

## CHAPTER ONE

Amman, Jordan

“The president . . . is missing.”

Even as the words came out of my mouth, I could hardly believe what I was saying. Neither could my editor.

There was a long pause.

“What do you mean, *missing*?” said the crackling, garbled voice on the other end of the line, on the other side of the world.

Allen MacDonald had worked for the *New York Times* for the better part of forty years. He’d been the foreign editor since I was in high school. For as long as I had been with the *Times*—now well over a decade—we’d worked together on all kinds of stories, from assassinations to terror attacks to full-blown wars. I was sure he had heard it all in this business . . . until now.

“I mean missing, Allen. Gone. Lost. No one knows where he is, and all hell is breaking loose here,” I said as I looked out over the devastation.

Amman’s gorgeous new international airport was ablaze. Thick, black smoke darkened the midday sun. Bodies were everywhere. Soldiers. Policemen. Ground crew. And an untold number of jihadists in their signature black hoods, their cold, stiff hands still gripping Russian-made AK-47s. Anyone not already dead, myself included, was wearing a protective chem-bio suit, breathing through a gas mask, and praying the worst of the sarin gas attacks were over.

“But I—I don’t understand,” Allen stammered. “CNN is reporting Air Force One is safe. That it’s already cleared Jordanian airspace. That it has a fighter escort.”

“It’s all true,” I replied. “But the president isn’t on it.”

“You’re sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“There’s no chance that you misheard.”

“No.”

“Misunderstood?”

“No.”

“Fog of war?” he pressed.

“Forget it.”

“Maybe somebody said it as a tactical diversion, to throw off ISIS or other enemies.”

“No, Allen, listen to me—the president is not on that plane. I’m telling you he’s missing, and people need to know.”

“Collins, if I go with this story and you’re wrong . . .”

Allen didn’t finish the sentence. But he didn’t have to. I understood the consequences.

“I’m not wrong, Allen,” I said. “This is solid.”

There was another pause. Then he said, “Do you realize what this means?”

“No,” I shot back. “I don’t know what this means. And neither do you. I don’t even know for sure if he’s been captured or injured or . . .” Now it was my voice trailed off.

“Or killed?” Allen asked.

“I’m not saying that.”

“What, then? Missing and presumed dead?”

“No, no—listen to me. I’m giving you precisely what I know. Nothing more. Nothing less.”

“So where do you think he is?”

“I have no idea, Allen. No one does. But my sources were explicit. Air Force One took off without the president.”

“Okay, wait,” Allen said. “I’m putting you on speaker phone. I’m going to record you. And Janie is here—she’s going to type up everything you tell us.”

I could hear some commotion as he set up a digital recorder, cleared space off his desk, and shouted for Mary Jane Harris, his executive assistant, to bring her laptop into his office immediately. A moment later they were ready.

I took a deep breath, did my best to wipe some of the soot from my gas mask, and checked my grandfather’s pocket watch. It was now 3:19 p.m. local time on Sunday, December 2.

“Okay, take this down,” I began. “The president of the United States is missing. Stop. Air Force One took off from the Amman airport under a U.S. fighter jet escort just after 2:30 p.m. Stop. But President Harrison Taylor was not on the plane. Stop. U.S. and Jordanian security forces are presently engaged in a massive search-and-rescue effort in Jordan to find the president. Stop. But at the moment the president’s whereabouts and safety are unknown. Stop.”

My hands were trembling. My throat was dry. And my left arm was killing me. I’d been shot—grazed really—just above the elbow in a firefight back at the palace. I was going to need something for the pain, and soon, but I knew Allen needed more details, so I kept going.

“The devastating chain of events began unfolding early Sunday afternoon in the northeast suburbs of Amman. Stop. Forces of the Islamic State launched a multi-prong terrorist attack on the Israeli-Palestinian peace summit being held at Al Hummar Palace. Stop. Just before the ceremony to sign a comprehensive peace treaty began, a Jordanian F-16 flying a combat air patrol fired an air-to-ground missile at the crowds gathered for the summit. Stop. The pilot of the F-16 then flew a suicide mission into the palace. Stop. Simultaneously, thousands of heavily armed ISIS terrorists penetrated the grounds of the palace. Stop. Under heavy fire, security forces evacuated President Taylor, Jordan’s King Abdullah II, Israeli Prime Minister Daniel Lavi, and Palestinian President Salim Mansour from the palace grounds. Stop. Lavi and Mansour were severely wounded and are being airlifted to Jerusalem and Ramallah respectively. Stop. Witnesses saw a black, bulletproof Chevy Suburban driven by U.S. Secret Service agents whisking President Taylor away from the scene of the attacks. Stop. But that vehicle never reached the airport. Stop. Sources tell the *Times* the president learned the airport was under attack by ISIS terrorists and called the commander of Air Force One and ordered him to take off immediately to protect the plane and crew. Stop. The president reportedly told the pilots he would recall them once Jordanian military forces regained control of the airport grounds. Stop. However, at this moment, senior U.S. government officials say they do not know where the president is; nor can they confirm his safety. Stop. Neither the president nor his Secret Service

detail is responding to calls.”

I paused, in part to allow Janie to get it all down, but she was a pro and had had no trouble keeping pace.

“I’m with you,” she said. “Keep going.”

“I think that’s it for now,” I said. “We need to get that out there. I can call back and dictate more details of the attack in a few minutes.”

“That’s fine, but who are your sources, J.B.?” Allen asked.

“I can’t say.”

“J.B., you have to.”

“Allen, I can’t—not on an open line.”

“J.B., this isn’t a request. It’s an order.”

“I have to protect my sources. You know that.”

“Obviously. I’m not saying we’re going to include them in the story, but I have to know that the sources are solid and so is the story.”

“Allen, come on; you’re wasting time. You need to get this out immediately.”

“J.B., listen to me.”

“No, Allen, I—”

“*J.B.*,” he suddenly shouted. I’d never heard him do it before. “I can’t just go on your word. Not on this. The stakes are too high. A story like this puts lives in danger. And getting it wrong is only half the issue. I’m not saying you’re wrong. I can hear in your voice you believe it’s true. And I’m inclined to believe you. But I have to answer to New York. And they’re going to have the White House and Pentagon and Secret Service going crazy if we publish this story. So tell me what you know, or the story doesn’t run.”