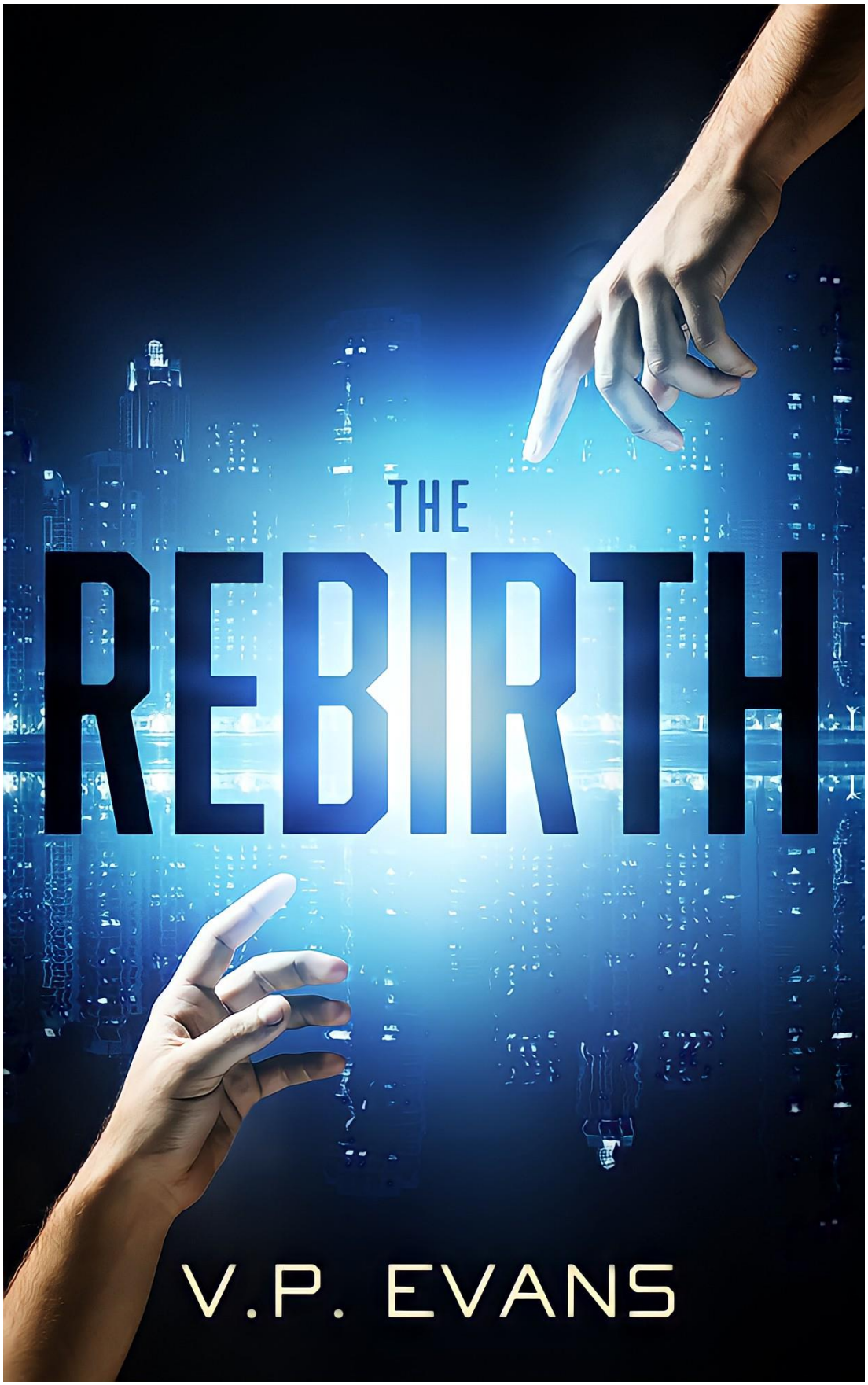

THE
REBIRTH
V.P. EVANS

# THE REBIRTH

a

novel

V.P. EVANS

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This is a work of fiction, except for the … well, you know …

*To you …*

The saddest aspect of life right now is that science
gathers knowledge faster than society gathers wisdom.

—*Isaac Asimov*

Let those who feel the heavy brazen hand of fear bear slavery:
freedom needs virtue, needs daring.

—*Andrea Calbo*

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# PROLOGUE

Thursday, March 16, 2023
10:49 p.m.
Chicago, Illinois

His time was up. He knew it. The bullet to his stomach had already soaked his pants with blood, and he could feel the warmth of it running into his shoes.

He staggered among the tall trees, pressing a hand over the hole, but that only pushed the blood out faster between his fingers. He managed a few more steps as though his body still believed it could survive—but he collapsed. His cheek scraped against the wet grass. Damp leaves froze his face. A bug jumped out of the ground, tickling his nostrils.

His gaze climbed up the thick, naked tree branches. Far to the north, along Lake Michigan's shoreline, vibrant lights fought to master the night sky, and eminent towers of steel and glass waved from the Loop.

Thrusting with his legs, he lugged his body toward the lake's edge. Less than ten feet away.

Wet muck soaked his white shirt. His arms shoveled the ground, spoiling the blanket of green with deep, muddled brown lines. His hands sank into the soil, molding balls of dirt and grass in each fist.

A muffled chuckle echoed from behind. The man who'd shot him stepped closer.

Dermot Walsh always knew it would end like this—a lifetime of countless crimes had inscribed his name on a great number of bullets, but each had missed him.

Till now.

Maybe this disturbing feeling wasn't exactly fear but a sick curiosity about the person who'd end his days.

He tried to roll his body over. The bullet burned, twisting in his gut. But the pain couldn't hold him back. He had to see his executioner. He pushed his body up and finally turned.

