

PRAISE FOR “THE SIMON TRILOGY”

The Ultimate Revenge

“Just finished reading *The Ultimate Revenge*—in a word, Phenomenal! Having thoroughly enjoyed the first two books, *Brotherhood Beyond the Yard* and *Noble’s Quest*, I was more than anxious to read the final book of “The Simon trilogy.” It is an incredible and fitting finale in the lives of characters created by an author who takes you into a world of intrigue where she expertly weaves a story that has the reader pondering the possibility, or perhaps I should say probability, of fiction being more real than we dare to think. A great read that I would strongly recommend!”

—Donna Post, Banking Consultant (Ret.), Florida

“You do not have to be a political junky to love this book of intrigue. *The Ultimate Revenge* takes you to a place that will make you question—could it happen—and if it did? The *recherché* and insight that has gone into this book will certainly keep you wondering for a long time.”

—Ann E. Howells, Wine Consultant, Florida

Noble’s Quest

“In a word—WOW!!! Sally Fernandez has done it again. *Noble’s Quest* is a great read. I thoroughly enjoyed her first book, *Brotherhood Beyond the Yard*, and it was such fun to meet up with old characters again in this sequel. Sally has given us a great story telling experience, riveting in ways that walk the line between art and life. While *Noble’s Quest* is a great standalone story, it was wonderful to follow up on the lives of characters I had come to love (and hate) in *Brotherhood*. Even with the complexity of the story line and the volumes of research that went into the preparation, the result is an amazingly reader friendly story that grabs you from page one! I would highly recommend the book with just one warning—give yourself plenty of reading time because once you start, you won’t be able to put it down!!”

—Donna Post, Banking Consultant (Ret.), Florida

“A captivating second addition to the Simon Trilogy. Intense rhythmic development woven brilliantly—at times haunting and foreboding—at others a palpable sensation of an unerring power, leaving you to confront your own views of contemporary events. The modern political thriller has a strong advocate in Fernandez.”

—**Maestro Debra Cheverino, Internationally Recognized Conductor, Fulbright Scholar, Florence, Italy**

“I was anxiously awaiting the publication of *Noble’s Quest* as I had read the prequel, *Brotherhood Beyond the Yard*. I was not disappointed! *Noble’s Quest* is everything I was hoping for and more. Along with solid characters development (Noble Bishop really comes alive), Ms. Fernandez has a tight grip on the pulse of the high stakes world we live in today. Her ability to merge political intrigue, international terrorism, and state of the art technology into a swirl of tension-filled events brings to mind the writing of John La Carre. I can’t wait for the last installment of the Trilogy.”

—**William Kelley, Artist, Florence, Italy and Sarasota, Florida**

“Loved the newest installment of Sally Fernandez’ trilogy. *Noble’s Quest*: Sequel to *Brotherhood Beyond the Yard* was a real page turner...I could not put it down. In the *Brotherhood*, Fernandez set us a scary...and plausible...scenario. *Noble’s Quest* builds on that story and takes you down a path to worldwide terror. In addition to being totally engrossed in this story, I found Fernandez’ ability to weave the back-story of the first book into the 2nd book very well done...Also, Fernandez is a master with her research! Which makes the story that much more convincing...”

—**Beth Littman Quinn,
Vice President at Marketburst, Massachusetts**

“Put it down, NO WAY! Simon at his tricks with a sparkling cast! There were new unexpected developments that truly enhanced the *Brotherhood*. So real, it’s easy to visualize in real life. Or was it. Making us wait for number three is crazy! Bring it on Sally. I thought it merited 6 stars.”

—**Garrett B. Vonk, President-Keiser Career College &
Southeastern Institute Florida**

“*Noble’s Quest* starts out with an explosion of fireworks and intrigue. The hope and good wishes that always begin with the New Year is quickly put into question. As the sparks settle and the dots are connected, Noble once again finds himself in the high stakes game of intellect and will. His one friend from a past life, now his nemesis, has come back to taunt him into the ultimate game of man vs. power. Simon has surfaced and Noble is ready to confront the friendly face of evil.”

—**Ann E. Howells, Wine Consultant, Florida**

“...As the sequel it met my expectations for another exciting work of intrigue and adventure. Sally does a fantastic job of keeping 3 balls in the air while moving each plot along in a well thought out methodical track. Characters are fully developed so you really know them, as this is critical for the story to move along. Max is just what Noble needs to compliment who he is as an investigator and person. Simon is more sinister than ever and his control is more evident as the reader follows his devious mind. I do not want to divulge the ending, but wait! It’s not over! Well written and paced...a great read for any season!”

