforded President Post two years to try to turn the country around before the off-year elections—but the country could not wait two years.



The clock read five minutes of two. Noble Bishop, the director of the States Intelligence Agency, needed only three minutes to walk down

the stairs to arrive at the Oval Office. That gave him two minutes to wonder what the president's urgent request entailed.

"Go in; he's waiting," the president's secretary announced as Noble rounded the corridor.

Seconds later, Noble found himself locked in the customary handshake. "Mr. President."

"Thanks for coming down on such short notice," the President greeted him. Then, seeming more officious than usual, he motioned Noble to the sofa on the left. "Have a seat." The president remained standing.

Noble readied himself for the unexpected.

"You're a smart guy," the President continued, offering a slight smile. Then he asked, "What have you found to be the number-one concern of the American people?"

Noble was surprised by the rather simple question, considering it was the topic dominating the national conversation. He offered the logical answer. "Jobs, sir."

"Hmm, I asked my twelve-year-old niece the same question, and she gave that exact answer. Precocious and quite mature for her age, she persisted and asked, 'Uncle Randall, you're the president; can't you fix it?' I promised the sweet child that I would do everything in my power to resolve the problem."

After his pronouncement, the president walked over to the other sofa and sat down opposite Noble. Then, while he maintained unsettling eye contact, the conversation took an even odder twist. He began to deliver what sounded like a State of the Union Address from his seated position.

"Our nation's economy continues to be unstable and a weak economy threatens our national security. In the last two months alone, there have been massive layoffs, witnessed by the streaming picket lines of unemployed workers protesting against their companies. And when they're not railing out against their employers, they're protesting against the newly amnestied immigrants, fearing their own government subsidies are in jeopardy. Social unrest is spreading across the country."

Noble was well aware that the president had inherited an untenable situation, but was saddened that the president spoke as though he was personally responsible. At that moment, for some inexplicable reason, an unattributed quotation popped into Noble's head. "Sir, someone once said, 'War is when the government tells you who the bad guy is;

revolution is when you decide that for yourself. I hope that's not what we are facing."

The president cocked his head. "Clearly, the citizens have already attributed their woes to the bad guy—their government." He stopped and looked straight at Noble with an unusually painful expression. "The country is divided; her mere existence is in peril. As I told my niece, I would do everything in my power to resolve the problem. There are a multitude of options to consider, but to be utterly honest; I'm not sure where to start. After a brutal election, partisan politics have reached their apex. The past Congress, incapable of stopping the bleeding, perpetuated the problem. And the freshly elected Congress has yet to make the difficult choices." The president paused for a moment and then lamented, "I've become the Commander in Chief of Triage. With all the government resources at my disposal, I still can't see a clear way out of this crisis. And most indeed it can't be resolved with the swipe of a pen!"

"Sir, unfortunately, the crisis doesn't stop at our borders," Noble said, referring to the ongoing crisis in the Middle East and the increase of radicalism throughout the world.

The president seemed not to take note; his focus was on the domestic front for the moment. Then, he abruptly backed away from his earlier self-recrimination and returned to his usual stoic presidential mode.

Noble noticed that the president glanced toward the American flag, positioned behind his desk. He assumed the president was contemplating his next statement. Then without warning, he redirected his eye contact to Noble.

"Our unemployment rate has flatlined at six-point-five percent, notwithstanding the staggering number of people who continue to drop out of the workforce and become dependent on the government. Today, one third of eligible workers have been unemployed for more than a year. That's one of the dynamics that caused the Great Depression." His decisive statement was coupled with great unease. He continued, "People once again are defaulting on their loans, and with energy costs soaring, the middle class is barely able to sustain its lifestyle. As a direct result, the embattled housing market is bracing for another moment of truth—the likes of the 2008 crash."

"If we continue to sashay down this path the economy will become *unsustainable*," Noble stated with emphasis, signaling that he understood the gravity of the situation.

