

Chapter 1

The feeling a man has when he loses control of a situation is like no other. The weight of the resulting guilt has destroyed many. Staring through the window of the air traffic control tower, Pete Kennedy had this feeling. He crushed out his cigarette and took the last swallow of what was now cold coffee.

It had rained throughout the night. Daylight brought wind and cold. As the darkness lifted off the tarmac, the Presidential seal came into view on the side of the aircraft. Pete Kennedy looked up when he heard the familiar voice of Craig Johnson, the Vice President's Chief of Staff. Johnson was a short, thin, irritating man who thought our government would cease functioning without him. "What's the situation, Kennedy?"

"We're not sure how many of them are on the plane. We think they were disguised as the catering services crew which means there could be as many as five."

Johnson was becoming agitated. "How the hell could you let this happen, Pete?"

As much as Kennedy despised this little man, he wondered the same. How could five terrorists get by the secret service and take the Vice-President of the United States and his family hostage? “We’ll figure it out later, but right now we need to concentrate on resolving this situation without anyone on our side getting hurt.”

The seriousness was hitting Johnson and he knew there would be plenty of time to deal with Kennedy later. “Have they communicated with us?”

“Not since last night when the pilot radioed they were captive and he had been instructed to inform the tower the plane would not be leaving until further notice.”

“So what the hell do we do now?”

“*We* try to solve this and *you* wait.” Kennedy returned his attention to the window signaling the conversation was over.

Pete Kennedy was the fifty-one-year-old son of Irish immigrants who had taught their son all his life about the greatness of the United States. He was raised on the north side of Chicago. His parents were poor, so he used his 6’5”, 250 pound frame to earn a football scholarship to Notre Dame, and through hard work was named to the All-American team his senior year. After graduation, believing he had to give back, he joined the Marine Corps and spent the next ten years serving his country. After a tour in Vietnam, he was discharged and through a Corps connection joined the Secret Service. He spent the next twenty-one years there and was now the Deputy Director. He loved the work and still loved his country. He married his college sweetheart and had four large sons who he wished he could spend more time with arguing about Chicago Bear football

and the fact the Cubs would have their year. His wife, Kate, wished he were around more as well, although she would prefer he drank less beer and would finally, successfully, quit smoking. At the office, Kennedy was respected for his intelligence, street sense, and his fierce loyalty. He was a registered Democrat but the political affiliation of his President did not make a difference. His job was to protect at all cost and he was the best at that job.

Thoughts of his responsibility brought him back to the situation at hand. All anyone knew was approximately five terrorists were holding the Vice-President, Eric Wright, his wife, two small children and a crew of five, hostage aboard Air Force One. Kennedy lit another cigarette and wondered. *What did these people want? When would he hear from the plane? How would his team stop these maniacs from killing when he knew they would kill anyone or themselves to succeed with their mission?* He had been on the radio all night. Sharpshooters were in place and there was a Marine strike force in an adjacent hangar waiting for the call to board the plane and end the situation with prejudice. As he watched, he hoped they would not have to board the plane. That would greatly increase the likelihood of injury. Kennedy's frustration grew as he stared out the window. "Who are you and what in the hell do you want?" he said to no one.

Craig Johnson stared at the radio receiver. He had spoken to the President and was upset that he had no news. He was always in control and this feeling of helplessness did not sit well with him. After all, it was Johnson who had lobbied to have Eric Wright added to the presidential ticket two years before. It was his strategy of going after the

other party's platform and personal past that had won the election. He'd be damned if he would let five ignorant terrorists ruin his plan. When the President retired and Wright assumed the highest post in the land, it was Johnson who would be Secretary of State. As he stared at Pete Kennedy, he told himself there would be no incompetents like this in his administration. His would be the administration political scientists would praise and teach to the wannabe's at every American university in the states.

Craig Johnson went to Harvard, not for the education, but for the status. He passed on law school because America could not afford three more years without his brilliance. He joined the right fraternity and associated only with those who he could call on later to assist him in implementing his master plan. He married the best possible adornment for his arm. He had done everything right. He had not counted on this. He never thought anyone would dare interrupt his plan like this. He had hand picked Eric Wright as his star. Wright had it all. He was a young, clean-cut Senator with no skeletons and a bright future. And now an outside force was about to change everything in one short, swift stroke. *Who were these maniacs who would dare attempt to interfere with his plan?* His eyes met Kennedy's as the red light on the radio signaled a call from Air Force One. Maybe now there would be some answers.

"Kennedy."

Pete's heart pounded at the thought he might finally be asked to join this game.

"Who am I speaking to?"

“This is Captain Jack Roberts of Air Force One. I have someone who would like to speak with you.” Johnson’s interest peaked as he watched Kennedy handle the call.

“This is Rashid of the United Liberated Front.”

Kennedy immediately knew the name and he had to fight the urge to explode into the receiver. “What can we do for you, Rashid?”

Rashid spoke slowly and in perfect English. “Mr. Kennedy, we have captured your Vice-President and if you do not follow our instructions, great harm could come to him and his family.”

Kennedy gripped the receiver more tightly but resisted the urge to show any emotion. “What do you want?”

Rashid spoke slowly. “I would first like to inform you that the aircraft has been wired with explosives and any attempt to overtake us will result in a great tragedy for your Vice-President and his family.”

