



A PRESIDENTIAL MOTORCADE is a fascinating sight, particularly at night, and particularly from the air.

Even from twenty miles out and ten thousand feet up—on approach to Denver International Airport’s runway 17R—both pilots of the Gulfstream IV could clearly see the red-and-blue flashing lights of the entourage on the ground at about one o’clock, beginning to snake westward down Pena Boulevard.

The late November air was cool, crisp, and cloudless. A full moon bathed the flat plains below and the Rockies jutting heavenward to the right with a bluish tint and remarkable visibility.

A phalanx of two dozen police motorcycles led the way toward downtown Denver, forming a V, with the captain of the motorcycle force riding point. Then came a dozen Colorado State Patrol squad cars, four rows of three each, spread out and taking up all three lanes of westbound highway with more lights and more sirens. Two jet-black Lincoln Town Cars followed immediately, carrying the White House advance team. These were followed by two black Chevy Suburbans, each carrying teams of plainclothes agents from the United States Secret Service.

Next—one after the other—came two identical limousines, both black, bulletproof Cadillacs built to precise Secret Service specifications. The first was code-named Dodgeball. The second, Stagecoach. To the untrained eye it was impossible to know the difference, or to know which vehicle the president was in.

The limousines were tailed closely by six more government-owned

Suburbans, most carrying fully locked-and-loaded Secret Service assault teams. A mobile-communications vehicle followed, along with two ambulances, a half dozen white vans carrying staffers, and two buses carrying national and local press, baggage, and equipment. Bringing up the rear were a half dozen TV-network satellite trucks, more squad cars, and another phalanx of police motorcycles.

Overhead, two Denver Metro Police helicopters flanked the motorcade—one on the right, the other on the left—and led it by at least half a mile. All in all, the caravan lit up the night sky and made a terrible racket. But it was certainly impressive—and intimidating—for anyone who cared to watch.

A local FOX reporter estimated that more than three thousand Coloradoans had just packed a DIA hangar and tarmac to see their former governor—now president of the United States—come home for Thanksgiving, his last stop on a multistate “victory tour” after the midterm elections. Some had stood in the crosswinds for more than six hours. They’d held American flags and hand-painted signs and sipped thermoses of hot chocolate. They’d waited patiently to clear through incredibly tight security and get a good spot to see the president step off *Air Force One*, flash his warm trademark smile, and deliver one simple, Reaganesque sound bite: “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet.”

The crowd absolutely thundered with approval. They’d seen his televised Thanksgiving-week address to the nation from the Oval Office. They knew the daunting task he’d faced stepping in after Bush. And they knew the score.

America’s economy was stronger than ever. Housing sales were at a record high. Small businesses were being launched at a healthy clip. Unemployment was dropping fast. The Dow and NASDAQ were reaching new heights. Homeland security had been firmly reestablished. The long war on terrorism had been an unqualified success. Al-Qaeda and the Taliban had been obliterated. Osama bin Laden had finally been found—dead, not alive.

Forty-three terrorist training camps throughout the Middle East and North Africa had been destroyed by the U.S. Delta Force and British SAS commandos. Not a single domestic hijacking had occurred in the past several years—not since a U.S. air marshal put three bullets in the heart of a

Sudanese man who single-handedly tried to take over a U.S. Airways shuttle from Washington Dulles to New York. And thousands of cell members and associates of various terrorist groups and factions had been arrested, convicted, and imprisoned in the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

Overseas, however, the news wasn't quite as good. The global economy still struggled. Car bombs and assassinations continued to occur sporadically throughout Europe and Asia as remaining terrorist networks—unable to penetrate the U.S.—tried to find new ways to lash out against the allies of the “Great Satan.” One newspaper editorial said the U.S. seemed to be playing “terrorist whack-a-mole,” crushing the heads of some cells at home only to see others pop up around the world. This was true. Many Americans still felt unsafe traveling overseas, and global trade, though improving, remained somewhat sluggish.

But within the U.S. there was now a restored sense of economic optimism and national security. Domestically, at least, recessions were a thing of the past and terrorism seemed to have been quashed. Presidential promises made were promises kept. And the sense of relief was palpable.