Pitch darkness consumed Burnham Park. Scattered pale lamps barely lit the hulking hitman who was approaching slowly, gun raking in his left hand. His chest suffocated in the tightly fitted suit—the buttons ready to hurl and his buff arms almost tearing the fabric apart.

*Who are you?* Walsh tried to ask. The blood had filled his throat, and he coughed some of it over his chin.

The hitman kneeled over him. His face lacked color and hair, including eyebrows or a beard. He was just a soulless, fey, creepy figure shrouded in the shadows.

"Mr. Walsh." The ghost's voice was clear, steady. "We gave you everything, but you wanted more. For years we've waited to repay your vanity."

What? Those words … how could they be true? In his thoughts, a single name popped up—*Jason*.

Something happened. The hitman raised his head, then scurried off somewhere into the park.

Walsh's bleary vision offered nothing more than faint images: his BMW parked nearby. Through the half-opened, smashed rear door, the last member of his security detail was hanging, attempting to grab the gun in front of him. The other two were already corpses.

Who was he? Walsh wondered. Harry? Jorge? It was impossible to recognize the man under the mask of dripping blood.

"Ha, ha, naughty little piggy," the bald hitman snickered, marching over to the bloody-faced man.

Confused about what he'd just heard, Walsh thrust a hand into his jacket pocket, searching for his cell phone.

He grasped it. He tried to—*ugh*, he didn't have the strength. Unable to pull it completely from his pocket, he struggled to type the message. The screen was barely visible. His eyes were burning. All he could see was a white fog.

He touched the screen with his fingers but couldn't feel anything. He couldn't even say if he was typing or if this whole attempt was just an illusion of his frigging mind.

He strived to focus, but with each passing second, his senses surrendered to the cold hug of death.

He had to make it. This was his only shot at naming his murderers.

The mouth of the hitman's gun made a dull sound as he pulled the trigger, taking the life of the bloody-faced man.

Walsh didn't have any more time. He hoped he'd keyed and sent the drafted message, though he feared he hadn't.

Steps gouged the ground as the hitman was pacing toward him.

Walsh directed his eyes toward the lake. Its special beauty had always been a comfort to him, and now its peaceful waters were calling him with their serene song of silence. Gritting his teeth, he funneled every scintilla of his remaining strength into moving his damn hand. He couldn't flex it, so he stretched it all the way to the right till it touched the cold water. He felt the need to groan, but air refused to enter his lungs. He plunged his hand into the water and opened his palm wide, praying that the cell phone had actually reached the lake, carrying the faith that the night wouldn't end with his death. Instead, his death would be the beginning … *Jason*.

The hitman stood before him, winking and aiming his gun mockingly.

Then a thick cloud enveloped Walsh's body.

# CHAPTER

# 1

The door banged shut.

"Jason?" Oscar exclaimed, his eyes shooting daggers at the man who'd just entered his office.

Jason paused for a moment. Then he approached with easy steps. "Hello, old friend."

Oscar's feet grazed the floor under his desk, keeping up the nervous rhythm from the instant his secretary had informed him about the unexpected visitor from his past.

"You're … I don't understand." He wedged his reading glasses on the bridge of his nose and rubbed his fingers over a lengthy *Chicago Tribune* article about the next day's St. Patrick's celebrations. "What … what are you doing here?"

"I know how this looks," Jason offered in a kind voice, possibly sensing the frustration that had overwhelmed Oscar. "We need to talk."

Oscar snorted, struggling to get his head together. One of very few black TV station owners and also the CEO of Channel Seven, Oscar Brown had been through dozens of stressful moments in his life, yet now he was fidgeting, consciously refraining from straightening his tie, his attention fixed on the grayish eyes of the person standing opposite him—Jason Roneros.

Jason seemed so changed from the last time they'd met: his skin was yellow as if forgotten by the coltish tickle of life. His face appeared exhausted as if feckless to carry the striking features of the past. Two brusque lines around his mouth resembled deep snicks. Fitful creases whipped his forehead. His white, medium-length hair was combed back, just as it had been ten years ago, though a receding hairline now marked his forehead. His skeletal hands seemed incapable of keeping the watch fastened on his wrist, while his legs were so bony they seemed likely to break. Although Jason, like Oscar, was in his mid-sixties, he looked at least a decade older.

"There's no time left."

His voice remained rich, though. It still carried the slight British accent from his days in Oxford.

A mild shaking started traversing Oscar's body. He put his glasses on the newspaper and stood up, using the desk for support. "You need to leave." He struggled to sound calm. "They were clear, Jason. We cannot be together. The deal—"

"The *deal* doesn't exist anymore." Jason scratched at his neck, above the collar of his white shirt, where an already reddened patch of eczema had become even more inflamed. "Dermot Walsh is dead."

"What? How do you know—?"

"He told me himself. A few minutes ago. Texted me, pointing out his killers."

"Murdered?" Oscar soughed, terrified by the ensuing sentence.

"By *them*," Jason added, confirming Oscar's dread. "The Imperatores are already after me."

"Jesus." *The Imperatores*. That name. Saliva filled Oscar's mouth, choking him. "After all these years … now? Why? We had a damned agreement!" He slammed his hands on the desk, trying vainly to expel his fear. His palms burned from the hit.

"To stop me," Jason said, his words faint yet filling the huge office. He tipped his head right and left like he was considering what to say next. "I'm dying, Oscar. Pancreatic cancer. I've got less than a year."

Oscar felt like he had been punched in the stomach, knocked by the truth's firm fist. The cursed illness that had plagued Jason in the early 2000s had reemerged, seizing his body, waiting patiently to steal his final breath. "I'm so sorry," he whispered. "But I don't understand. What does this have to do with Walsh or the deal or—"

"The Imperatores are looking for *this*." Jason pulled a blue metallic object, about eight inches wide, out of his jacket pocket. The letters "WD" shone on its corner.

"A hard drive?"