—**Richard Cobello, Director, Information Technology,
Schenectady County Government, New York**

“I’ve never been a spy nor an intelligence agent nor a villain, but I would love to be one so I could inhabit the world of *Noble’s Quest*, Sally Fernandez’ sequel to *Brotherhood Beyond the Yard*, her excellent first novel that took readers through the intricacies of maneuvering a fraud into the office of the President of the United States. Now the intrigue continues as Fernandez brings us into a world where nothing is as it seems at first—places, people, and events morph from one apparent reality to another...Fernandez’ writing style is a delightful blend of fast-moving, crisp language presented in a paradoxically unhurried pace that allows the plot to develop slowly and deliberately. We are constantly challenged to think about where she might be going; almost sparring with her to see if we can guess correctly...Finally, the ending caught me by complete surprise. Fernandez won the sparring contest...the clues were there—no obfuscations, just cleverly woven into a very entertaining and thoughtful narrative...”

—**Alfredo S. Vedro, Media Production Consultant, Florida**

Brotherhood Beyond the Yard

“Simon Hall, one of the characters in Sally Fernandez’ addictive novel, *Brotherhood Beyond the Yard*, is an ace puppeteer, manipulating the people he encounters, taking them and you on a thrilling political rollercoaster. Timely—Could it be paralleled to the current administration?—and masterly crafted, Sally’s action prose will have you riveted right up to the last page. I impatiently anticipate a sequel to see Simon’s next strategic move.”

—**Dann Dulin, Senior Editor, A&U Magazine**

“Unquestionably, this is a book for the thinking reader. The book’s combination of intellect, authenticity and believability, led me on several occasions, almost to forget that I was reading fiction. The author’s use of language is quite exceptional...I’m still pondering the book’s serious dose of reality and am impatient to get my hands on a copy of the sequel!”

— **Edwin Chadbourne, PhD,
Human Resources Professional, Australia**

“A parable for the times in which we live. Fernandez has written a classic fable for our Age of Doubt, just as Kerouac defined the Age of Hippies. Worth reading no matter what side of the political spectrum you inhabit.”

—**Aladar Gabriel, Florence, Italy**

“Ingenious harmonic conception—Dazzling plot with infectious power, nuance, and sparkling wit—in a true potential enigma. Only a select few can ignite the palette of curiosity and blend together fantastical overtones with such power, nuance, and transformative persuasiveness. Sally Fernandez’ debut *Brotherhood Beyond the Yard* invites you to ponder the contemporary enigmas of our age and leaves you longing for the sequel. A resounding ovation!”

—**Maestro Debra Cheverino, Fulbright Recipient,
Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, Florence, Italy**

“Two Thumbs Up! *Brotherhood Beyond the Yard* is a gripping story of intrigue from beginning to end. The reader is captured by the ingenuity and daring of the Brotherhood and their unprecedented impact (one hopes) on the political and economic future of our country and the world. In its daring exploitation of the national political process with worldwide implications, the reader is left to ponder the possibility of reality and its consequences. Truly a mystery one is left pondering could it really happen. Can't wait for the sequel.”

—**Philip Ames, Marketing Director,
General Electric (Ret.), Florida**

“Excellent read in these interesting times...well-crafted and contemporary with intelligent twists and turns! Had me missing a few nights of sleep..”

—**Roland Marcz, Owner,
Shanghai Malong Construction, Shanghai, China**

“I have finished reading *Brotherhood Beyond the Yard*. I commend the author for her imagination and for her use of her expertise and knowledge of politics, finance, academe, and electronics. The plot is a natural for a Hollywood film: I can see George Clooney in several of the roles. *Complimenti!!* I eagerly await the sequel.”

—**Horace W. Gibson,
Co-Founder of the International School of Florence, Italy**

“Amazed and Amused. *Brotherhood Beyond the Yard* far exceeded my expectations from a new writer on the scene. I was pleasantly drawn into the plot, and as it developed, I was often amazed and amused at how well the author manipulated my curiosity and intrigue regarding the characters as they intertwined their lives in order to devise and undertake a ‘master’ plan. Now I am left wanting to read more of what I hope will be the first part of an epic story to come. Did someone say the future is now...?”

—**Philip Claypool,
Acclaimed Country Western Singer/Songwriter, San Francisco**

“The *Brotherhood Beyond the Yard* is a wonderful story—compelling and all too believable. It is masterfully plotted, with every episode revealing an increasingly tangled but utterly plausible scheme in which fundamentally decent people perpetrate a despicable fraud, manipulated by a master puppeteer. The fast-paced denouement satisfies all the expectations of a political thriller and yet leaves just enough unfinished business to leave readers anxiously awaiting the next installment...This is a story that unfolds both psychologically and visually, almost begging for a cinematic rendering, and I found myself visualizing many of the individual chapters as scenes in a movie...”