As a result, the president's job-approval ratings now stood steady at a remarkable 71 percent. At this rate he'd win reelection in a landslide, probably pick up even more House seats and very likely a solid Senate majority as well.

Then the challenge would be to move to the next level, to bolster the U.S. and international economies with his sweeping new tax cut and simplification plan. Could he really get a single-rate, 17 percent flat tax through Congress? That remained to be seen. But he could probably get the country back just to low tax rates, say 10 percent and 20 percent. And that might be good enough. Especially if he abolished the capital-gains tax and allowed immediate write-offs for investment in new plants, buildings, equipment, high-tech hardware, and computer software, instead of long, complicated, Jurassic Park-era depreciation schedules.

But all that was a headache for another day. For now, it was time for the president to head to the Brown Palace Hotel in downtown Denver and get some rest. Wednesday night he'd attend a Thanksgiving-eve party and raise \$4.2 million for the Republican National Committee, then join his family already up at their palatial lodge, nestled on the slope of the Rockies in Beaver Creek, for a cozy, intimate weekend of skiing

and turkey and chess. He could smell the fireplace and taste the sweet potatoes and marshmallows even now.



The motorcade cleared the airport grounds at 12:14 Wednesday morning.

Special Agent Charlie McKittrick of the U.S. Secret Service put down his high-powered night-vision binoculars and looked north, scanning the night sky from high atop the DIA control tower. In the distance, he could see the lights of the Gulfstream IV, a private jet chartered by some oil-company executives that was now the first aircraft in the holding pattern and waiting to land. Whenever the president, vice president, or other world leader flew into an airport, all other aircraft were prevented from landing or taking off, and the agency tasked with maintaining complete security put an agent in the tower to keep control of the airspace over and around the protectee. In this case, until Gambit—the code name assigned to the president—was secure at the Brown Palace, McKittrick would maintain his vigil in the tower and work with the local air-traffic controllers.

The holding pattern was now approaching five hours in length, and McKittrick had heard the G4 pilots repeat four times that they were running low on fuel. He hardly wanted to be responsible for a foul-up. It wasn't his fault the flight crew hadn't topped their tanks in Chicago rather than flying straight from Toronto. But it would certainly be his fault if something went wrong now. He glanced down at the radar screen beside him and saw thirteen other flights behind the Gulfstream. They were a potpourri of private and commercial aircraft whose pilots undoubtedly couldn't care less about the White House victory lap or the Secret Service. They just wanted their landing instructions and a good night's rest.

"All right, open 17R," McKittrick told the senior air-traffic controller, his voice suggesting an unhealthy combination of fatigue and fatalism. "Let's get the G4 down and go from there."

He cracked his knuckles, rubbed his neck, and swallowed the last of his umpteenth cup of coffee.

"TRACON, this is Tower. Over," the senior controller immediately barked into his headset. Exhausted, he just wanted to get these planes on the ground, go home, and call in sick the next day. He desperately needed a vacation, and he needed it now.

Linked by state-of-the-art fiber optics to the FAA's Terminal Radar Approach Control facility three miles south of the airport, the reply came instantaneously.

"Tower, this is TRACON. Over."

"TRACON, we're bringing in the Gulfstream on 17 Romeo. Put all other aircraft on notice. It won't be long now. Over."

"Roger that and hallelujah, Tower. Over."

The senior controller immediately switched frequencies to one-three-three-point-three-zero, and began putting the Gulfstream into an immediate landing pattern. Then he grabbed the last slice of cold pepperoni-and-sausage pizza from the box behind McKittrick and stuffed half of it in his mouth.

"Tower, this is Foxtrot Delta Lima, Niner Four Niner, on approach for 17 Romeo," said the Gulfstream. "We are going to increase speed and get on the ground as quickly as possible. Roger that?"

His mouth full, the senior controller thrust his finger at a junior controller by the window, who immediately jumped into action, used to finishing his bosses' sentences.

The young man grabbed a headset, and patched himself in. "Roger that, Foxtrot. You're cleared for landing. Bring her down."