"You could call it a memoir of my guilty days."

"No, Jason, I can tell where this goes. We went through this years ago. We fought and failed. It pains me, too. But … it's a lost battle."

"It's so much bigger than what we tried back then. The hard drive contains over one hundred thousand pages of information about the organization. I've included names. Meetings. Events. Things that happened during the years I belonged to them."

"What? How long have you been doing this?"

"Since right after the deal."

"Ten years? Jesus Christ. I don't understand. You managed to secure Walsh's protection. It was a deal with the devil, but you saved us back then. Why did you risk your life?"

Jason took a step closer and came to stand less than two feet away from Oscar. "God, how those people used me. The mistakes I've made. I cannot erase them. I wish I could." He sighed. "Revealing their crimes is my apology to the world."

"*Revealing* …"

"I was planning to send copies to independent journalists—people who could make a case against the Imperatores."

"This is—" Oscar coughed. "Oh, this is …"

"I didn't manage to include everything. I … I thought"—Jason took a deep breath—"the doctors would give me more time, but the relapse was sudden. Still, the drive contains enough details. It could lead to an investigation against them. But the Imperatores suspect me. They have contacts everywhere. They must have found out how critical my health has become."

"So they made the hit." Oscar patted his mouth. The harsh scent of Camel tobacco hit him. "They broke the deal by killing Walsh to catch you off guard."

Jason nodded. "And get a clear path on ending me, too."

"They know you're here now. They're coming for you. Here!" Oscar peered at the shiny object in Jason's hands. "You want me to take it. That's why you're here."

Jason glanced at the drive. Then he raised his gaze and looked deep into Oscar's eyes. "Only if you want it." His tone remained soft, but the slight tremor in his voice betrayed his agony.

Oscar waved his hands like he was being offered a carcass.

"Listen to me," Jason said. "I would give anything for things to be different. This is the last road I ever wished to follow. But they've blocked all other options. This is the only copy. Do you remember our old getaway plan? Is the money still there?"

Rubbing his neatly trimmed gray hair, Oscar groaned. "There's not enough time."

"I'll help you. We can make it together."

"How, for heaven's sake?"

"By using their power for our benefit."

Oscar drew a long breath, letting Jason continue.

"*Late Night People*."

"Uh? The next show?" Oscar asked.

"Exactly. The Imperatores know I'm here, asking for your help. So let them come after me."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll be the scapegoat, Oscar. Arrange a live TV interview on *Late Night People*, and I'll misdirect them, claim I've shared these documents through your station, and say I'm going to get them published."

"Perhaps we *should* get them published."

"No. If the Imperatores learn what the documents contain, they'll build up their defenses through their associates to prevent anyone from searching deeper."

"Damn." Oscar rolled his eyes. "And the whole story will be dismissed."

Jason nodded. "The only chance of catching them unprepared is if someone works in the shadows. You have the ability and experience to do that, right? Don't hit immediately. Plan meticulously. Find trustworthy reporters who will follow the leads of my documents and go in deep to find the proof that could bring down the Imperatores. I'll keep the attention on me, buy you some time to disappear with the hard drive."

Oscar shook his head. "The Imperatores will find a way to stop the broadcast."

"Let's hope so."

"For Pete's sake, Jason, they're going to kill you!"

"Nothing can prevent my death." Jason's smooth tone was creepier than the words themselves.

"How can you say that?"

"Because it doesn't matter anymore." Jason's eyes shone. A fond smile crossed his face. "It's the best way for me to die, my friend. Looking straight at the camera and speaking about the Imperatores' existence, knowing that the world will learn the truth through my words when the time comes. God knows how long I've been waiting for this moment."

Dazzling memories popped up in Oscar's mind—pictures of the two of them in this very office, around the same desk, barely visible under stacks of papers that concealed a terrifying secret. He glanced at the drive again. "Is there really a chance?"

Jason nodded.

With the ball in Oscar's court, more commotion spread over him. Jason's irreversible end and the decision's weight caused a nervous tingle down Oscar's head and shoulders. He thought of the horrifying alternative: the door opening violently, men in suits entering his office, guns in hands, hardness on faces, then smiles and laughter at Oscar and Jason, two wrecked fools pathetically trying to deal a critical blow to the villains.

Oscar was a career man. Jason was an intellectual. Neither of them had chosen the family life. But this station was like Oscar's child. It had grown into a notable entity. Could he leave it to pursue a quest made for a different, younger, stronger self?

Like then, he was now torn in two. Ten years ago, this fight had almost cost them their lives. In an awful way, it had cost them their living. The deal's terms had been clear: Jason and Oscar were to spend their days defeated, silent. They were to forget everything about the Imperatores. Even the slightest provocation against this disgusting organization was equal to a death sentence. He remembered it all so clearly. Jason didn't want to stop, but Oscar couldn't continue the fight. Scared about the next day, and the next, he agreed to abandon their constant pursuit of the truth.

Perhaps now he should fight. Maybe he owed it to the old neighborhood of his boyhood—Chicago's Black Belt, which reeked of drugs and death. Back then, his childish eyes had witnessed friends with hopes and dreams suddenly headlining the news as punks and mules. As a teenager, he'd been unable to accept that it was so easy for someone to become a criminal, so he'd begun his quest to discover the facts behind Chicago's high crime rate. His research had led him to the beginning of the century when blacks in the South had discovered the stern face of freedom that the Jim Crow laws offered and had migrated to the North. Soon they had found new, different yet strangely similar, clean neighborhoods that refused to get dirty through the addition of blackish families, so they denied them houses, jobs, and education, thereby lumping them in distant southern districts, like outsiders with souls that weighed as much as 20 forged bucks. Where did Oscar's thirst for searching originate? What had motivated him to become an investigative journalist and the founder of a channel that focused on uncomfortable stories from poor and troubled communities like his own? He didn't know. He'd been dry for so long that he couldn't remember anymore. And now, just before a retirement that promised boring, lonely nights in front of the TV, the high time had struck once again.