Satisfied at Noble's grasp of the situation, the president nodded and then continued in the same vein, quoting numerous statistics to

support his premise. Then, he cited another grave concern. “After three years, the country is still recovering from the influx of one hundred and fifty thousand immigrants arriving from Central America in 2014, increasing pain to the already suffering. Added to the mix was the induction of twenty million more illegal immigrants that needed to be prepared to stand in the so-called *path to citizenship*. The entire process has put a terrible strain on state governments and the taxpayers. The language barrier alone adds to the tension. Noble, we are about to ride the killer wave in a perfect storm. God willing, we’ll come out on the other side.”

“Sir, we are all grateful that you were able to gain approval to reallocate funds to seal the border at long last.”

“We’re not home free yet—but we are getting closer. Increased border security will have to suffice in the interim until we find permanent solutions. But the processing and deportation have been an exhaustive administrative nightmare. The costs are untold.” The president let out a noticeable sigh before readjusting his seat. Then he confessed, “You’ll never hear me speak about this outside these walls, but had Baari gone to the table with comprehensive immigration reform, it would have saved the taxpayers billions of dollars. His end run around Congress, directing the Department of Homeland Security to ignore deportation, was unconscionable. But the final blow was the sweeping amnesty provisions he neatly wrapped up in an executive order. In the final analysis, he chose to abdicate his responsibility for leadership and turned it over to the governors and state taxpayers to bear the burden.”

Noble continued to listen intently but felt distraught at the president’s even bleaker assessment that followed.

“We are standing on the edge of the precipice and run the risk of falling into a depression. It would create insurmountable damage not only to the country but to the world economy,” he stated, as though it were a personal default on a promise. The concern resonated in his voice. “In the eyes of the people, the makeup of the new Congress makes no difference. Confidence in the government as a whole has been lost. The people see the legislative branch and the executive branch as still being polarized, not able to shake off the rhetoric from the last eight years that divided the nation.”

The president stopped. The room became eerily silent, adding to Noble’s discomfort. Then he redirected the conversation back to the prior administration and alleged, “The information that spewed out of the White House from my predecessor seemed to take a circuitous

route, directing the citizens away from the truth.” He noted a few scandals to make his point, emphasizing Benghazi, Bergdahl, and NSA, IRS, DOJ, among other jumbled letters. Then, sounding more like his fighting, spirited self, he became most emphatic and announced, “The American citizens deserve better! I must regain their trust!” -

After a few more statements in a similar vein, it appeared that the president was about to wind down the conversation—leaving Noble even more confused as to why he was summoned in the first place. For certain, the sweeping change in the tenor of the conversation had left him flummoxed. But before he departed the Oval Office, the discussion would take another curious route.

“Did you enjoy your prior position as research analyst at the CIA?” the president asked.

Noble, taken aback by the question, responded instinctively. “There are times I miss the simplicity of the role, sir—relatively speaking.”

The president offered no reaction to his answer. But then the actual purpose of the meeting unfolded. Over a ten-minute period, the president made a series of requests and then posed the ultimate question. “Can you do this?”

Noble took a deep breath and then replied, “Yes, sir. It can be done!” It was the only acceptable response.

After a few hurried pleasantries, Noble left the Oval Office, carrying more questions than answers.

It was not an agenda he could have anticipated.

2

CALL TO ARMS

Noble trekked back up the stairs to his office, contemplating the situation along the way. Then he readied himself. As he entered his reception area, he exclaimed, “Fine!” without giving Doris the opportunity to ask the inevitable question.

She was predictable. For years, his secretary had asked the same question each time he returned from the Oval Office. “How did it go with POTUS?” had become her mantra.

In response to his outburst, Doris just rolled her eyes and refocused on the keyboard.

In that particular moment, he was in no mood for chitchat. And truth be known, there was nothing *fine* at all about his conversation with the President of the United States.

“Doris, hold my calls,” he ordered as he headed into his office.

Before even reaching his desk, Noble hurriedly opened his famed xPhad, a combination smartphone that transformed into a tablet. Although it was somewhat thicker than an iPhone, when unfolded the tablet became the identical thickness as the iPad; it was a device essential to his day-to-day activities. Now, seated at his desk, he began to use the stylus to doodle on the tablet as he reviewed in his mind the gist of the meeting. Then, after firmly collecting his thoughts, he started to dissect point-by-point the issues the president had addressed. As Noble continued to mull over the series of questions that had been raised, he was overcome by the same trepidation that the president had projected.