Special Agent McKittrick didn't want to be here any more than these guys wanted him to be. But they'd better get used to it—all of them. If Gambit won his reelection campaign, he might as well open up his own bed-and-breakfast.



On board the Gulfstream, the pilot focused on the white strobe lights guiding him in and the green lamps imbedded down both sides of the runway.

He didn't have to worry about any other planes around him, because there weren't any. He didn't have to worry about any planes taxiing on the ground, because they were still in the Secret Service's holding pattern. He increased speed, lowered the landing gear, and tilted the nose down, taking the plane down from ten thousand feet to just a few hundred feet in a matter of moments.

A few minutes more and the long night would be over.



Marcus Jackson munched on peanut M&M's and tapped away quietly on his Sony VAIO notebook computer as the motorcade sped along at well over seventy miles an hour.

As the *New York Times* White House correspondent, Jackson was permanently assigned Seat 1 on Press Bus 1. That put him just over the right shoulder of the driver, able to see and hear everything. But having awoken at 4:45 a.m. for baggage call in Miami—and having visited twelve states in the past four days on the president's Thanksgiving Tour—Jackson couldn't care less what could be seen or heard from his coveted seat. All he wanted to do now was get to the hotel and shut down for the night.

Behind Jackson sat two dozen veteran newspaper and magazine reporters, TV correspondents, network news producers, and "big foot" columnists—the big, brand-name pundits who not only wrote their political analyses for the *Times* and the *Post* and the *Journal* but also loved to engage each other on *Hannity & Colmes* and *Hardball*, O'Reilly and King, *Crossfire* and *Capital Gang*. All of them had wanted to see the president's victory lap up close and personal. Now all of them wanted it to be over so they, too, could get home for Thanksgiving.

Some dozed off. Some updated their Palm Pilots. Others talked on cell phones with their editors or their spouses. A junior press aide offered them sandwiches, snacks, and fresh, hot coffee from Starbucks. This was the A team, everyone from ABC News and the Associated Press to the *Washington Post* and the *Washington Times*. Together, what the journalists on this bus alone wrote and spoke could be read, watched, or listened to by upward of 50 million Americans by 9 a.m.

So they were handled with care by a White House press operation that wanted to make sure the A team didn't add to their generally ingrained bias against conservative Republicans by also being hungry, cold, or in any other way uncomfortable. Sleep was something national political reporters learned to do without. Starbucks wasn't.

A former *Army Times* correspondent who covered the Gulf War, then moved back to his hometown to work for the *Denver Post*, Jackson had joined the *New York Times* less than ten days before Gambit announced his campaign for the GOP nomination. What a roller coaster since then,

and he was getting tired. Maybe he needed a new assignment. Did the *Times* have a bureau in Bermuda? Maybe he should open one. *Just get through today*, Jackson thought to himself. *There'll be plenty of time for vacation soon enough*. He glanced up to ask a question about the president's weekend schedule.

Across the aisle and leaning against the window sat Chuck Murray, the White House press secretary. Jackson noticed that for the first time since he'd met Murray a dozen years ago, "Answer Man" actually looked peaceful. His tie was off. His eyes were closed. His hands were folded gently across his chest, holding his walkie-talkie with a tiny black wire running up to an earpiece in his right ear. This allowed him to hear any critical internal communications without being overheard by the reporters on the bus. On the empty seat beside Murray lay a fresh yellow legal pad. No to-do list. No phone calls to return. Nothing. This little PR campaign was just about over. Do or die, there was nothing else Murray or his press team could do to get the president's approval ratings higher than they already were, and he knew it. So he relaxed.

Jackson made a mental note: *This guy's good. Let him rest.*



Special Agent McKittrick was tired.

He walked over to the Mr. Coffee machine near the western windows of the control tower, out of everyone's way, itching to head home. He ripped open a tiny packet of creamer and sprinkled it into his latest cup. Then two packets of sugar, a little red stirrer, and *voilà*—a new man. Hardly. He took a sip—ouch, too hot—then turned back to the rest of the group.