—Linda Cabe Halpern,
Dean of University Studies, James Madison University, Virginia

“...I strongly recommend *Brotherhood Beyond the Yard* for those looking for an exciting, pithy read. As you near the conclusion of, I hope, this first book, the pages will jump out of your hands. A great read for either the beach or the fire.”

—John Pearl, Partner, Pearl Associates, Greenwich, Connecticut

“I highly recommend this book. Mystery thrillers, detective thrillers, even vampire thrillers are really enjoyable read. *Brotherhood Beyond the Yard* is just that...an international political thriller that’s timely and provocative, and contains extremely believable characters placed in well researched locations and situations.”

—Baroness Suzanne Pitcher Flaccomio,
Founder and Director of Pitcher & Flaccomio, Florence, Italy

“You’ll want to fasten your seat belt to navigate the twists and turns of this global political thriller. Fernandez combines knowledge of banking, technology, and politics to offer a ‘*Back to the Future*’ reading adventure. And, the author’s intimate familiarity of Florentine life makes one want to buy a one-way ticket.”

—Donna Davidson, Davidson Associates,
San Francisco, California

“Great read! Unfortunately, all the clichés in English are true and have become so firmly entrenched in our vocabulary that few or no fresh phrases have entered the language. So, when we want to give praise we are stuck with the all-too-familiar ‘compelling,’ ‘page-turner,’ ‘riveting,’ and the like—all appropriate for Brotherhood, but I lack the talent to come up with anything more complimentary. So, I hope readers will accept my very simple WOW! I thoroughly enjoyed Brotherhood—plot, characters, setting, and the many subtle little clevernesses and clues the author drops in as the plot progresses—that I can’t quote here for fear of giving it away.”

—**Alfredo S. Vedro, Media Production Consultant, Florida**

“Fascinating story, intriguing title. It certainly is thought-provoking and intellectually stimulating. It easily brings to mind the power of the Pericles quote at the beginning of the book. Kudos to a new and exciting author!”

—**Dr. Patricia Ames, Fulbright Scholar, Maine**

The Ultimate Revenge

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A Novel

Conclusion to
The Simon Trilogy

Sally Fernandez

DUNHAM
books

The Ultimate Revenge

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*Dedicated to Dr. Patricia Ames,
loving aunt, mentor, and teacher
who planted the seed that spurred
my intellectual curiosity.*

*“Truth is so hard to tell,
it sometimes needs fiction to make it plausible.”*
– Francis Bacon

AUTHOR'S NOTE

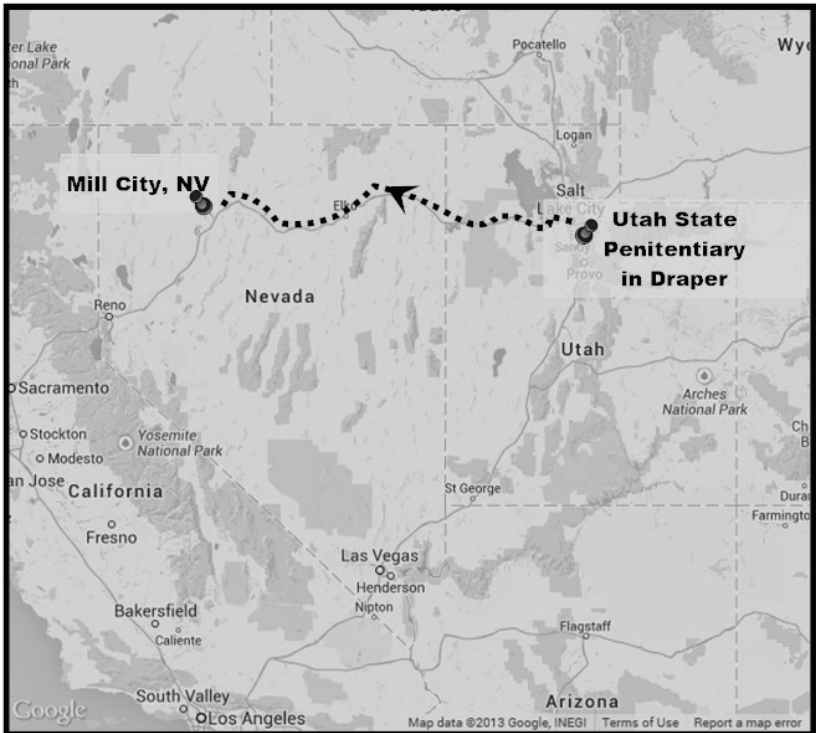
This story is pure fiction. The Godfather, the Financier, and Stronghold Management have been fictionalized, but the events are real. This does not detract from their veracity. The mention of other real people, organizations, or groups are factual, but weaved into a fictional setting. All facts are in the public domain. The statements voiced by other fictional characters may add realism to the plot, but should not be misconstrued as giving credence to any of the issues raised. The narrative gestated solely in my vivid imagination.