What should he do? He could kick Jason out, forget about the hard drive, and be safe. But that would not help for long. It was so strange … Even though they looked tired, Jason's eyes glittered with hope and faith in the item he was holding—the item that could make the Imperatores sweat like Oscar was right now.

"People deserve the truth," Jason had said during their first meeting.

Now, a decade later, something screamed inside Oscar, begging him to make one last attempt at achieving the impossible.

Once the secrets were out, the planet would be a different place. Perhaps a better place; perhaps not. But definitely different. It was true that Jason's revelations could have an impact so profound they could influence the course of history. And everything would begin from here—from his station. What if this was the most significant moment of his career?

"Of my life?" he muttered as he looked at the green telephone on his desk. Its silver numbers gleamed. He grabbed the phone and pressed *3*. His secretary answered almost instantly. Oscar let out a sigh and waited a few seconds before he finally said, "Mary, we have a new guest for our next show."

*** * ***

Gray clouds were scattered across the sky, engraving bizarre shapes on the night's black veil.

"At fucking last," Mark murmured. The past week had been nothing but heavy rainfall and icy temperatures—same as every other March in the goddamned Windy City. But today had been fucking absurd, dusted with warm sunlight and birdsong and all that cliché Disney bullshit. How could the world be bright on *this* fucking date? Nights, at least, always seemed correct—without the daylight, they carried something miserable on their shoulders.

Spitting another curse, he kept walking among the neighborhoods of Pilsen, where the short houses and mottled walls painted by street artists seemed bland in comparison to Downtown's fancy mantle opposite the river, where that asymmetric black giant topped by two snow-white spiky horns gleamed. Willis fucking Tower. *Shit*. It was impossible to swallow how much that metallic dong had overwhelmed him when he and his pop had first arrived from Colorado Springs after his mom's death. (For a six-year-old kiddo who saw goddamn rocks and mountains everywhere he looked, Willis was like discovering America.) Even as a teen, Mark had felt like his mind had a thing for fantasy. (Yep, Willis reminded him of Sauron, the villain of *The Lord of the Rings*—a dark lord inside the Loop, its eye always watching the zombies combing the streets, heading to their jobs with their heads down, lost in the frantic bustle of the contemporary goddamn madness.)

Now, at almost a half-hour to midnight, the streets were mostly empty. In the distance, Dvorak Park's lamps glowed, creating a hazy dome around their bodies. The swings hung vacant, pushed only by the invisible hand of air, their once-bold colors now victims of the humidity that had sucked the vivacity out of them. Among them stood a woman, back turned. A long, black coat swallowed her petite body. Loose braids of raven, curly hair fell fitfully on her shoulders. A bag was folded under her armpit. Within her hands, a child's yellow shirt gaped empty. A monster had stolen the life from it, and the boyish giggles had given place to creases on the fabric. And just like that, there was a constant wound in the mom's heart, and her smile had turned into hot tears, a wail that would never stop.

"Fuck." Mark sighed as he approached Anna from behind, wishing she hadn't heard him. He'd been dreading this moment all fucking day. He couldn't even bear to glance at her. Especially today. But she was here now. Of course she was. She was here for the same reason he was on this day each year.

Anna sniffed. Careful not to bespatter the child's shirt, she wiped away her tears with the sleeves of her coat. "I miss him, Mark," she muttered, her voice reaching his ears like a soft whisper that made his spine shiver.

Mark was close now, almost patting the back of her head with the stiff stubble that covered his chin. His breath caressed her neck. He twitched at the familiar scent of her hair—a faint hint of vanilla that bathed the long, vast desert of his goddamn mind with memories of distant Sunday mornings. When the sun popped through the windows, he and Anna would nestle under the sheets before their little mite would run in, shouting, "Incominggg!" and then climb on the bed, jumping till he'd fall over them, laughing.

Mark raised his hands to wrap her in his arms. He wanted to touch her so much, to take something from her strength. He opened his mouth to … *Speak, you son of a bitch!* It didn't matter what. *Just say a fucking word!* That'd make Anna feel better, even if the relief would disappear in a moment.

But goddamn him, he'd lost the ability to give anything back to her except disappointment, pain, and shame. Tears filled his eyes, too. He wouldn't let them fall. Not in front of her. For some stupid, fake-macho reason, he thought that would seem weak. (Men, assholes—nothing new here.)

He turned and started walking away. He lurched through the narrow, puzzling streets as the familiar burning sensation boosted from his feet, deep into the bone. Every step was heavier than the previous one. His heart was in a crazy "Smells Like Teen Spirit" rhythm. Fat drops of sweat formed around his hair. Those goddamned panic attacks were becoming worse by the day.

He reached his bungalow, passing without glancing at the mixture of azure, violet, and rosy flowers that surrounded his yard. His was one of very few houses with such a thriving garden. (For others, at least, Mark himself thought it was bullshit.) An endowment from his neighbor, Tony, who loved—for some dull reason—killing his retirement hours by tending to Mark's plants.

He headed straight inside. Any chichi windbag decorator might have called his living room minimalist. The rest of the typical fucking dudes out there would refer to it as misery. How else to describe those two leather couches and a sofa the color of steel, the sleek wooden table over the floor's center, and the austere beige walls so empty as to suggest that no one lived there?