One question in particular caused him to reflect on Hamilton Scott, his predecessor. It was a time when Hamilton had plucked him out of the CIA and coaxed him to join the SIA. Fatefully, it had thrust Noble into a case that required him to interrogate his former classmates from Harvard, the infamous members of La Fratellanza. In some ways, he was affected as well, despite the fact that he had refused to become part of the illicit group. Certainly, after the death of Hamilton, he was pulled into a life-changing game of cat and mouse with Simon Hall, challenged to track him down and bring him to justice; three times he had failed. Without foresight, he had been robbed of the opportunity. It all came to an end with Simon's grand leap off the Peace Bridge.

The conversation with the president had also dredged up memories of the years spent in the hunt for Simon and of the final words Simon left in a message on that fateful day. Noble could still picture vividly the last sentence that read, "Act Three has yet to begin—watch out." That statement continued to haunt him to this day. *This is no time to resurrect the past*, he thought fleetingly, until he quickly admonished himself. *The answer will have to wait*. He shrugged.

With stylus once again in hand, he continued to jot down a few more points. Then he reached for the phone and made the first of his calls.



Secret Service Agent Stanton hung up his phone, mildly curious as to the reason for all the secrecy. Although, the SIA director had said that the orders came from the president. It was not his job to question, only to obey orders. Of all people, he understood protocol, having been a major in the U.S. Army's Special Forces. And he trusted Noble. Had it not been for his recommendation, Stanton would not be heading up the president's Secret Service detail. It was then that Major Stanton proudly traded in his medals and uniform for the standard black suit and earpiece.

Stanton first met the director during Operation NOMIS, an operation tasked with entering an underground encampment south of the Dugway Proving Ground in Utah. The mission was to capture Simon inside the encampment where they suspected he was hiding. Noble's deputy director, Maxine Ford, was in charge of the initial operation, at which time she was badly bruised in an explosion that killed two soldiers. The next day Major Stanton met Max. At first,

sparks flew as they stepped on each other's turf; then the sparks took on a different meaning. Not surprisingly, Stanton moved to Washington a short time thereafter—and not for purely professional reasons.

From the onset, Stanton and Max recognized that their respective professions could create tension from time to time in their personal relationship. But he was grateful that Max had top-secret security clearance and was familiar with most of the Secret Service assignments. Unquestionably, it made their time together easier and generated many lively discussions. Later that evening, Stanton was scheduled to meet Max at the Blackfinn American Saloon, a watering hole for the politicians inside the beltway. It was their usual go-to spot before deciding where to head for dinner. For the first time, Stanton would not be able to discuss his latest assignment—an assignment that was beyond even Max's purview.

3

STRANGER IN THE NIGHT

Max rushed out of the White House and into the pouring rain. “Shit,” she uttered as she retrieved her umbrella. Then she sprinted the typically nine-minute walk to meet Stanton, all the while trying to avoid the taxis that managed to splash through most of the puddles on the street.

Fortunately, Stanton didn’t notice her bursting through the front door at the Blackfinn, nor the fact that she was running late. Unaware, he sat at the end of the bar nursing his beer. Without delay, she removed her soggy raincoat and hung it on the last of the empty wall hooks. Then she tiptoed over and playfully slid her arms around him from behind. Stanton jerked his body forward, apparently surprised by her arrival.

“Hey babe, I told you not to do that,” he cautioned, and then little by little softened his lips into a smile.

“Sorry. I know!” Max admitted, wrinkling her nose. She hated it when she fell out of character, and it was a trait that was occurring with some frequency as of late. Despite the fact, she was well aware of the pitfalls of their professions and knew to stay vigilant. The whole relationship thing was still very confusing—a concept she would admit only to herself. More often than not she would question her behavior and confess to herself, “If this is what love does to you—I’m not sure I want any part of it.” Embarrassed at her *faux pas*, she immediately changed the subject. “You seemed deep in thought. Is everything okay with the big guy?”

