



MONDAY, AUGUST 31—7:02 P.M. EST—CIA HEADQUARTERS, LANGLEY, VIRGINIA

It was going to be bloody, but it could be done, if they moved fast.

All eyes in the CIA's Global Operations Center turned to Danny Tracker. Once the deputy director of operations, Tracker, forty-six, was the newly installed director of the Central Intelligence Agency. Only he could authorize the Delta Force commander on the ground to carry out this strike, and it was he alone who would have to answer for his decision to the president, to a myriad of congressional oversight committees, and to his colleagues throughout the Byzantine world of U.S. intelligence.

The Agency had been hunting this "high-priority target" for months. Tracker watched as live video images of their prey streamed in from a Predator drone hovering—unheard, unseen—a mile above an abandoned warehouse outside of Sanaa, the capital of Yemen, where their target now entered, surrounded by scores of heavily armed bodyguards.

"How far away are they?" Tracker asked the senior watch officer beside him as he surveyed the feeds coming in on five enormous plasma TV screens on the wall before him.

"Both Delta teams are at least twenty minutes out, sir."

Tracker winced. Twenty minutes was an eternity in his business. They had to take this guy down fast. Umberto Milano, after all, was the head of operations for the Legion, one of the most feared terrorist organizations on the planet.

Tracker flipped through the file in his hands, the one stamped “CLASSIFIED—EYES ONLY” in red. Only forty, Milano, the Sicilian-born son of Marxist radicals, had already served seven years’ hard time for blowing up two banks in Rome and one in Florence. Converted to Islam in prison. Escaped with two fellow inmates in 2000. Fled to Afghanistan. Trained with bin Laden. Returned to Europe just before 9/11. Joined the Legion, a loosely affiliated European arm of Al-Qaeda. Planned the Madrid train bombings in 2004. Responsible for at least eight other bombings from Casablanca to Cairo and from Jakarta to Jerusalem.

After the demise of Al-Qaeda, Milano provided financial and logistical assistance to the Al-Nakbah terror network run by Yuri Gogolov and Mohammed Jibril. What’s more, the Agency had some evidence—circumstantial but compelling—that Milano had masterminded the suicide bombing at the Willard InterContinental in D.C. the previous January.

Tracker had no doubt the Legion was planning something far deadlier, but at the moment, he had no idea what. Milano had eluded the Agency for years, operating in the shadows and off the grid. They had no idea where he lived. They had very little idea who his contacts and associates were. All they had were occasional bits and pieces of phone and e-mail intercepts; this was the first time they’d ever been able to spot and track him in real time. They needed to take him down. They needed to make him talk. They needed to extract every last bit of information they could. And they needed to do it now.

“Yesterday’s tip on Milano’s movements—do we know where it came from?” Tracker asked.

“No, sir,” the watch officer said.

“But you’re absolutely certain it’s him in that warehouse?”

“Yes, sir, I am.”

Tracker turned to two senior intelligence analysts, each of whom had spent much of his career focused on the Legion.

“Do you guys concur?”

“I do, sir,” one said.

“No question,” the other said. “That’s Milano, all right. And with all due respect, sir, we need to take him before it’s too late.”

Tracker turned back to the senior watch commander and asked, “Do the Delta teams have everything they need to bring this guy in?”

But the commander was no longer listening to the conversation. His eye had suddenly been drawn back to the live feed coming in from the Predator.

Now Tracker looked there too. “You’ve got to be kidding me.” He cursed. “They’re leaving already?”

No one said a word. The Predator feed said it all. A dozen armed men were clearly exiting the warehouse and taking up positions around the third vehicle in a line of five black SUVs.

“How much longer until Delta is on scene?” Tracker asked.

“They’re still ten minutes out, sir.”

Tracker glanced at his watch. They didn’t have ten minutes.

President James “Mac” MacPherson was en route to Los Angeles. Tracker knew he’d love nothing more than to be able to point to a new success in the War on Terror during his prime-time speech that night at the Republican National Convention. Giving the president the ability to announce a major CIA coup to a global audience couldn’t hurt his Agency’s tattered image, or his own career.

The country was deeply divided over the future. The rhetoric of the campaign could not have been hotter. Both major parties were locked in a knock-down, drag-out battle over who could better protect the country for the next four years. MacPherson had served his eight years and couldn’t serve again. The latest polls showed his anointed successor in a dead heat with the Democratic challenger. Perhaps an operation like this could help tip the balance, even a little, Tracker thought. Perhaps in a race this close, even a little boost might be all that was needed.

“Sir, we need a decision,” the senior watch commander pressed.

Tracker felt his pulse racing. He had only two options. He could let Milano leave the warehouse, use the Predator to follow him to his next location, and pray Delta could move against him later that day or the next. Or he could forfeit the possibility—slim though it was—of bringing Milano in alive by ordering the Predator to fire two Hellfire missiles into the warehouse and parking lot, killing everyone and destroying everything inside and out.

“We’re out of time, sir. What do you want to do?”

Tracker hesitated. What was more valuable—the information he might be able to extract from Milano later or the worldwide headlines

Milano's death could give them now? He stared at video feed and cursed again. Sometimes technology wasn't enough.

"Take him out," Tracker said at last. "Take them all out."

All eyes turned to the center video screen, and as the senior watch commander relayed the orders to the Predator controllers in the field, everyone in the Global Operations Center seemed to hold their collective breath. No one said a word, but Danny Tracker was sure they were all thinking what he was. Was he doing the right thing? How much actionable intelligence was he about to sacrifice? What exactly would the president say when he heard the news? Was there another way?

But it was too late now.

Suddenly they could see the contrails of two laser-guided AGM-114 Hellfire missiles streaking toward the earth below. One hit the center of the warehouse. The other hit the center vehicle in the convoy. Two enormous explosions filled the screen with a blinding light. Then thick, black smoke rose from the wreckage. Then came grisly, full-color images of a blazing building, five burning vehicles, and body parts strewn about as far as the eye could see.

The ops center erupted in cheers, but Tracker began pacing. He couldn't celebrate. Not yet. Not until they had all that they'd come for.

He stared at the Predator feed and the digital clock on the far wall and felt the acid chewing through the walls of his stomach. He clenched his teeth as two vans pulled onto the scene. Eight Delta operators, all heavily armed and clad in Kevlar and black masks, set up a secure perimeter. Four more headed straight into the inferno. It was their job to find Milano, confirm his remains, and secure any evidence they might find on or around him, evidence that could—if they were lucky—give them some idea of what the Legion was planning next. But they were quickly running out of time. Whatever didn't burn or melt, Tracker knew, would be in the hands of the local police in less than ten minutes, and their best hope for protecting against the next attack would be lost forever.