*Fuck*. How different it had been back then. Anna's radiant smile had filled the gaps in a way furniture never could. And when the nights fell, Mark would ask her if he should check on their son, Roy, in bed. She'd whicker, knowing he'd go either way. Of course, she was right. Mark always climbed the stairs with anticipation like a silly schoolchild. Sliding along the second-floor corridor, lingering between glimpses of their family photos on the walls, he'd reach the room of colors and stray toys and find Roy tucked inside his tiny bed, sleeping peacefully, holding his plushy elephant tight and wearing his favorite yellow shirt with the cartoonish moon in the middle. Mark would approach. Roy would wake from the clumsy moves of his pop and peer at him, a smile drawn under his shining green-blue eyes. Man—they looked so much like Mark's. A breathtaking combination with the dark skin and short, frizzy hair—Mommy's largesse. Grinning weakly, Mark would give his son a kiss goodnight and sit on the edge of the bed until Roy fell asleep again.

But not tonight. Like every night over the last ten years. *Fuck*. Roy wandered only as a memory now—a never-aged seven-year-old who rarely visited Mark in his dreams. If he ever managed to sleep, that is. If he was lucky enough. How could the motherfucking word "luck" still have a place in the dictionary?

His breathing became more intense. He grasped his chest and swallowed, trying to relax his muscles. It felt like a hammer was striking his head, crushing his skull. He couldn't hold on much longer.

He tottered to the kitchen, past the army of dirty glasses and plates heaped on the table and piled up in the sink, covered in half-eaten fries and brushes of dry ketchup. A vile smell struck his nose, emanating from a plate containing the white-green fossil of a half-chopped tomato. He gulped. Against the cocktail of piss, feces, and rotting flesh a corpse emits, Mark's kitchen smelled like an apple-blossom bouquet. And goddamn, he'd seen enough dead bodies throughout his years in the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit, plus the past few months as a consultant for Chicago PD Homicide.

"Shit. The bottles." He'd forgotten the two Grey Gooses in the trunk. He let out a deep sigh, irritated. The panic attack was fast approaching. He doubted he'd make it to the car.

He dragged himself to the living room and opened a cupboard below the dark-brown library. Wrong one. He closed it and went for the one on the left. *That's it.* He pulled out the big metal box. An old baseball bounced inside. Even though two decades had passed since the White Sox game he'd watched with his pop—the only game they'd ever attended together—the ink from Michael Jordan's autograph still seemed fresh. What the hell? Was MJ's touch somehow magical? And how ironic: Mark was actually a basketball fan, and they'd moved to Chicago during the nineties madness about the Bulls (and that fucking "Blue

Da Ba Dee" song), and Mark's souvenir was from the sport Jordan played for little more than a year.

He put the baseball aside and searched deeper. His pop's old Chicago PD superintendent's badge lay over the furled US flag he'd given Mark on his return from the nightmare of the Middle fucking East. Beneath the flag, a photo of Mark and the rest of the 1st Marine Special Operations Battalion in the Faryab Province of Afghanistan. He kept snooping: the Silver Star, dusty, hanging from a ribbon in the colors of the US; a half-open letter beginning with the snappy phrase "To Corporal Mark Lane Gilliam for his gallantry in action against an enemy of the United States"; a photo of him and the strapping Sergeant S.C.—*Smuggling Cockatoo*—another Star recipient, also decorated for surviving inside that goddamned bunker during their shared last days in the war. How long since he'd last seen him? How long since he'd last seen anyone from his past life? His old college buddies—Aaron, Tom—crossed his mind.

Finally, sidelining the cracked glass of his BA certificate, he found a tiny blue oblong box with a small bag inside. He grabbed it and sat on the couch.

He turned on the TV and scrolled through the channels until he stumbled upon Channel Seven, where *Late Night People*, a shitty talk show that investigated unusual cases and informed on current events—if he recalled right—was starting. Not that he cared. He just wanted the stupid box to play something.

He dumped the entire bag of white powder onto the table, spilling some of it on the floor. *Fucking shithead!* He tried to sponge it with his fingers but didn't get far. The room was spinning.

*Fuck it*. He pulled a dollar bill and his zero-balance US bank card out of his jacket pocket and flattened two lines on the table. He made a thin roll out of the paper bill, sliding the eyes of the Founding Father staring at him. (Not exactly the creative tomorrow George had envisioned when he was fighting for independence.)

Freeing his nose from the air, Mark inhaled the first line. A nasty taste of candy and gasoline burned his nostrils, but it wasn't strong enough. The effects had seemed limited these past couple of months. He needed higher doses to hollow his thoughts and tranquilize his flaming brain. He hated that he had to drag his ass out to Garfield Park more and more frequently to meet his scumbag mule J.J. and ask him for another gram. At least he didn't have to pay full price—he'd be completely broke at a hundred bucks per gram (not that he wasn't heading there already). As someone who worked for the cops and could therefore shut down J.J.'s business at any time, he'd earned himself a 60 percent discount. (Great deal motherfucker! You should be proud of yourself.)

He snorted the second line, mopped up the remainder in his palm, and tucked it in his mouth. He stretched his feet on the floor and clenched his teeth. The veins in his neck tightened and went numb. He closed his eyes, feeling the nothingness slowly wrap around him. In five seconds, the kick would arrive.

*What the …*

A voice echoed.

"It can't be," Mark said. He opened his eyes, fixing his gaze on the TV. All drowsiness was swept away at the sight of the aged man on the screen, addressing the viewers.

Mark focused on the man's face, trying to verify his identity. *No shit*—could this withered figure really be *him*?

The old man spoke again, and now Mark was confident. The deep, alluring voice couldn't belong to anyone else.

Little by little, the awakening made the blood in his veins seethe with rage. His lips stiffened; his muscles tightened. He grabbed an empty glass from the table so roughly that it almost broke within his fingers. A cry flew from his mouth and echoed from the walls as he cast the glass on the goddamn floor.

He yelled and yelled until his neck burned. Then he yelled again. This time, there was not only pain and anger, but questioning.

“What the fuck is Jason Roneros doing there?”

# CHAPTER

# 2

Jason watched Kylie Cooper as she bolted to the studio to take her place before the cameras began shooting.