"Everything is fine. POTUS has been staying pretty close to home these days. I think, in part, he wants to assure the public that he's at the helm, trying to stem the economic crisis."

"Why does everyone keep bringing up the economic crisis?" she carped, annoyed by the perpetual chant.

Stanton ignored her slight distraction. "On a happy note, it keeps me in Washington close to you." Considerably more at ease, he moved in, but was able to manage only a kiss on the cheek. Without niggling, he asked, "What can I get you?"

"The usual." Max sat up on the bar stool and began to tackle the potato-chip bowl.

"Hungry?"

"Not really. Sorry I'm late; I was wrapping up a few cases. So what are you working on?" she asked, throwing a question back at him.

"You mean other than keeping the president safe?"

"When the rooster is in the roost, you must have other duties?"

"Max, what's going on? You're aware of what I do."

"Nothing. I guess I can't decide what to talk about tonight."

"We could go to your place. I'm sure we can find something to do that doesn't require talking." Stanton reached over to pull Max closer but she jolted backward.

"Now who's pulling away?"

Max had just viewed a figure entering the door at the front end of the bar. "See that guy? The one who just walked in, the one in the hoodie and dark glasses."

"Yeah."

"I saw him a few days ago at the supermarket. Yesterday, he was at the bus stop when I was walking to work. I had this weird sensation that he was following me."

Stanton, without hesitation, stood up.

"Sit down!" she ordered brusquely.

"I'm going over to speak with him," Stanton insisted.

"I can handle this, Agent. Let it go for now—maybe I'm imagining things!"

"Max, this doesn't sound like you. The Max I know would have pinned his face against the wall."

"I'll be on my guard. I promise. Can we change the subject, please?"

"Do you think you could find a subject you would like to discuss?" Stanton was becoming frustrated, and he didn't need a fight at that moment. "Look, you seem tired. Finish your beer and I'll walk you home."

Max glared at him.

"I'll leave as soon as you are safe inside your front door."

"I'm sorry. You're right. Let's call it a night."

Stanton flagged the bartender for the tab.

Max glanced over toward the front door.

The hooded figure was gone.

38

THE AUTOPSY

“Max, I hear you’re sitting in on this one?”
“Yes, Doc. I’m a glutton for punishment. What have you found so far?”

“Well, based on the height, bone structure, and natural hair color, along with the clothing and the bullet hole, described in the crime scene report—I’d say it’s your guy—I’d say it’s Simon Hall.”

“C’mon Doc,” she said suspiciously. “You’d never settle for such skimpy evidence.”

“You’ve been hanging out with the stiffes and me too long, Max,” he teased. “As you can see, there’s been a lot of decomp, especially in the facial region. A few animals certainly left with their bellies full.”

“But why the face? What animal is smart enough to only attack that part of the body?”

“Glad you asked. I was curious as well and scaled off whatever skin sample I could locate. It showed high traces of rabbit urine.”

“Rabbit urine?”

“Yes, it’s the major attraction for coyotes and is often used to bait them.”

“Coyotes? The corpse was found in the lake region.”

“You and I seem to be on the same wavelength. I checked it out. Evidently, in southern Ontario, they’re having a huge problem with coyotes coming out of the forest and into the towns looking for food. Coyotes normally have a keen sense of smell and the faint human scent doesn’t alarm them. They tend not to engage.”

"Except for this poor guy. So you're telling me he died somehow. Then a rabbit pissed on him, and then a coyote ate him. What a way to go."

"Max, I would say, based on the urine content of my samples, some human sprayed this guy deliberately."

"You think to destroy his identity?"

"You got it. The fact that there is no water or other fluids present in the lungs also proves he didn't drown. Most likely he was killed and left where he was found."

"So if this is Simon's corpse, it happened weeks ago. Therefore, he would have been exposed to the external elements for a period of time."

"And being dehydrated it also made the dactyloscopy difficult."

"The what?" Max winced.

"Fingerprint analysis, my dear."