For an instant, McKittrick's brain didn't register what his eyes were seeing. The Gulfstream was coming in too fast, too high. Of course it was in a hurry to get on the ground. But get it right, for crying out loud. McKittrick knew each DIA runway was twelve thousand feet long. From his younger days as a navy pilot, he figured the G4 needed only about three thousand feet to make a safe landing. But at this rate, the idiots were actually going to miss—or crash. No, that wasn't it. The landing gear was going back up. The plane was actually *increasing* its speed and pulling up.

"*What's going on, Foxtrot?*" screamed the senior controller into his headset.

When McKittrick saw the Gulfstream bank right toward the mountains, he knew.

*“Avalanche. Avalanche,”* McKittrick shouted into his secure digital cell phone.



Marcus Jackson saw the bus driver’s head snap to attention.

A split second later, Chuck Murray bolted upright in his seat. His face was ashen.

“What is it?” asked Jackson.

Murray didn’t respond. He seemed momentarily paralyzed. Jackson turned to the front windshield and saw the two ambulances and the mobile-communications van pulling off on either side of the road. Their own bus began slowing and moving to the right shoulder. Up ahead, the rest of the motorcade began rapidly pulling away from them. Though he couldn’t see the limousines, he could see the Secret Service Suburbans now moving at what he guessed had to be at least a hundred miles an hour, maybe more.

Jackson’s combat instincts took over. He grabbed for his leather carry-on bag on the floor, fished through it frantically, and pulled out a pair of sports binoculars he’d found handy during the campaign when the press was kept far from the candidate. He trained on the Suburbans and quietly gasped. The tinted rear windows of all four specially designed Suburbans were now open. In the back of each of the first four vehicles were sharpshooters wearing black masks, black helmets, steel gray jumpsuits, and thick Kevlar bulletproof vests. What sent a chill down Jackson’s spine, however, wasn’t their uniforms, or their high-powered rifles. It was the two agents in the last two vehicles, the ones holding the Stinger surface-to-air missile launchers.



*“Talk to me, McKittrick.”*

Special Agent-in-Charge John Moore—head of the president’s protective detail—shouted into his secure cellular phone as he sat in the front seat of Gambit’s limousine, his head craning to see what was happening behind him.

Just hearing McKittrick yell, “Avalanche”—the Secret Service’s code

for a possible airborne attack—had already triggered an entire series of preset, well-trained, and now instinctual reactions from Moore’s entire team. Now he needed real information, and he needed it fast.

“You’ve got a possible bogey on your tail,” said McKittrick from the control tower, his binoculars trained on the lights of the Gulfstream. “He’s not responding to his radio, but we know it’s working.”

“*Intent?*”

“What’s that?” McKittrick asked, garbled by a flash of static.

“*Intent? What’s his intent? Is he hostile?*” shouted Moore.

“Don’t know, John. We’re warning him over and over—he’s just not responding.”

Gambit lay on the floor, his body covered by two agents. The agents had no idea what threats they faced. But they were trained to react first and ask questions later. Moore scrambled over them all to get a better look through the tiny back window. For a moment he could see the lights of the Gulfstream bearing down on them. Suddenly the plane’s lights went out, and Moore lost visual contact.

Glancing to his right, he could see Dodgeball—the decoy limousine—pulling up to his side as Pena Boulevard ended and the motorcade poured onto I-70 West. Both cars were moving at close to 130 miles an hour.

The question facing both drivers was whether or not they could get off the open and exposed stretch of highway they were now on and get under the interwoven combination of concrete bridges and overpasses that lay just ahead at the interchange of I-70 and I-25. This would make an overhead attack more difficult, though not impossible. The challenge would be driving fast enough to get there and then being able to stop fast enough—or stop and back up fast enough—to get and stay under the bridges and out of the potential line of fire.

But what if the bridges were booby-trapped with explosives? What if the Denver Metro Police and Colorado State Patrol securing the bridges were compromised? Were they escaping an enemy, or being driven into the enemy’s hands?

Moore reacquired the Gulfstream in his high-powered night-vision binoculars. It was gaining fast.

“Nighthawk Four, Nighthawk Five, this is Stagecoach. Where are you guys?” Moore shouted into his wrist-mounted microphone.