Wearing a long sapphire dress that exposed her sculpted arms, the host of Channel Seven's *Late Night People* perched on the wide sofa next to the couch. Flowing strands of blond hair petted her shoulders, and her brows frowned over her jungle-green eyes.

"Ms. Cooper." Jason shuffled over the couch's arm, approaching her. "Please accept my apologies. I understand a last-minute change is unorthodox, but soon you'll learn the importance of my deeds."

She barely tossed him a peep while trying to rearrange the cards in her hands. Then she stashed them behind her back, realizing they were useless as they contained information about the original guest. "Take your position. We're ready," she replied briskly.

Jason slipped across the leather back to the center of the couch. Casting his gaze around the modest studio, he discerned the crew's pale faces. Right and left, whispers fanned out among the two audience groups, carrying queries and surprise about the unannounced change. Without a doubt, his appearance had brought turmoil; no one could know this was just drizzle compared to the storm that would follow.

He glanced at his watch: 11:29 p.m. He sighed. His mouth was dry as if an oven were baking his body. He was used to the enemy's eyes on him. For the last ten years, the Imperatores had been watching his moves and invading every aspect of his life. During all this time, the idea of facing them may have seemed inspirational, but here, now, under the luminous lights, everything seemed ten times harder. He sighed again. He had to find the strength to follow the plan.

A technician signaled "clear" to Cooper, and she began addressing the viewers. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Tonight, we're delighted to have with us one of the most celebrated writers of our time. His three books have received global acclaim, with millions of copies sold in more than 45 countries. Most of you, of course, are familiar with his novel, *The Paradox*, where a relationship between mentor and student rides on a dramatic portrayal of our era with deep critical insights. The book hit the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list and remained there for sixteen straight weeks." She turned to him only when the monitor ran out of words. "It's an honor to have you here tonight, Dr. Roneros."

"The honor is mine, Ms. Cooper," he replied, amazed by her abrupt transformation into a friendly TV personality.

"Please, just Kylie."

Oh, he could do even better. "As long as you call me Jason."

"Hanging tough to your old habits, I see. You don't like people to refer to you as a doctor. I guess you still don't sign as one."

Jason crossed his legs, trying to relax. "The title of doctor is the highest of honors. I think it's a better fit for those who save lives."

"Well." Cooper made the slight pause of *anyway*. "I suppose this passion for philosophy arises from your ancestry. Greece is the motherland of many well-known thinkers."

"There's a long scientific discussion about the role of DNA in the cultures of human societies. Either way, I don't know if or how much Hellenic DNA is in my blood. My mother came to the United States before my birth. I was born and raised in East Boston."

"But in all your works, the way you choose to split your characters into duos and concoct conversations between them to deliver social criticism is significantly close to Plato's *Dialogues*."

Jason realized the producers must have fed Cooper with some last-minute information. "Guilty as charged. I admit I find it charming and, of course, very challenging. Though the reason I'm here is much more—"

"We'll get to that." Cooper cut him off and shifted her attention to the camera in front of her, the furrow between her brows incessant, like a stamp under her forehead. Then she turned back to him; flames sparked from her eyes, though her lips maintained the fake smile. "*Dr.* Roneros," she insisted, "I must say we'd almost forgotten your face."

"It has been ten years since my last public appearance."

"Wow, that's a long time."

"Sure is."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but you were known to give lectures at universities and think tanks around the globe and …"

Sidelining Cooper's ingratiating references to his National Book Award and the rumors that he'd once been a favorite to win the Nobel, Jason tried to concentrate. Even if being there, on this particular show, wasn't exactly what he had anticipated, he finally had the chance he'd been waiting for. All the attention was on him. He thought of his old friend. Jason would have to handle this interview perfectly if he wanted their ploy to work. He had to speak before it was too late. Cooper's voice echoed like a mild humming in this whirl of thoughts.

"… but all of that came to a stop in early 2013, a few months after you published *The Paradox*. Despite the initial success, you made a public statement that you were stepping down. Then you disappeared. The general assumption was that you never enjoyed the fame and chose to isolate yourself. Some even compared your absence to that of Harper Lee."

Jason straightened his body, the sweaty collar gumming on his nape. His mind was spinning through complex calculations. He looked at Cooper and caught her trying to read his body language.

"Are you okay, Dr. Roneros?"

He offered an awkward smile and continued searching for the most appropriate way to begin. He needed something to sound the alarm, a shocking introduction. "Ms. Coo … excuse me, *Kylie* … you haven't seen me all this time because I wasn't allowed to be seen … or heard."

"*Allowed?* By whom?"

Leaning forward, his black Oxfords tapped at the floor. A clump of hair fell in front of his eyes. He pulled it back. "A group of important people."

"You understand that sounds a bit … weird?" Cooper jested, trying to lighten the mood.

Jason responded in the same merry tone, diving into her game. "You assume I'm talking about Masons or Illuminati?"

"Well, I wouldn't put it like that, but, you know, let's say it's—"

"Conspiratorial?"

Cooper gestured *bingo* with her index finger.

"I assure you, they're not the New World Order. They do not own the planet."

"So, what are they?"

"A company."

"A *company?*"

"A secret parent company with plenty of subsidiaries that wants what every company wants: the biggest possible slice of the global economy. Nothing wrong with that, right?"

Cooper swallowed hard as if a rock were tumbling down her throat. "Dr. Roneros, companies have legal forms and are out in the open. Do we know anything about the—I don't know how to name them—the *people* you're talking about?

"You can't. You see, although the goal is the same, the methods this particular organization employs are legally questionable. In simple terms, it's corrupt. And really dangerous."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I worked for it."

Cooper twitched, eased back, and settled in her seat. Instinctively, she went for the cards again but stopped herself. No matter how placidly the words sailed from her lips, her restlessness betrayed her anxiety.