It is a story that brings “The Simon Trilogy” to a conclusion, having been preceded by *Brotherhood Beyond the Yard* and *Noble's Quest*. When facts are blended with fiction, the reader ultimately must draw one's own conclusions. A nagging question that may arise is a simple, “What if?” as one ponders the possibilities raised.

Once again, I must acknowledge from the start the outstanding contributions of my Editor-in-Residence, Joe Fernandez, and his amazing ability to help me shape and define my storyline continued with *The Ultimate Revenge*. The plot is complex and the research was intense. There were times I became tangled in the weeds of facts and Joe was there to pull me out and help me to refocus. Much love and gratitude goes to my husband, best friend, business manager, editor, and occasional research associate.

1

DAY ONE



A pale hue blanketed the sky as the sunrise bled into the morning mist. The clock on the dashboard displayed 6:10; he had been driving for over two hours. By chance, he spotted a dirt road approximately five hundred feet ahead. A glance in the rear view mirror reflected nothing other than another dark, empty stretch of highway. *Perfect*, he thought. He gripped the wheel, veered right, and killed the headlights. The first signs of daylight offered enough of a glow for him to inch along through the thick grove of sagebrush. Then he brought the car to a halt.

“Recalculating, recalculating,” repeated the GPS’s nagging voice.

“Damn thing.” He hit the button to silence the stranger who shadowed his every move. The directions were uncomplicated. Straight across I-80 did not require the mile-by-mile instructions. Nevertheless, the GPS did offer a degree of companionship as he drove through the desolate state.

When he stepped out of the car, he hit a wall of frigid air. On instinct, he crossed his arms and hugged his body attempting to allay the cold temperature. Then he removed the duffle bag from the trunk and placed the bag in the back seat. In haste, he changed clothes while bravely ignoring the icy morning dew. Both the fresh clothes and the invigorating air prepared him for the next leg of his trip.

After resetting the GPS, he turned the car around and headed toward the highway. “Recalculating, recalculating,” repeated the no longer pesky but welcome voice. He drove for another two hours until the sun finally brightened the rear window.

Up ahead, he observed a sign that read, “Welcome to Mill City, Nevada,” and realized he had crossed the state border. Within minutes, another sign appeared. He was elated to see “Travel Centers of America” flashing on an inviting neon light. The fresh clothes partially helped, but as he took a whiff of his malodorous body he mused, *I’m desperate for a shower*. Without hesitation, he turned right into the parking lot and parked next to the “Fork in the Road Restaurant.” As if on cue, his stomach growled in relief.

Tucked away in the back booth in the corner he ordered the trucker’s special.

“Black or with cream and sugar, hon,” the first kind face of the day

asked.

“Black, please.”

The coffee was satisfying as he waited for the sunny-side up eggs, sausage patties, hash browns, and dark toast; the only hot meal he had had in days. Moreover, the sensation of feeling free again—was overwhelming. Finally, with his hunger sated, he went straight to the Wi-Fi hotspot and began to tap away on his tablet to look for his next destination.

After a hot meal, a lukewarm shower, a full tank of gas, and a firm destination, he once again ventured out onto the long stretch of highway and headed west.

2

THE HUNT GOES ON

Monday was a gloomy day in Washington D.C. It appeared to affect all those within the beltway. Inside the Dirksen Senate Building, the mood was more melancholy.

Already on edge, the knock at the door startled her. “Come in!” the senator barked as she looked up from her computer screen.

“Director Noble Bishop is on the line. He respectfully requests an appointment to discuss some urgent business.”

The senator grimaced. *Respectfully requests, I doubt it is a simple request from the director of the States Intelligence Agency*, she thought, knowing exactly the subject of the urgent business. She stared again at the monitor and asked, “Do I have any time this week?”

“Friday morning is open.”

“Tell the director I’ll see him at nine o’clock—in my office. Thank you,” she stated without looking up, a clear sign for her secretary to leave.



The gloom extended beyond the Washington weather. For the local, state, and federal authorities who had been conducting a massive manhunt, the trail had gone cold.

Two weeks prior, on January 31, SIA Director Noble Bishop had conducted Operation NOMIS from the command center at the Dugway Proving Ground in Utah. Noble and the base commander led a team comprised of Max, his deputy director, FBI Agent Burke, and Major Stanton, along with his Special Forces B Team. Their mission was to enter an underground encampment and capture Mohammed al-Fadl, also known as Simon Hall. The mission was a success. They captured the notorious terrorist, along with men and women trained for an unidentified cause.