"Okay, but not impossible." She didn't like the expression on his face, with or without his use of a fancy word. And without the corpse's face, she needed a fingerprint.

"I was able to rehydrate the right thumb and retrieve a fairly usable print, but it's useless."

"I don't understand."

"Our corpse had a severe case of pitted keratolysis. It's a bacterial virus that attacks various extremities, but primarily affects the feet. However, in extreme cases, it can affect the fingertips, rendering them useless for identification."

"I'm still confused. There would be some pattern to go by."

"They're useless because the pitting of the skin changes the circular and longitudinal patterns on the fingertips over time. Therefore, there is no consistent pattern. I'd say this guy worked in a profession that required rubber gloves. They're usually responsible for providing a breeding ground as the hands sweat. Not exactly Simon's sort of profession."

Her heart sank as she let out a huge breath and asked, "Doc, are you sure? What about dental records?"

"You're grasping, Max—look for yourself; they're all destroyed. The only hope we have is to run a DNA test. But we'll need a sample of Simon's DNA for comparison. Can you get me the DNA samples they took from him when he was processed at the Draper Prison?"

Max was becoming more distressed by the moment. "Forget it..."

The coroner cut in. "What's the problem?"

"The warden was ordered to place Simon in maximum security

immediately upon arrival and to bypass the indoctrination process, until Noble had an opportunity to interrogate him. That would have included fingerprint and DNA evidence, except he escaped the next day.”

“Oops,” the coroner replied. “In that case, Max—there’s even more troubling news.”

“Don’t do this to me.”

“It’s the gunshot wound that doesn’t make sense. Look here.” The coroner pointed to the bullet hole a few inches above the left kneecap.

“That’s where Simon was shot.”

“I know—according to the crime scene report. Noble stated that he saw Simon limp on his left leg as he headed to the side of the bridge, leaving a blood trail along the way.”

“Exactly, right after he was shot.”

“If he was shot by the agent as described in the report, the trajectory of the bullet would have entered in this direction.” The coroner held up his pen horizontally.

Max was confused as to where he was heading, but she listened with great interest.

“The bullet in this corpse entered in this direction, upward.” He once again held up his pen, but that time vertically and at a ten-degree angle. “The bullet that entered this guy pierced his femoral artery. He bled out instantly. There’s no way he could have limped anywhere.”

“So you are saying you’re a hundred percent sure this is not Simon?”

“I’m not saying Simon is not dead; I’m just saying this is not your guy.”

Max looked over toward the grotesque remains of what once was a man. His distorted body stretched out immodestly on the metal table pushed her mind into overdrive. “Hey Doc, isn’t it possible that the bullet didn’t hit the artery at first, but the impact of hitting the water caused the bullet to dislodge and that’s when it severed the artery?”

“Highly improbable.”

“But possible! Come on; after a hundred-foot drop?”

“It’s possible,” he allowed, “but I have grave doubts.” He smiled, knowing she would catch the double entendre.

“Cute, Doc, but we have the bullet and the one you pulled out of Abner Baari’s skull. See if they match.”

Only a select group of people had knowledge of how the former president Abner Baari died, including Max and the coroner. Even President Post was not informed, in order to protect him should the truth ever leak. The public was told that Baari had died of a heart attack

shortly after returning to the States to visit his wife and daughter. The former First Lady and senator, Maryann Townsend, knowing the full story, agreed to the deception. She had no choice, as it was tacked onto her own immunity agreement. Fortunately, La Fratellanza had not suspected that the senator had aided and abetted Simon and Baari in their escape. One fact that the insiders did know was that it was Simon who shot Baari in the car before he fled and jumped. There was no doubt that the sound of a gunshot had prompted the agent on the bridge to shoot Simon. It was a reaction to the sound.

"This is not your day, kiddo. The bullet shattered the bone, which is why I suspect it deflected and then hit the artery instantly—not after a fall. Sorry, I recovered only bullet fragments, not enough for testing."

Max was disappointed, but not yet willing to give up. "If this isn't Simon, could Simon have survived the fall?"

