



SATURDAY, JANUARY 10 – 12:39 P.M. – WASHINGTON, D.C.

Their eyes locked for only a moment, but in that moment FBI Agent Marcus Santini knew something was terribly wrong.

He had seen that face. He knew that face. But how?

Santini's cab swerved violently to avoid hitting the man who had suddenly stepped into the flow of Washington, D.C., traffic. The man's eyes flashed with fear, but not of dying. He seemed oblivious to the danger of standing in the middle of Massachusetts Avenue, busy even on a Saturday. Instead, for that brief instant, he seemed rattled only by the look of recognition in Santini's eyes.

And then he bolted.

The cab started moving again, but Santini couldn't take his eyes off the man as he raced toward Union Station, clad in a thick winter coat and clutching a large backpack.

Santini had been trained to trust his instincts, but he had been with the bureau's Counterterrorism Division for less than a year. And this was his day off. What were the chances this guy was actually on a watch list? Two blocks from the Capitol? Less than a mile from the White House?

Then again, what if he was? What if something happened, and he had done nothing to stop it? Santini knew he would never be able to live with himself.

"Stop here," he ordered the driver.

“But, sir, we’re almost there,” the man replied.

“*Now*,” Santini insisted, tossing a twenty through the small opening in the Plexiglas divider and jumping out the back door, even as the taxi was still slowing to a stop.

He had less than a minute, if that. If the man made it onto one of the trains, Santini would never find him until it was too late.

Sprinting like he had in college—like he had during training at the FBI Academy in Quantico for eight lonely months away from his wife and two-year-old son—Santini raced for the Red Line. Down the escalator. Through the turnstiles. Onto the platform.

The chimes began ringing. The doors were closing. The train was about to leave. Santini boarded the last car just in time, scanning the crowd to his left and right. The man was not there.

Santini’s heart was pounding, and his doubts were rising. Was he overreacting? Was he in danger of winding up as a gossip item in the *Post*—“Junior Agent Mistakes Area Student for Suicide Bomber”?

The train began moving, heading west.

Santini glanced at his watch. It was 12:42. He knew the station at Judiciary Square was closed on Saturdays. That meant their first stop was Gallery Place-Chinatown. From there, nearly the entire D.C. Metro system was accessible—the Green Line to the Navy Yard, the Yellow Line to the Pentagon and Reagan National Airport, and only one Red Line stop away from FBI headquarters and the White House itself.

And they would be there in exactly three minutes.

Santini pulled out his phone and called a friend in the Directorate of Intelligence.

“Bobby, it’s Marcus. I need a favor, fast.”

“Whoa, whoa, slow down, big guy. You sound terrible.”

“I need every watch-list photo you have of priority-one targets—males, European or North African, eighteen to thirty. Can you e-mail those to my cell phone?”

“That’s a lot of photos, but I . . .”

Santini’s phone chirped. His battery was dying.

“*Can you do it?*” he pressed.

“I guess so, but why?”

“Just send them—*now*. I’ll call you back.”

Santini hung up and glanced at his watch again.

12:44.

He had less than a minute to the next stop.



George Murray was late, and he was never late.

Overworked, absolutely. Underpaid, it went without saying. But though the chief archeologist for the Smithsonian Institution was not one who typically tolerated a lack of discipline in his staff, much less himself, today it simply couldn't be helped.

Uncharacteristically disheveled and out of breath, Murray burst through the revolving doors of the Willard InterContinental, arguably Washington's grandest five-star luxury hotel, beautifully situated around the corner from the Treasury Building and the White House.

"I'm so sorry—I should have taken a cab," Murray confessed, wiping the sweat off his brow with one hand and shaking the hand of a literary agent from New York a bit too vigorously with the other.

"No, no, please, Dr. Murray. It is an honor to finally meet you in person. I've heard so much about you. You were very kind to call me."

"Well, I just wish I had more time, Mr. Catrell," Murray apologized. "I'm leaving for Israel tomorrow. I haven't even started to pack. My youngest is in bed with a fever. We can't figure out what he has. I've got to get my oldest to a basketball game in Annandale by four. . . ."

"Then let's have a seat," the agent insisted, guiding Murray over to some couches in a quiet corner of the lobby, where they could talk in private. "And please, call me Gene. Believe me, I would've happily waited longer. It's not every day a proposal as intriguing as yours comes along."



The train began to slow.

Marcus Santini stepped to the door. His right hand moved to the sidearm holstered under his overcoat. His left hand reached for his badge.