On February 2, the ever-slippery Simon escaped from a maximum-security cell at the Utah State Penitentiary in Draper. He simply walked out of the prison—then he vanished from sight.

The authorities pulled out all stops. The prison warden had sent out an all-points bulletin to train stations, airports, hotels, and motels. The state police had established roadblocks throughout the state and at its borders. They required that all passersby submit to visual identification and retina scans—all to no avail. The over-confident warden insisted they would nab him, but Noble suspected Simon had crossed the Utah border—in which direction was only conjecture.

Neither Noble nor Max could add value to the physical capture. Running around the country in lockstep with other authorities on the search for Simon made no sense. They decided it was more important to return to Washington to focus on Simon's game plan, find where he was heading, and stop him in his tracks. The day after the escape, Noble and Max packed up the evidence from the encampment and the Draper prison, and escorted it back to Washington on a military jet. Since then, they had been wading through boxes of documents, manuals, and forensic evidence looking for minute clues.

Noble assigned Agent Burke to remain at the prison to lead the manhunt, much to the warden's chagrin. Major Stanton and his B Team stayed at Dugway to conduct the interrogations of the 109 detainees they had captured in the underground encampment. Unhappily, the number one detainee had slipped through their supposedly flawless

security at the Utah penitentiary—Simon was free to roam.

Once before, Simon had cleverly evaded Noble's grasp. It was seven years earlier, in 2009, when Noble organized a sting operation with his predecessor Hamilton Scott to capture Simon. As planned, it lured Simon to Florence, Italy to retrieve the last of his stolen funds—funds Noble had managed to syphon from his account at slowly paced intervals. However, Hamilton's race through the streets of Florence, and then through the famous Vasari Corridor, left him capturing an empty satchel—without the remaining money. Simon had disappeared once again.



Max burst into Noble's office in her usual brash manner and asked, "Did the senator agree to a meeting?"

"Don't you ever knock?"

Max ignored Noble's jibe.

"Yes, she agreed to meet on Friday at nine a.m. as I respectfully requested."

"Great!"

"I want you to join me in the interview and in the questioning."

"Me!"

"You can handle it. After all, Simon deprived you of an opportunity to interrogate him by escaping. Perhaps you'll uncover a clue that will put him back in his cell." He flashed a supportive smile, and then said, "Now, let's review the evidence. Start with the surveillance video showing the senator's visit to the prison."

Max anticipated correctly and had already queued up the video on the large multi-touch monitor. She hit the *Play* button.

Noble paid particular interest as the senator walked over to the table and sat down in the chair across from Simon, Noble's former Harvard classmate. He recalled sitting in the same chair three weeks earlier, when he spent six and a half hours interrogating Simon in a furious battle of wits. On the monitor, Simon again appeared to be comfortable sitting in the prisoner's chair, the one bolted to the floor. He was flashing his famous, unnerving Cheshire grin toward the

senator—just as he had with Noble and any other undeserving soul. In a way, Noble felt as though he was still in that dim interrogation room illuminated by a single row of lights. Even in the video, they cast the same ominous yellow glow over the sparse furnishings, creating a sense of *déjà vu*.

Max observed intently, as well, but focused on the body language. Almost immediately, she paused the video. “Pay attention to the look on Simon’s face when the senator lifts her handbag off her shoulder and places it on the floor,” She reversed the video and then hit the *Play* button.

“His eyes are following her movements,” he observed. “Wait a minute, he flinched.”

“Right, I saw the same thing.” Max reversed the video again. “Now watch, but this time pay attention to the senator’s movement.” She hit the *Play* button.

“I’ll be damned. He flinched just as she returned upright after putting the bag on the floor. Simon must have felt her hand brush his ankle under the table, unless he was numb,” he quipped.

Max hit the *Pause* button.

Then observing the scene more closely, Noble affirmed, “It looks like she slipped him something.”

They both looked at each other and said aloud in unison, “xPhad.”

The xPhad had become standard issue for the SIA. It was somewhat thicker than an iPhone, but when unfolded it transformed into a tablet matching the dimensions of an iPad. Both Noble and Max relied heavily on their xPhads and were well aware of its capabilities.

“It’s circumstantial with a bit of speculation at best. We’ll need more,” Noble asserted.

They reviewed another video, this time showing Simon in his six-by-twelve-foot cell. He was sitting on a hard bed topped with a thin prison-quality mattress, positioned across from an unappealing stainless steel sink and toilet. Noble had inspected the same maximum-security accommodations the day before he entered the encampment. It was in anticipation of Simon’s capture outside the Dugway Proving Grounds.