“Stagecoach, this is Nighthawk Five. We’ll be airborne in one minute,” came the reply.

“Nighthawk Four. Same thing, Stagecoach.”

Moore cursed. The pair of AH-64 Apaches were state-of-the-art combat helicopters. Both could fly at a maximum speed of 186 miles per hour, and both carried sixteen Hellfire laser-guided missiles and 30 mm front-mounted machine guns. But both—on loan from the army’s Fort Hood in Texas—might actually end up being useless to him.

After the suicide airplane attacks against the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, the Secret Service had decided that motorcades should be tailed by Apaches. “Just in case” was, after all, the Service’s unofficial motto. But the White House political team went nuts. It was one thing to keep the president secure. It was another thing to have military helicopters flying CAP—combat air patrols—over city streets and civilian populations year after year after year. A compromise was reached. The Apaches would be pre-positioned and on standby at each airport the president or vice president was flying into, but wouldn’t actually fly over the motorcades. It seemed reasonable at the time. Not anymore.

But it didn’t matter now. Moore’s mind scrambled for options.

*“Nikon One. Nikon Two. This is Stagecoach. Turn around and get in front of this guy.”*

“Nikon One, roger that.”

“Nikon Two, roger.”

The two Denver Metro Police helicopters weren’t attack helicopters. They certainly weren’t Apaches. They were basically reconnaissance aircraft using night-vision video equipment to look for signs of trouble on the ground—not the air. But they immediately peeled off the formation and banked hard to get behind Gambit’s limousine. The question was, could they make the maneuver fast enough? And what then?



The Gulfstream pilot ripped his headphones off and tossed them behind him.

The tower was screaming at him in vain to change course immediately or risk being fired upon. Why be distracted?

He could see the police helicopters beginning to break right and left,

respectively, so he increased his speed, lowered the nose and began bearing down on the two limousines, now side by side.

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“Tommy, you got an exit coming up?” Moore shouted back to his driver.

“Sure do, boss. Coming up fast on the right—270 West.”

“Good. Stagecoach to Dodgeball.”

“Dodgeball—go.”

“Pull ahead and break right at the 270 West exit. 270 West—go, go, go.”

Agent Tomas Rodriguez imperceptibly eased his foot off the gas, just enough to let the decoy limousine roar ahead, pull in front of him, and then peel off to the right—just barely making the exit ramp.

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For the first time, the Gulfstream pilot let out a string of obscenities.

With one limousine peeling off to the right and two Chevy Suburbans going with it, he suddenly doubted the intelligence he’d been given. Which limousine was he after? Which had the president? He was pretty sure it was not the one that had just peeled off. But now he hesitated.

His heart was racing. His palms were sweaty. His breathing was rapid and he was scared. Yes, he was ready to die for this mission. But he’d better take someone with him—and the right someone at that.

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“Tommy, how far to the interchange?” Moore demanded.

“Don’t know, sir—five miles, maybe eight.”

It felt like they were moving at light speed, but Moore didn’t like his odds. After all, they were rapidly approaching the outskirts of Denver. He could clearly see the city skyline and the bright blue Qwest logo, high atop the city’s tallest building. All around him, industrial buildings and restaurants and hotels and strip malls were blurring past on each side of the highway. In his race to escape, he was drawing the G4 into the city and putting thousands of innocent civilians in danger.

“Cupid, Gabriel, this is Stagecoach. Do you copy?” Moore sure hoped they did.

“Stagecoach, this is Cupid. Copy you loud and clear, sir.”

“Roger that, Stagecoach. This is Gabriel. Copy you five by five.”

“You guys got a shot?”

“Yes, sir,” said Cupid. “Ten miles out—2,500 feet up.”

Both Cupid’s and Gabriel’s eyesight was 20/20 uncorrected. Their night-vision goggles made the G4 impossible to lose against the night sky. Both voices were steady and calm. A former CIA special-ops guy, Cupid was extremely well trained, having lived in Afghanistan for years, training *mujahedin* how to use portable, shoulder-mounted, heat-seeking Stinger missiles in the war against the Soviets in the eighties. Gabriel was nearly as good, having been Cupid’s understudy for the past six years.