"I believed the promises I was told and became a member many, many years ago." He turned to the audience. Murmurs flew across the studio, whizzing like summer flies. "Promises of a better tomorrow," he muttered so low that probably nobody heard. He cleared his throat hard. "Not a day has gone by without me regretting my decision to trust them. I have dedicated the past decade to writing down my experiences and detailing their crimes." His face was burning, and the veins on his temples were ready to blow. The time to throw the bait had arrived. "At this moment, your exceptional team at Channel Seven is preparing to broadcast my revelations." He paused to stress his all-important move. "Your show might be the only insurance I have."

Cooper sat frozen, rapt, her mouth slightly open. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He let a moment slide. "As long as this program runs, I might be safe, thanks to the live broadcast. I will not be able to say the same when the lights go off."

The audience's constant whispers turned into heavy breathing; all eyes remained fixed on Jason. But as silence occupied the air, bold footsteps could be heard approaching.

The Imperatores were closing in.

On or off, the lights wouldn't hinder them. Either way, they would make their hit. And the irony … Jason was counting on that.

"One thing's for sure, Kylie. Tonight is the last time you're going to see me."

*** * ***

"I'm almost there," Victor Taylor reported, running a handkerchief over his bald scalp to keep the sweat out of his eyes as he accelerated through the hallways of the Channel Seven building.

The hitman hated spontaneous operations. He'd thought that once he'd disposed of Dermot Walsh's car and the four dead bodies in Lake Michigan he'd calmly proceed to the final phase of the original plan: head directly to Jason Roneros's home and put a bullet in his

fucking skull. The Imperatores and the superior had been waiting for that bullet for so long. As had Taylor himself. This mission would finally usher in a new era: a tomorrow in which he would be next to *her*.

But an unexpected call came over his cell. A new mission was assigned, one that needed to be accomplished immediately. And Taylor was the one who'd caused all this trouble. His mind turned in circles as he replayed Walsh's last moments. Where was his mistake? He'd recited the words the Imperatores had ordered him to say, then—those damned seconds. He remembered now: he was finishing off that bloody asshole of a bodyguard when he'd heard a splash. He'd looked around to check if someone else was there and saw Walsh's hand in the water. But he'd never suspected it was hiding the message that alerted Roneros.

This cursed city! Once again, everything was unraveling. Just like back then—ten years ago. Taylor shook his head. He couldn't think of that now. He had to focus.

"Hurry up," the superior said from the other end of the line. She had an unusual tone, a mix of a pant and, perhaps, impatience, which Taylor wasn't used to hearing. "Is he there?" she asked.

"He's here," Taylor said, glancing at the man behind him, who was walking fast thanks to his height, almost as tall as Taylor. But that was where the similarities ended. Channel Seven's security chief was at least 50, with completely white hair, a circular belly, and a clownish goatee.

Such a pity. On any other mission, Taylor would have had some fun with this petrified lardy. The superior had set the perfect scene. Taylor knew how persuasive she could be. When she'd called the security chief, she'd probably described where his wife worked and where his children went to school with distressing exactitude to highlight that he should do whatever he could to help Taylor bypass the building's safeguards and make his way undetected through the back door. Otherwise, his family would pay a heavy price.

"Do you appreciate the embarrassment Roneros is causing us?" she said sharply, her voice jarring his ear canal.

"We're almost there," Taylor responded, wiping his skull again. He was sweating freely now, which was out of character for him. Was it the haste of this assignment? His failure earlier in the evening? No, it was more that he and the superior had developed a close bond over all these years, so close that it had become physical. If the superior sounded odd, Taylor was a bit off, too.

The security chief wrenched open the wire gate that led to the basement. Taylor loosened his tie and undid his collar as he dashed down two or three stairs at a time.

"Speed up," the superior said.

Taylor responded only with hurried breathing. This time he'd ensure that everything went perfectly.

*** * ***

Jason Roneros glanced at his watch and thought of his friend again. *Oh, Jesus.* Was everything going as planned?

"I can't understand what's happening here." Cooper gestured to the camera, "speaking" with the producers. If it had been in their hands, they would have run a commercial break. Oscar's orders were clear, though. The live broadcast was to continue, no matter what.

"It's okay," Jason said softly, came closer, and grasped her hand, sensing her shivering body.

Cooper's lips formed the shape of words, but no sound came out. Her years of experience in television seemed useless now.

"Just spend the next few minutes with me," Jason said. "I assure you, it won't take more than that."

"This is going too far."

"I know. I'm truly sorry." He wrapped his fingers around hers.

"If …" She paused; her nails dug into his skin, betraying the intensity she was feeling. "If someone's really after you, we should call the police."

Jason tried to disagree in the awkward, kind tone people adopt with someone they've just met. "And say what? Who would care to listen? There's no proof behind my words yet. I hope that one day there will be. But for now, the police can do nothing." That wasn't the only reason, of course—surrendering to the police meant surrendering to the Imperatores.

"Let me … let us … help. Just stop it. Please. Why are you doing this?" She was close to crying.

*Oh, God*. If there had been any gentle road to follow, he would have taken it without a second thought. But this was the only path. "Perhaps your kindness is preventing you from mentioning it, but I know how I look. Cancer has already condemned me to death."

Curious glances met his eyes, then looked away at once, struggling to hide their anxiety and maybe their wonder. How long would this gaunt ancient on the couch be marching among them?

"It will be over soon." Jason again scanned the audience's troubled faces. "I can't just die and let the truth get buried with me." His stare raked along the cream floor before landing on Cooper. "Kylie, as far I'm concerned, your career is impressive. You were part of the *Tribune* staff that was awarded the Pulitzer for investigative reporting in 2008, right?"

"Yes," she responded in a low voice.

"So, from your experience, what is the most important aspect of a scandal?"

"I don't follow."

"Please try. It'll help you understand the reason for this mess."