Kennedy remained as cool as ice. “I understand. We do not wish any harm to come to anyone on the plane.” Kennedy waved off Johnson’s advances and continued. “If you will give me your demands, I will try to accommodate you and your associates and we can all go home.”

The voice came back with a chilling calm. “We need finances for our cause. Your government destroyed our homeland of Iraq and we demand payment. We want ten billion dollars and safe passage home.”

Kennedy did not want to say or do anything to set Rashid off. He knew this terrorist would kill for any reason and took great pleasure in his work. “That’s a lot of money and it’s going to take some time.”

Rashid’s voice never changed tone. “Mr. Kennedy, America is very wealthy. You have ten hours to deliver the money or I will begin sending you bodies, beginning with the children.” The line went dead before Kennedy could respond.

Craig Johnson was losing control. His world was unraveling and he was not handling the situation well. “Godammit, Pete, what is going on?”

“They want money, and if they don’t get it they’re going to start killing everyone on the plane,” Kennedy said, leaning back in his chair.

Johnson continued to tighten up. “Who are they?”

Kennedy’s voice was calm and clear. “The leader is a psychopath who calls himself Rashid. He is one cold, calculating bastard and he’ll carry out his threats. He’s the leader of a maniacal group calling themselves the United Liberated Front. They specialize in explosives and appear to be working for the Iraqi government.”

Johnson picked up Kennedy’s cigarettes and lit one. “What exactly do they want?”

Kennedy responded slowly. “They want ten billion dollars and safe passage home. But I wonder if they’re giving us the whole story.”

Johnson eyed Kennedy curiously. Regardless of what his personal feelings were, he knew Kennedy's reputation and he respected his accomplishments. In twenty years, his teams had one President injured and zero fatalities. "So what is their plan?"

"The curious thing to me is the money request. These guys are generally swimming in cash from drug money or assassination bounties. I'm not so sure he's not just blowing smoke our way to buy some time."

This uncertainty sent Johnson's blood pressure back up. "Then what in the hell do they really want?"

"Well sir, generally, these types have two passions; killing and dying."

The mood on the plane was very tense. In the main cabin, Lydia Wright sat on the left side of the airliner holding her daughter, Sara, while her four-year-old son, Andrew, sat at her side staring at his new tennis shoes. Watching over them were two baby-faced terrorists holding Russian-made AK-47 assault rifles. As Lydia sat comforting her children, she thought how these two boys looked like they should be enrolled at Georgetown rather than threatening her family.

Upstairs, in the Vice-President's cabin, Eric Wright sat thinking of Lydia and the children. He thought about all he and his wife of eighteen years had been through

since meeting on the campus of Duke University in the fall of 1973. They were both first-year law students, and he was in love with her from the first moment she stood across from him in a moot court debate and absolutely destroyed his argument of *Koramatsu* versus the United States. He spent the next several months trying to convince her he was not the right-wing pompous ass she thought he was. They were diametrically opposed on every issue of a political or religious nature. The Nixon White House had just crumbled. While Eric believed it was a crime that a great statesman could be ruined in such a way, Lydia thought it a great triumph for caring people everywhere that the demonic right wing had been caught doing what they did best; lying, cheating, and stealing. In fact, the only issue they did agree on was neither could possibly live without the other. They married in June of 1976, one month after graduating from law school.

His uncle, Chandler Wright, handpicked Eric to work at Chadwick, Connor, and Wright. Lydia, always the idealist, chose a position with the ACLU. Chadwick, Connor, and Wright was the most prestigious firm in Washington, and through hard work and a modicum of nepotism, Eric rose quickly. After only five years, he was made a partner and became involved politically. He and Lydia lived in Fairfax. In 1984 Eric Wright was elected the Republican Senator from Virginia. He worked very hard, and with his considerable family influence in Washington, earned a formidable reputation as a Senator who could get things accomplished.

He won re-election in 1990 and was appointed to the prestigious Senate Foreign Affairs Committee. He met Craig Johnson during his second term. Eric did not

like Johnson personally, however he knew Johnson as a doer and he respected his track record as a political strategist. He soon appointed Johnson as his Chief of Staff and his career soared into the national spotlight. Johnson's hard work was partly responsible for then candidate Davis Thorpe's decision to make Eric his running mate in 1996. Thorpe needed someone who would project a strong image and offset his obvious shortcomings in the area of foreign affairs. Eric Wright was the perfect choice, although very young politically. Johnson had gone to Thorpe and sold the future Commander In Chief on his man. Dave Johnson had his flaws, but a lack of persuasiveness was not one of them.

The timing of the nomination was perfect. Lydia had left the ACLU in 1993 after the birth of Andrew. It had taken nearly nine years for the Wrights to get pregnant and now she wanted to stay home and raise what she thought would be their only child. In April of 1995, however, the Lord gave them a second miracle by the name of Sara Catherine. The Wrights survived a nasty campaign of mudslinging and slandering by the Democratic incumbent, and the ticket of Thorpe and Wright won the election by the narrowest margin since the Dewey versus Truman battle fought three years before Eric Wright was born. In January of 1997, as Thorpe and Wright were sworn in to lead the country into the 21st Century, no one could have guessed what lay just ahead.