Moore gripped the backseat of the limousine. He didn’t have time to consult Washington. He barely had enough time to give an order to shoot. What if he was wrong? What if he was misreading the situation? If the United States Secret Service shot down a bunch of businessmen in cold blood . . .



“Sir, it’s Home Plate—line one,” Agent Rodriguez shouted from the driver’s seat.

Moore grabbed the digital phone lying on the seat beside him. “Stagecoach to Home Plate, go secure.”

“Secure, go. John, it’s Bud. What’ve you got?”

Bud Norris was the gray, stocky, balding director of the U.S. Secret Service, a twenty-nine-year veteran of the Service and a Vietnam veteran who’d driven for U.S. generals and VIPs in Saigon until it fell. In 1981, he’d been President Reagan’s limousine driver the day John Hinckley Jr. tried to assassinate the president in a vain attempt to impress actress Jodie Foster. In fact, within the Service, Norris was widely credited with helping save Reagan’s life that day. At first, Reagan’s agents hadn’t realized he’d been shot—until he began coughing up bright red blood on the way to the White House. Told to divert immediately to GW Hospital, Norris slammed on the brakes, did a 180-degree turn into oncoming traffic on Pennsylvania Avenue, and made it to the hospital just moments before Reagan collapsed and slipped into unconsciousness from massive internal bleeding.

Norris was a pro. His agents knew it. And having worked his way up through the ranks from one promotion to another to the top spot just three years ago, Norris commanded enormous respect from his team.

“Sir, we’ve got a G4 bearing down on us. Broke out of a landing pattern, pulled up its gear, and cut its lights. We’re racing for cover but right now we’re in the open. Dodgeball broke right but the G4 is sticking with us,” Moore told his boss, surprised by the relative steadiness in his voice.

“Range?”

“Twenty-five hundred feet up, ten miles out, closing fast.”

“Contact?”

“Not anymore. Tower’s been talking to him all night. But now McKittrick’s screaming at them to change course and he’s getting nothing back.”

“Who’s on board?”

“I don’t know. Charter from Toronto. Supposed to be oil execs, but I don’t really know.”

“What’s your gut tell you, John?”

Moore hesitated for a moment. The full weight of responsibility for protecting the president of the United States sent an involuntary shudder through his body. He suddenly felt cold and clammy. His wrinkled, rumpled suit was now soaked with sweat. Whatever he said next would seal the G4’s fate—and his.

“I don’t know, sir.”

“Make a call, John.”

Moore took a deep breath—the first he actually remembered taking in the last several minutes. “I think we’ve got another kamikaze, sir, and he’s coming after Gambit.”

“Take him out,” Norris commanded instantly.

“We don’t know a hundred percent for sure who’s on board that plane, sir,” Moore reminded his boss, for the record, for the audiotapes being recorded in the basement of the Treasury Building in Washington.

“Take him out.”

“Yes, sir.”

Moore tossed the phone aside and grabbed his wrist-mounted microphone. “Nikon One, Nikon Two—this is Stagecoach. Abort. Abort. Abort.”

“Roger that, Stagecoach.”

Both police helicopters banked hard right and left respectively and raced for cover.

“Cupid, Gabriel, this is Stagecoach. You got tone?”

The November air and whipping winds caused by speeds upward of 140 miles per hour created a windchill in the back of the black Chevy Suburbans somewhere south of zero. It also made it almost impossible for any normal person to hear anything. But the agents code-named Cupid and Gabriel wore black ski masks and gloves to protect their faces and hands from arctic temperatures and wore the same brand and model of headphones worn by NASCAR’s Jeff Gordon at the Daytona 500. Moore’s voice was, therefore, crystal clear.

“Stand by, Stagecoach,” Cupid said calmly.

The G4 was now only seven miles from Gambit’s limousine and coming in white-hot.

First, Cupid “interrogated” the Gulfstream, pressing the IFF challenge switch on his Stinger missile launcher. This immediately sent a signal to the aircraft’s transponder asking whether it was a friend or foe. The answer didn’t actually matter at this point. But the procedure did.