Max fast-forwarded the video and then hit the *Play* button. “Note

the time on the video. It's after the senator departed.”

Simon's cell was immersed in total darkness, except for a small beam of light emanating from under his blanket. The only illumination in the tiny chamber, they concluded, was from the tablet he was hiding underneath his bedcover.

They continued to watch the video, noticing the time-stamp. It was now 4:05 a.m. The station guard was nowhere to be seen as Simon walked through a series of gates. Then he walked directly out of the prison. From another surveillance video, they saw him as he slithered by the guard tower and ducked behind several cars as the revolving search light headed in his direction. Then he vanished from the scene.

Max and Noble shared the same sense of dread they felt when they first scrutinized the video together with the warden within hours of the escape.

“That confirms it in my mind,” Max insisted. “He was using the xPhad the senator had slipped him to program his escape from his cell.”

“We still need more evidence. Play the surveillance video you retrieved from the airport.”

“Give me a sec.” As Max fumbled through a series of folders, she harked back to Noble, “Remember the senator was to arrive at the South Valley Regional Airport in Jordan, Utah. Her jet pulled into the hanger at one-fifty p.m. Here it is.” She hit the *Play* button.

They studied the video as the senator disembarked with her security detail in tow. From the various videos Max spliced together, they viewed her walking in a corridor and then entering a door to her right. The agents waited in the hallway.

“I guess the senator needed to powder her nose.” Max smirked.

Minutes later, the senator returned to the corridor and the entourage continued out of the building. Parked at the door were three black sedans, the usual sinister looking cars with their opaque black windows. They escorted the senator to the middle car.

“Everything seems to square with what the secret service reported,” Noble conveyed. “One of the agents reported checking the senator into the hotel and accompanying her to her suite. She requested not be disturbed for the evening and announced she would see them in

the morning. Each agent had a turn standing guard outside her door.”

“We have the prison’s visitor logbook showing that she signed in at nine p.m. So how did she leave without them knowing and make her way to the prison?” Max asked.

“Good question. Get the surveillance video for the hotel corridor. View the section between the time she checked in until she had left the next morning to join her fellow envoys at the prison as scheduled.”

“Fine, but I won’t be able to get my hands on the tape until late tomorrow.”

“We’ll have to go into the meeting with the senator with what we have. Who knows? Maybe she’ll give up something.” Without warning, Noble felt the intrusive vibration from his xPhad. “Hold on. Let me take this call,” he requested, holding up his right index finger.



“Burke, what’s up?”

“We have a lead on Simon. It is possible he’s heading west toward Reno. The day he escaped, he stopped in Mill City, Nevada at the ‘Travel Centers of America.’ Essentially, it’s a truck stop, which includes a gas station, a restaurant, and shower facilities. The attendant on duty explained that he was responsible for cleaning the shower stalls after each use, replacing the towels and soap...”

Noble was furious and cut Burke off. “Why are we just hearing this now? That was two weeks ago!” he admonished.

Burke took no offense and explained calmly, “The manager returned to work yesterday after recuperating from emergency back surgery. He happened to be sorting through the *Lost and Found* bin. Evidently, it’s typical to find articles of clothing, toothbrushes, et cetera, left behind by travelers. Guess what? A pair of white sweatpants and a white shirt found its way to the bin. Printed on the back of the shirt was Draper State Penitentiary Inmate. He called the local precinct and they called the warden.”

Dialing down his ire a notch, Noble scoffed, “What gives with the attendant? He thought the owner would come back and claim them?”

Burke understood Noble’s frustration and kept his cool. “The

sheriff for the Nevada Highway Patrol interviewed him. The attendant remembered the clothing but he said they were folded, as if someone had planned to put them back into a travel bag. He swears he put them in the bin exactly the way he found them.”

“Does he remember who they belonged to?”

“Yes. In fact, he recalled filling the gas tank for a customer who had just showered, but then the customer had departed before the attendant returned to clean the shower stall. Director, he identified Simon from a photo and he remembers the make and model of the car. Believe it or not, it’s a 2012 Ford Escape.”

“Escape!”

Burke could not resist a chuckle.

“I fail to see the humor,” Noble interrupted.

“Harrumph.” Burke cleared his throat and continued, “It’s a blue metallic XLS sport utility model. From a surveillance video, we were able to identify the license plate. It was from Utah. The number is four seven zero, X as in X-ray, B as in bravo, A as in alpha. We ran the plates. Get this! The car is registered to a Hal Simmons.”

“Dust for prints and get back to me A-S-A-P?”

Burke could tell from Noble’s voice that he was exasperated. He tried not to prolong the agony. “Will do!”