"After he jumped, he would have had to place himself perfectly in a seated chair position. The slightest change in position would smash his spine and damage internal organs. Most likely, he'd ruptured his spleen. With a gunshot wound in the upper leg—it's improbable he could maintain that position in the fall."

"Okay, so if it's not Simon, then who the hell is he?" she huffed in frustration.

"That, my dear—will be your job to find out. And with no clear means of identification, I'll have to list him as 'John Doe.' Time to sew him up and ship him out."

"Doc, don't close this case yet. Keep the body in the drawer. I'm not convinced. But if isn't Simon, perhaps there's a family out there looking for this guy."

"Will do. But find them soon; he is taking up valuable space." The coroner patted her on the back. "Go get 'em, Max."

She had hoped beyond hope for a different outcome. *But what if the Doc is correct, and it's not Simon?* she pondered.



As Max headed back to the White House, she reviewed in her mind the events of an autopsy she had supervised in another case. At the time, she was shocked to learn that Noble had considered cremation to let the whole sordid affair disappear. She was thankful that the intelligent side of his brain had prevailed. After all, Baari was a U.S. president and, even if he was disgraced, the American people still had the right to

mourn. The true cause of death, however, would never be revealed. The chosen course of action was to maintain a slight distortion of the facts. Having to explain why a U.S. president and a terrorist were taking a road trip together certainly would have created a very messy scandal in a time of an extreme national crisis.

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THE ART OF FUGUE

The days seemed to be getting longer to Max with each new discovery, adding to her concern about flying solo. But as soon as she entered her apartment she began to relax. As part of her normal routine, she first kicked off her shoes and then tossed the day's mail onto the ever-increasing stack. *Odd*, she thought, as she noticed that the pile had been moved. She glanced toward the kitchen and spotted it on the counter. *Hmm, Stanton must have moved the mail when he was here last night. Oh well*, she thought, and thrust the envelopes onto the pile.

Retreating into the bedroom, she changed into a pair of sweats and pinned her hair up off her neck. Magically, the stress began to recede further. "One last gesture and I'll be totally at ease," she said, thinking aloud, a frequent occurrence when at home alone. She walked into the kitchen and uncorked a bottle of Capannelle Chianti. Then she poured herself a glass of wine and moved into the living room. Once curled up on the sofa, she began the arduous task of sorting through the mail, hoping that the majority was the usual junk. Then, just as she ripped open the second envelope her smartphone rang.



"Hey you, what a pleasant *not-so* surprise."

"Wow, you sound in a good mood. That is a pleasant surprise."

"Sorry, I've been so on edge. But last night was wonderful."

"Just what your secret agent man ordered. Like another backrub?"

"It's so tempting, but I have to do some boring *life stuff* tonight. Like get rid of a couple weeks of mail. By the way, did you move the pile that was on the table in the foyer?"

"No, why would I?"

"Duh! I guess I moved it and didn't remember. I'm really losing it."

"Go pour yourself a glass of wine and I'll catch you tomorrow."

"Already did. Thanks for being so understanding."

"Love you."

"Love you too."



Max took a few more sips of wine and enjoyed the warm soothing feeling in her throat, along with the sensation in her relaxed neck muscles. And after discovering the majority of the mail was junk, she was in heaven. "Just a few more pieces of mail to go!" she spoke out again with glee. The next one she happened to pick up was a brown CD jacket with no markings. Inside was a CD with no label. "You slippery devil, you did move the mail, making sure I'd find the CD." Max smiled as she thought about her rough, tough, ex-military, and now-secret-agent man. At times, he could be a real romantic. "What's my problem?" she asked herself as she walked over to the stereo. She inserted the CD and hit the *Play* button. Curled up back on the sofa, she poured herself another glass of wine and prepared herself to be wooed.

As she listened, she found the melody quite pleasant. But halfway through the track, there was a repetition of cacophony she found intrusive. At times, it sounded like the music score from a Bela Lugosi movie, not what one would consider romantic. "What was he thinking?" Max questioned, as she continued to listen, waiting for his hidden message. "Surely, it's there somewhere. It can't be that subliminal." But by the last track, Max had become restive. "This sounds so familiar."