*Beep, beep, beep, beep, beep, beep.*

The rapid-fire beeping meant the answer was “unknown.” Cupid sniffed in disgust, turned off the safety, and pushed the actuator button forward and downward. This warmed up the BCU—the battery coolant unit—hooked to Cupid’s belt and made the weapon go live. Though it took only five seconds, it felt like a lifetime.

Next, Cupid triggered an infrared signal at the G4 to determine its range and acquire the heat emanating from the plane’s jet engines. Instantly hearing a strong, clear, high-pitched tone, he quickly pressed the weapon’s uncaging switch with his right thumb and held it in, and the tone got louder. He now had a lock on the G4, just three miles away and down to a mere one thousand feet.

“I have tone. I have a lock,” Cupid shouted into the whipping wind and the microphone attached to his headphones. The G4 was now just two miles back.

“Me, too, sir,” Gabriel echoed.

Moore was not normally a religious man. But he was today.

“Oh, God, have mercy,” he whispered, then crossed himself for the first time since graduating from St. Jude’s Catholic High School.

“Fire, fire, fire,” Moore shouted.

“Roger that. Hold your breath, hold your breath,” Cupid shouted.

Moore and all his agents immediately responded, gulping as much oxygen as they possibly could. But Cupid wasn’t actually talking to them. Per his intensive training, he was reminding himself and his driver that they were about to be trapped inside a live, mobile missile silo, and it wasn’t going to be pretty. Cupid’s driver quickly lowered every other window in the vehicle and threw another switch turning on a small, portable air pump as well. The G4 was now less than a mile back.

“Three, two, one, fire.”

Cupid squeezed the trigger.

Nothing happened.

Moore waited, his heart racing, his eyes desperately scanning the sky.

“Cupid, what’s the problem?”

“Don’t know, sir. Malfunction. Hold on.”

“I don’t have time to—Gabriel, talk to me.”

“Got it, sir. Don’t worry. Hold your breath, hold your breath. Three, two, one . . .”

The Stinger missile exploded from its fiberglass tube and streaked into the night sky. The Suburban filled with a flash of blinding fire and hot, toxic, deadly fumes. For a moment, the driver began to lose control of the vehicle. Moore could see the Suburban rock and swerve. But within seconds the smoke and fumes were sucked out of the vehicle and into the atmosphere. The driver could see again. Gabriel could breathe again if he wanted to—but he didn’t. Not until he was sure.



McKittrick knew combat firsthand.

He’d been in the Gulf War. He’d seen gunfire and death. But he’d never seen anything like this. Nor would he again. As he watched through his high-powered binoculars from the control tower, he saw the Stinger missile tear the G4 in half. The plane then erupted in a massive fireball. McKittrick fell to the ground, screaming in pain. The explosion

was magnified so intensely by his night-vision binoculars that it had burned holes in his retinas, leaving him permanently blinded.



Moore was horrified.

Despite all of his training, he was suddenly completely unprepared for what was happening. This was no ordinary charter plane falling from the sky. It was a death machine, packed with explosives for maximum impact. The roar of the explosion was deafening, heard as far away as Castle Rock. The sky was now on fire. Night turned to day. The flash of heat was unbearable. Molten metal rained down on the motorcade.

Cupid's Chevy Suburban swerved hard and barely escaped being landed upon by the disintegrating G4. Gabriel was not so lucky. Moore saw one of the G4's engines slam into the young agent's vehicle and explode into yet another blinding fireball. But what Moore saw next terrified him more than anything else. The fuselage of the G4 was hurtling at him like a flaming meteor, propelled forward by the force of the blast.

"Tommy!" Moore screamed.

Agent Rodriguez began swerving right, heading for an off-ramp and praying desperately the car wouldn't overturn. But it was too late. The G4's burning fuselage crashed into the pavement just behind them and slammed into the back of the limousine, sending Stagecoach careening into the concrete dividers in the center of the superhighway in a series of 360-degree spins. The car rolled over and over again in a fury of sparks and flames and smoke, eventually grinding to a halt upside down below the overpass for which Rodriguez had been racing. Inside Stagecoach—from the moment of impact—airbags exploded from the steering wheel and dashboard, from each car door and even from the roof, a feature designed exclusively for Secret Service vehicles, particularly since no one inside ever wore seat belts.