However, Noble was not finished. “What time did he arrive in Mill City?”

“As viewed on the video, he filled the gas tank at ten a.m. That would be about right. It’s a five and a half hour drive west on I-80 from the prison.”

“Great! He escaped at four a.m. and by nine thirty—he was taking a hot shower. Thank goodness massages weren’t available.”

Burke had one last burning question. “The video showed the car leaving. Simon turned right on to I-80 continuing in a westerly direction. But why would he head west? You’d expect him to head south to the Mexican border or cross over north into Canada.”

“He’s not finished,” Noble lamented. “There’s a good chance he’ll try to dump the car at some point. Update the APB with a description. Maybe, we’ll get lucky.”

“I’m on it.”

“Burke, if you find the car I want you to run the prints. Only you,” Noble cautioned.

Burke had come to trust Noble’s instincts and did not question why. “Later, Director.” He ended the call.



Noble filled Max in on the conversation.

“Hal Simmons! Then the escape had to have been prearranged if he’s using one of his aliases.”

“I agree. But how the senator fits in to all this is what I want to know!”

“Maybe on Friday we’ll get lucky and find out.” Max tried to sound encouraging.

Noble’s discouragement was transparent.

“Maybe you should call it a night, boss.”

“You too—go home,” Noble ordered.



“Darling, you sound exhausted.”

Hearing Amanda’s voice gave Noble a momentary surge of energy. “I’m still at the office, but I’ll be heading home soon.”

“Would you like some company?”

“You know I love your company, but I need to get some sleep tonight.” Noble missed the nights when Amanda stayed over, but this case had to take precedence. He needed to be sharp and stay focused.

“I understand sweetheart. Are we still on for dinner with the Ridges Friday night?”

“Of course, I’m looking forward to seeing them.”

“Call me tomorrow.”

“I will. I love you.”

“I love you too. Now go home,” she commanded.

Noble heard the click on the other end of the line and placed the receiver in its cradle. Then he looked over at the framed photo on his desk and thought about how much he loved Amanda. He was forty-

seven-years-old and up until a year ago, he had avoided any serious relationship, preferring his work to the “getting-to-know-you” dating scene and all that followed. At times, he questioned his reluctance to engage in intimacy. Often, he reasoned that losing his parents at a young age might have aided his aversion. There was no question that *challenge* was his Achilles heel and left little room for anything or anyone. Then when he assumed the position as the director of the SIA, he became more driven in the pursuit of national security. He recognized his reticent personality had shifted and he had become more demonstrative in spite of his obsession.

Then something changed.

His brother-in-law Paolo introduced him to Amanda and his heart skipped more than a few beats. She was striking, with dark black hair and light blue eyes. She was also extremely intelligent. Noble decided at that moment to make an attempt at a relationship. From the start, he relished her company. An added bonus was that she tolerated his erratic, non-stop work schedule, which endeared her to him even more. Aside from her stunning beauty and charm, he admitted to himself there were other influences that caused him to take the plunge. As he looked again at the photo staring back, he reckoned the reasons were no longer important. His only thought was how happy he was to have Amanda in his new life. He ruminated a bit longer. Then noting the time, he packed up his briefcase, including the senator’s files containing the evidence, and headed home wistfully to an empty bed.

3

LIGHTENING STRIKES TWICE

Director Bishop is here to see you,” announced the senator’s secretary, and then added, “He’s accompanied by Deputy Director Ford.”

“Direct them to my conference room. I’ll be there momentarily.”

The secretary left to comply.

Several minutes later, Senator Maryann Townsend, the former first lady, entered the conference room. She offered them a puzzled look as she had only expected to see Noble.

Both Noble and Max rose from their chairs.

“I understood this meeting was to be with you, Director,” Maryann barked.

“I apologize for the confusion, Senator. However, Deputy Director Ford and I are working on the case together to recapture Mohammed al-Fadl. Her knowledge of the evidence is crucial to the questions we need to ask.”

The senator displayed no expression and gestured them to be seated at the table. Then she sat down across from them. “Director, Deputy

Director, what is it you'd like to know?"

"We understand that the president appointed you as one of the envoys from the Senate Intelligence Committee to travel to Draper, Utah, to witness the interrogation of al-Fadl at the state penitentiary?" Noble asked respectfully.

"That is correct. Our role was to ensure that the prisoner's rights were protected."

"Why did you go alone to see al-Fadl?"

"You already know that I was asked by the president to be part of a delegation to ensure the prisoner's rights were upheld."

Max took the opportunity to interject. In a polite tone, she asked, "Excuse me, Senator. We are speaking about the night before, when you went to meet with the prisoner without the envoys. We have the logbook with your signature; you signed in at nine o'clock p.m."