She used the remote to select the *Repeat* option and listened to the CD several more times, almost obsessively, as though it were an intoxicant. It wasn't the wine consumption; that had ceased some time ago.

Then on the fourth go-around, she sprang up from her sofa. "Oh, no!" she called out and raced to the CD cabinet. She tossed case after case onto the floor until she found the CD she was searching for. By

that time she was frantic. Hastily, she exchanged the CD for the one playing. Then seated, that time on the floor, she slowed down her breathing and listened one more time.

“Oh my God. It’s Bach’s *Art of Fugue*.”

A sudden flashback of her interview with Simon’s mother came to the fore. She grabbed her phone instinctively to call Noble, until she realized he was unavailable. “Damn you!” she shouted, and then hit the speed dial for Stanton.



“Hi hon, change your mind?” he asked coyly, knowing it was a long shot.

“Yes! Come over right away!”

“Are you okay? You sound upset.”

“Please, come as quickly as you can.”



Max remained seated on the floor, frozen in place while her mind spun like a top. She could hear Simon’s mother’s voice describing his obsession with Bach as a child. It was the crucial clue that led Noble to locate Simon’s failsafe code, which he had buried in the operating system of several of the nation’s electrical grids. It allowed Noble to foil Simon’s plot and to avert a national disaster. She replayed it in her mind, recalling the day Noble explained how he had used Bach’s combinatorial permutation to break the failsafe code. The CD for Bach’s *Art of Fugue* was also found in Simon’s car on the bridge.

“This can’t be happening. Stanton, where the hell are you?” she pleaded aloud. Still seated on the floor, now clutching her knees, she rocked back and forth. All of a sudden, weird thoughts began racing through her mind: Greek philosophers, Pythagoras’s *Table of Opposites*, and Bach’s use of the Pythagorean philosophical principles in his compositions, largely in the *Art of Fugue*. She remembered at the time it was pretty wild stuff, but Noble described how the premise behind comparing opposites, such as right and left, or odd and even, led him to decipher Simon’s code.

Suddenly, the sound of the doorbell interrupted her thoughts. Her heart rate began to recede. She pulled herself up off the floor and rushed toward the door. “Forgot your key, Agent?” she called out.

It was April 2017. The nation was gripped by the shocking news that Simon Hall, the notorious terrorist, had leaped to his death off the Peace Bridge in Buffalo, New York. Moreover, the fact that the body had yet to be recovered raised doubts among many. Had Simon cleverly eluded his captors once again?

But for the newly elected president, there were greater threats looming. President Randall Post had inherited a rapidly sinking economy that brought chaos of gargantuan proportions. And with the push for global governance threatening America's sovereignty, the country was in dire need of solutions.

Meanwhile, the American populace was clamoring for a full governmental offensive on the clear need to create more jobs. The economic sinkhole had been accelerated by the paucity of employment throughout the country, which was largely ignored by the former administration in favor of their agenda. Internationally, a loss of esteem, coupled with a rising support of global governance among powerful forces, gave birth to a prediction of a permanent decline in America's stature. Unrest among the masses had surfaced in frequent demonstrations against the government, many of which included violence. There was a blatant crisis of confidence facing the nation.

The increasing turmoil threatening the future of the U.S. was addressed head-on by the president. He filled the leadership void boldly and without hesitation—but he needed the support of the American people. The downtrodden mood that permeated society forced his primary objective to design a strategy to address the crucial need for more jobs. Borrowing a page from the Manhattan Project, the president's chosen course was to assemble some of the country's best minds to offer solutions.

The clandestine group known as La Fratellanza was enlisted to fulfill the role. Their superior intellectual skills and experience as Washington insiders, made them eminently qualified to meet the President's needs. Noble Bishop, director of the States Intelligence Agency was tasked to bring them together and to provide the leadership and guidance. The timetable had been set. To deliver on the immediacy of his stated goals, the president expected an overall strategy in only sixty-five days—a challenge of overwhelming dimensions.

With the country's sinking economy and sovereignty in peril, can President Post rescue America?

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