I-70 was ablaze.

The wreckage of the G4 and whatever was inside it was strewn everywhere, on fire and scorching hot. The surviving Suburbans screeched to a halt. Secret Service assault teams immediately jumped out, armed with

M16 rifles and fire-suppression equipment. Cupid regained his bearings and quickly began to check his weapon for the malfunction. He'd personally failed his mission. He had no idea what else might transpire. And he wasn't about to take any chances.

Dodgeball and its security package now reversed course and raced to rejoin Stagecoach. Weaving carefully through the wreckage, the backup vehicles arrived to find assault teams taking up positions in a perimeter around Gambit's car. Two more assault teams quickly joined their colleagues while three agents hauled a large metal box from the back of one of the Suburbans and hurried it to Stagecoach's side. They rapidly removed a specially designed Jaws of Life kit and began trying desperately to get Gambit out of the wreckage.

Colorado State Patrol cars and local fire trucks, along with the motorcycle units, raced to the scene. Overhead, the two police helicopters hovered nosily, each shining powerful search lamps onto the ground below to help the rescuers do their jobs.



"John. John. This is Bud. What's your status?"

Bud Norris heard the explosion and the screaming through John Moore's digital cell phone on the backseat of Gambit's car. But now the line was pure static and he feared the worst. Norris grabbed a secure digital phone from the bank of phones in front of him and speed-dialed the lead Apache pilot.

"Nighthawk Four, this is Home Plate. Do you copy?" Norris barked.

"Home Plate, this is Nighthawk Four—we have a Code Red in progress. Repeat, we have a Code Red in progress. Please advise. I repeat, please advise."

"Nighthawk, you've got video capability, right?"

"Affirmative, Home Plate. We've got three systems on board. What do you need?" the lead pilot responded.

"What've you got?" Norris asked, his mind suddenly scrambling to remember the details he needed.

"Sir, we've got the TADS FLIR system, which is thermal imaging. But, sir, you've got two police helicopters here lighting the whole scene with spotlights. It's basically a TV studio down there, sir. If you'd like, we

can use our Day TV system with black-and-white video imaging, or the DVO system with full color and magnification. It's your call, sir."

"Can you get it to me through a secure satellite, son?"

"We can get it to the Pentagon, sir. I think they can patch you in, sir, but don't quote me. You gotta check with Ops to be sure."

"I'll do it. Start transmitting, son. I'll take care of the rest."

Norris picked up another phone and speed-dialed the other Apache. "Nighthawk Five, this is Home Plate. You there? Over."

"Nighthawk Five, standing by, sir."

"Set up a perimeter around the crash site and tell the news helicopters they're grounded immediately. I'm scrambling an F-15 fighter squadron to join you in the next few minutes, and I want a no-fly zone over the state of Colorado. Got that?"

"Roger that, Home Plate."

Next, Norris sent out a Code Red on all Secret Service frequencies and gave the word for the vice president, the Speaker of the House, and all cabinet members—spread out all over the country for the holidays—to be evacuated to secure underground facilities immediately. Moments later Norris was on the phone with the secretary of defense and the Pentagon watch commander. The air force scrambled aircraft to secure the skies over Denver.

Now a live, color, digital video feed from the hovering Nighthawk Four began streaming into the National Military Command Center, the nuclear-missile-proof war room deep underground, below the Pentagon. It was then cross-linked via secure fiber-optic lines to the Secret Service command center in the bombproof basement of the Treasury Department in Washington, the White House Situation Room, the FBI Op Center, and the CIA's Global Operations Center at Langley. Norris could finally see the grisly scene unfolding on one of the five large-screen TVs. His top staff worked the phones around him, gathering intelligence from the ground, alerting other security details and opening a direct line to FBI Director Scott Harris.

"My God," Norris said quietly.

The terrorists had struck again.