A voice came over the loudspeakers, announcing their location. The doors opened. Santini waited a moment, then looked out. Only a handful

of passengers stepped off the train and onto the platform. The man with the backpack wasn't among them.

Santini drew his weapon and, keeping it low and at his side, moved quickly to the next car. He ducked his head in but saw no one he recognized. He did the same for the next car, but again, Backpack wasn't there.

His doubts were rising again. Was this guy even *on* the Metro? There was only one train he could have gotten on, and this was it. But what if he had headed *into* Union Station instead, toward the shops or the movie theaters or perhaps the Amtrak trains? Which was worse: chasing a ghost or losing one?

Santini was about to call the whole thing off when he suddenly spotted Backpack. He was standing in the next car, nearly hidden by a group of giggling teenage girls. Santini's heart began racing again. If he was going to move, it had to be now. But was he really going to pull his weapon on this guy on a crowded D.C. subway car?

He still had no idea who the man was. He had no proof he was actually a threat. The backpack could be filled with schoolbooks or gym clothes or a ham sandwich and a six-pack of Coke, for all he knew.

Santini remembered an incident in London, shortly after the bombings there, when police had mistakenly shot and killed an innocent, unarmed man, thinking he was another suicide bomber. And yet, for all his doubts, Santini knew he had to move now, even at the risk of embarrassing himself and the bureau.

The chimes sounded again. The train doors began to close. Angry with himself for hesitating too long, Santini stuffed his sidearm into his coat pocket and quickly slipped into the train car behind Backpack's—just in time. The train began to move again.

Santini took a seat behind a large African-American woman carrying an armful of shopping bags, then noticed that the phone in his pocket was vibrating. He pulled it out and found that the e-mail had arrived. Actually, eight had arrived, the master file having been too large to send all at once. He scrolled through the photos as quickly as he could.

"*Come on, come on,*" he whispered under his breath.

There were too many faces, and none of them matched.

He glanced up at Backpack. But with so many people around him,

Santini couldn't get a better look at his face. He would have to go by memory. His phone chirped again. His battery was almost dead.

He scrolled through another set of photos, then glanced back at his watch. He had less than two minutes until they reached the next station. More e-mails. More photos. Santini's pulse was racing. Sweat was dripping down his back.

And then his heart stopped. *That* was him. *That* was Backpack.

Santini saved the image, then speed-dialed the FBI Operations Center.

"This is Special Agent Marcus Santini," he whispered, his voice quaking slightly as he gave his authorization code. "I'm on the Metro. Red Line. Heading west. I have a positive ID on one Alonzo Cabresi. High-priority target. Suicide profile. Bulletin says consider armed and extremely dangerous. Requesting backup at—"

But Santini's phone died before he could give his location.



"What did he just say?"

For a moment, the watch commander in the FBI Op Center couldn't believe what she'd just heard and made her colleague who had fielded the call repeat himself, just to be sure. A priority-one target in D.C.? On a Metro train, no less?

It wasn't possible. They'd had no warnings. No chatter. Nothing that would indicate an attack, imminent or otherwise. Just the opposite. After all that had happened in Russia, Iran, and the Middle East recently, the world had gone quiet. The last three months had been the quietest of her entire ten-year career.

"Trace the call," she ordered.

"I'm doing it now, ma'am."

"Let's go, let's go."

"I'm going as fast as I can, ma'am."

"How much longer?"

"At least another minute or two."

"We might not have that long."

She grabbed the red phone on the console in front of her and speed-dialed the Secret Service command post.

“Sir, this is Agent Andrews at the FBI Op Center. We are going to threat level delta. Secure POTUS and crash the White House.”



“Next stop Metro Center. Please watch your step.”

Santini raced through his options. But there weren't any. He was out of time. He would have to do this alone, he realized, and his hands began to tremble. At least he still had the element of surprise.

Then Santini looked up and saw Cabresi staring back at him from the adjoining train car. The man had a look of both shock and horror on his face. He'd been made, and he knew it. His hand moved to the backpack.

Instinctively, Santini drew his weapon. Cabresi ducked behind the teenage girls and moved to the exit. The doors opened. Cabresi made a mad dash for the escalators.

Santini moved to the door, but the woman in front of him did as well. He almost knocked her over trying to get out and in the process lost his footing and precious seconds. By the time he got back on his feet and onto the platform, Cabresi was nearly to the top of the stairs. Santini raised his sidearm and shouted, “*Stop, FBI.*”

But it was too late. Cabresi had disappeared.