"It was my duty to ensure that he had proper accommodations and of course, was not being *tortured* before the meeting with my colleagues."

"Why didn't you wait for the other envoys before going to the prison?"

"As I said before, I wanted to ensure that there was no evidence the prisoner had been mistreated."

Max was getting nowhere. She chose to move the conversation ahead. "Did your security detail drive you to the prison?" She knew the answer, but wanted to give the senator an opportunity to skirt the truth.

"Yes."

That went well, Max smiled inwardly. "We interviewed the prison guard at the entrance gate. He said that you asked him to call a taxi, but does not remember you arriving in any vehicle. All he recalls is that you appeared at the gate."

"Obviously," Maryann continued, "I had a car drive me with my secret service detail following."

Now we are getting somewhere, she really is lying. Noble sat back. He knew where Max was heading.

No further response came from Maryann. Her face remained deadpan.

“With all due respect Senator, we’re just trying to clarify some details.”

“Look, I simply left my hotel suite when the agent on duty stepped away for a moment. I called for a taxi and went to the prison on my own accord. I took a rare opportunity to be alone. It becomes very claustrophobic with people surrounding you constantly. Besides, no one even knew I was in Draper. I wasn’t in any danger.”

Max did not buy it. She sensed it was time to turn up the heat, but Noble quickly stepped in.

“Senator, we have you on a video camera while you were meeting with al-Fadl.” Noble nodded to Max.

On cue, she turned the tablet toward the senator and hit the *Play* button. The video began.

Noble proceeded, “In this scene, it’s clear to us that you are passing something to al-Fadl under the table.”

“How dare you! I am a United States Senator! And I would be very careful with your accusations.”

Noble ignored Maryann’s outburst. “According to the logbook, you were there for ten minutes. Why spend so little time with him, if you took such efforts to see him in the first place?”

“I’m finished with your impertinent questions.” Maryann leered, displaying an obvious heightened annoyance.

They had created the desired effect.

Maryann directed her attention to Noble, and in a condescending tone meant for an underling, she asked, “Is this an interrogation?”

“Consider it a conversation for now, Senator,” Noble replied with spurious politeness.

As he sat across the table from Maryann, he found it surprising that he had never been in such close proximity to the former first lady, for any length of time. A quick handshake in a reception line, or a wave as she buzzed in and out of the Oval Office, was the full extent of their familiarity. When in her company she was always aloof. His mind drifted back to the past, as he imagined her twenty years younger, thirty pounds lighter, and with long black hair. Then the vision of her in a black mini skirt with bright red lipstick—seemed unreal.

Lightning struck. *No way! Maryann and Simon, it couldn’t be*, he

thought. In that instant, Noble suspected she was the “hooker” on campus at the Harvard Yard. The one Simon arranged to proposition Noble and then conjured up the campus police to play the heavies. Simon had bribed them to create the illusion of reality. Then he rode in on his white mount in time to save Noble from disgrace. All was planned by Simon in an effort to lure Noble into his web, which he resisted adamantly.

From the expression on Maryann’s face, she began to suspect that Noble had uncovered Simon’s ploy.

“Had you ever met al-Fadl before seeing him in prison at Draper?” Noble inquired with respectful directness.

He’s figured it out, Maryann thought. “Seriously, I never made the connection between al-Fadl and Simon Hall, until I visited him at Draper. It was a terrible shock!” At first, Maryann deflected the precise question and began to talk briefly about her time at Cambridge as though it were a matter of record. Then at the end, she finally admitted to knowing Simon.

“It was a college fling,” she blew off. “It ended after I graduated from Radcliff and entered DePaul University College of Law. Then for years, we maintained our friendship.” She paused, and then asked hopefully, “I expect you’ll be discreet, Director?”

Max was flabbergasted by Noble’s question and even more astonished by the senator’s answer, but she sat back and remained uninvolved during their repartee.

Noble chose not to persist further. He was still in shock by her revelation. But he allowed that it added an interesting twist to the case. “Senator, I thank you for your candor. Your past relationship with Simon is not germane to our case. You can rely on our discretion.”

Maryann’s outward sternness appeared to wane.

Noble felt it was best to conclude the interview. “We appreciate your giving us your time.”

Maryann stood up briskly.

Noble and Max took their cue, stood up and walked around the desk.

Max was the first to offer a respectful handshake and thanked Maryann again for her time.

Then Noble took the opportunity also to shake her hand, but held it longer than he had ever had the opportunity in the past.

She eyed him with indifference and then walked out of her conference room.

Noble turned toward Max expecting an outburst. “Wait until we’re back in my office,” he cautioned.