"I'm sorry, I can't—"

"Please."

Rolling her eyes, she exclaimed, "The people who're involved, I guess."

"All we want is that, right? A face and a name to blame. But does it end there? What about the true importance of a scandal? May I …?" He glanced at their tight hand-holding. When she nodded, he whipped his hand away and raised it, palm to his eyes, partly obscuring his vision. "Scandals are like curtains. Every time one occurs, the curtain drops, revealing the ugly but true face of the world."

He lowered his hand and noticed Cooper was shaking her head ever so slightly. She remained skeptical, giving him the chance to continue.

"When the US Senate brought the HSBC money-laundering scandal to the surface in 2012, it was time for me to act. I had collected evidence of similar financial frauds that created the economic bubble in 2008 and led to Foreclosure-gate. I discovered that people from the organization I'm talking about were involved in both cases, so my findings started to point to a much wider web of corruption. But my enemies put all their efforts into silencing me and anyone else who could hurt them. They threatened me. It forced me to stop. I surrendered all the evidence I had accumulated against them and disappeared." He gazed around and saw

nervous faces. “The way the world changed after 2008—God, the impact that wrongdoings can have throughout society. The world’s richest individuals—the same who own 89 percent of US stocks—have increased their wealth by almost ten percent. Soon, two-thirds of global money will be in the hands of just one percent of the world’s population.” Jason sighed. “Then the curtain of the 2008 meltdown fell, revealing dozens of tricks like “robo-signing” and fine prints that investment banks and financial firms used to grant risky loans at enormous interest rates, accumulating hundreds of billions for a few while the Federal Reserve and Wall Street were unable—if not unwilling—to stop the downfall.”

“Mr. Roneros,” Cooper said, pointedly choosing this moment to disregard his doctoral status, “the banks have already been held to account for this. J.P. Morgan alone has paid forty-four billion dollars in fines—”

“And it has doubled its profits to over two hundred billion in the past ten years. Who could have guessed that fifteen years after the crisis that shattered the world, most of the banks would still be alive and doing so well? In fact, they have amassed six hundred and thirty-four billion dollars—more than they managed in the decade before 2008. Oh, for Christ’s sake, HSBC’s penalty for allowing terrorists and drug dealers to launder their money was just one-point-nine billion, even though it made almost seventeen billion in 2011.” Jason gulped back the rude smile that had formed on his lips. “And it’s not just the banks. Google, for example, has been found guilty of antitrust behavior on three separate occasions, resulting in fines of over eight billion euros to the EU. Would you call them idiots for not learning from their mistakes?”

“Excuse me, this is too much! Are you suggesting that a corporate giant like Google is deliberately flouting the regulations simply to make more money?”

Nice trap. He wouldn’t fall for it. “Do you remember the amount the major tobacco companies agreed to pay in 1998 for the harm their products had caused to human health? A truth they not only denied but fought to discredit by manipulating, concealing, and even burying medical research that conclusively linked smoking with cancer.”

“I can’t quite recall, but—”

“Two hundred and six billion dollars. To be paid over 25 years. That’s less than nine billion annually, about nine times less than Philip Morris’s yearly revenue. Do you know the total number of deaths related to smoking by the end of the twentieth century?”

Cooper rubbed her knees. Red circles formed at her nostrils as she inhaled and exhaled deep breaths. She was losing patience.

“One hundred million,” Jason said. “Twenty million more than the Second World War. Not to mention that the total cost of treating lung cancer has been ten times higher than the total revenue received through cigarette taxes. Major scandals have significant effects on all our lives, don’t they, Kylie?”

Cooper shrugged. “I guess so.”

“Because there is a line that connects corporations of every kind to the political world, isn’t there?” Jason drew an invisible line in the air. “But in my eyes, that line runs right through our society. You, me, these people here, we’re all walking on it as part of a civilization that asks its citizens to entrust banks with their money, put their faith in a system based on corporations, give the only power we possess—the power of our votes—to politicians. And we feel betrayed when we see how the country—the system—was, and will always be, willing to hand over seven thousand billion dollars to save the banks from their bad investments and avert national collapse.”

“The controversial bailout of 2008,” she clarified.

Nodding, Jason said, “So, while bankers continued to receive million-dollar bonuses, their companies were saved by the money of American citizens—the same people who had been deluded and tricked. And, as the rich became richer, half a million of our fellow citizens lost their homes. Approximately forty million now live in poverty. Ten percent of them are college-educated.” His gaze traversed the audience that was staring at him with troubled faces. “So, could anyone please tell me how our nation has survived? Why … how could this be true? What is the point of saving banks, corporations, the entire system, if everyone forgets the people who are supporting it? What use are all the accomplishments we have achieved as a nation when pain and injustice are everywhere around us? If our democracy, our society, is helpless to draw different routes for us to follow, why did we strive so hard to build it in the first place?”

The audience remained pensive.

From the corner of his eye, Jason saw Cooper shifting uncomfortably on the sofa as if ants were tickling her body. Then he said, “Most of us have wondered, haven’t we? Is there anyone who can alter the fate of a country that swirls in a state of inequity? How much faith do we have in that? Not much, right? The global turnout in free, democratic elections has consistently decreased over the past 40 years as our belief in something we thought should work for everyone faded.” He turned back to Cooper. “You asked me why I’m doing this. The documents I have against these people could lead to a disclosure that won’t just rock the pillars of our society. It will change the way we understand it. I hope that answers your question.”

Determination? Eagerness? He wasn’t sure what had sparked the vibrancy that was coursing through him. Nothing would be revealed tonight. But he had planted the seed, and if everything went as planned, soon it would grow, and the world would know.

“I’m talking about the greatest scandal in the history of humankind,” he concluded.

Then he held his breath. The studio went black. Voices cried out. But Jason couldn’t tell from where as he peered into the darkness.