He answered on the first ring.

“Secretary James?”

“Speaking.”

“Sir, this is the FBI Op Center. You have an urgent call from Director Harris.”

“Put him through.”

Homeland Security Secretary Lee James was headed to Baltimore to give a speech to a conference of mayors when the FBI director gave him the news. Now he ordered his protective detail to turn around and get him back to Washington as quickly as possible. His driver instantly slammed on the brakes and spun the heavily armored Chevy Suburban into a lane of oncoming traffic, followed by the rest of their security convoy.

“Where's your man now?” James asked.

“We lost contact,” said Harris. “But his last signal put him near Metro Center.”

James froze. That was just a block from the White House. It wasn’t possible. Not with all the safeguards they’d put in place. And what if Cabresi wasn’t alone? What if this was a coordinated attack? Worse, what if Cabresi wasn’t simply carrying conventional explosives, but a dirty bomb or a suitcase nuke? Even a small nuclear device detonated in the heart of Washington could kill fifty thousand people almost instantly. It could leave another quarter of a million dead within the next few days and weeks.

“Scott, tell me the president has already left for Camp David.”

“I’m afraid not,” said Harris. “Not until three. He’s giving a speech right now.”

“*Where?*” James pressed.

“The JW Marriott.”

James’ stomach tightened. The terrorist was heading right for the president.



“*Get him out, now.*”

That was all U.S. Secret Service Agent Jackie Sanchez heard in her earpiece. She didn’t hear why. She didn’t take time to ask. She simply moved like she’d been trained, like she had practiced a thousand times before.

President James “Mac” MacPherson was addressing the National Association of Manufacturers when Sanchez and two fellow agents grabbed him by his arms and jacket and escorted him quickly offstage. They were immediately surrounded by another dozen agents who created a security cordon around the president, while still other agents blocked the auditorium’s exits and calmly ordered the confused audience members to sit down and stay put.



The next sound Santini heard was a gunshot—and then screams.

He bounded up the escalator steps two at a time, weaving his way through a small crowd of terrified Japanese tourists as he did. Breathless,

he finally reached the top, only to find Cabresi in the street—gun drawn—forcing a mother and her two young children out of a green Dodge Caravan.

The mother was hysterical. She was trying to get her youngest out of a car seat, but the child's leg was stuck. Cabresi now shoved the gun in the woman's face and yelled at her to move faster.

Santini raced for the cover of a mail truck parked along the street and carefully moved himself into position. He raised his gun again and aimed for Cabresi's head. He wanted to take the shot but he couldn't. Not without the risk of hitting the mother or her kids.

The child's leg was now free, and Cabresi forced the woman and the kids to lie on the sidewalk, facedown. Santini feared he was about to kill them all, execution style.

He moved to the other side of the mail truck, inched his way forward, and calculated the distance to the minivan. It wasn't more than twenty-five or thirty yards. If he sprinted, he could be there in a matter of seconds. There was still the risk that Cabresi would kill the family. But he might kill them anyway, and many more.



"Let's go, let's go, let's go."

Agent Sanchez and her team raced the president down a labyrinth of hallways, through the kitchen, out the service entrance, and down the loading dock. There Sanchez shoved him into the back of his armored limousine, slammed the doors shut, and ordered the motorcade back to the White House.



Santini heard sirens in the distance.

They were coming from every direction. Cabresi heard them too. Panicked, he climbed inside the open driver's-side door and started the engine.

It was now or never.

As Cabresi peeled away—heading west down Pennsylvania Avenue—Santini bolted from the safety of the mail truck. He aimed his weapon and fired. He fired every round he had. The back windows of the Caravan

exploded. The vehicle almost veered out of control, smashing through a trash can and a fire hydrant before turning a corner and vanishing from Santini's sight.



“And if you actually find this scroll?” the book agent asked.

Murray could see Catrell's eyes dancing with anticipation and he leaned in closer, oblivious to all the sirens and commotion just down the street.

“It will be the greatest archeological discovery of the twenty-first century,” he whispered. “Which is why I wanted to meet with you before I left. You're actually the only—”

But Murray never finished his sentence.

A green Dodge Caravan suddenly jumped the curb and smashed into the front of the Willard. An instant later, a massive explosion ripped through the lobby. A ball of fire engulfed the famed hotel. Thick black clouds of smoke billowed high into the afternoon sky. Twisted metal and shards of glass were flying everywhere. The ceiling began to collapse.

When it was over, authorities would find George Murray and Gene Catrell among the dead and have no idea why.