

# CHAPTER 1

*J*AKE MAHEGAN KISSED THE SCAR ON CAPTAIN CASSIE BAGWELL'S BACK as the sheer curtains fluttered inward from the southwest sea breeze on Bald Head Island, North Carolina. He ran a hand from her bare shoulder along the taut contours of her back, heard a slight moan escape her lips, and continued running his fingertips along her hip and leg.

"Been a week," she whispered, her head turned toward the open patio sliding door. "No phone calls."

Mahegan concentrated on the task at hand, which was pleasing Cassie. Plus, phones didn't ring when they were turned off. Ignoring her comment, he brought his hand back up and firmly traced the muscles on either side of her spine, starting just below her clipped blond hair near her shoulders. He found a few knots and worked the kinks out. He'd learned that she carried her stress between the scapula bones. He rubbed the lateral muscle of each for a few minutes, feeling her body let go of a little more anxiety.

Every day had been the same. Make love. Rest. Sleep. Eat. Make love some more. Walk on the beach, which was just over the dunes beyond the fluttering curtains. Swim in the Atlantic Ocean. He furrowed his brow as he recalled the worry on Cassie's face yesterday when he had swum a mile out to sea and a mile back. An easy swim for him. Something he had been doing most of his life, especially during his rehab from his combat wound.

He had grinned walking up the beach, spotting her cut body in the flimsy bikini. His smile slowly faded, though, as he noticed the concern etched in her countenance. Fixed gaze, doubting look, full but straight lips, arms crossed.

“Don’t do that again, Jake,” she warned.

“I just swam, like I always do,” he replied.

“You were . . . gone. I couldn’t see you—” She stopped, covering her mouth. A full tear slid from her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

He had hugged her and pulled her tight, his feet on either side of hers in the sand. She had slowly relented and wrapped her toned arms around his large mass. Mahegan was nearly six and a half feet tall and a former high school heavyweight wrestler. All muscle, no fat, Cassie was five feet ten inches. She rested her head on his chest and shoulder. He felt the tears continue to flow.

He had asked himself, *isn’t this what you’ve always wanted? A good woman to love and to love you?*

At that moment, he realized Cassie was precisely who he wanted. Never considering himself fortunate enough to find his person, she’d suddenly become a fixture in his life.

Now, this morning, he looked from Cassie’s bare back to the sun rising over the dunes and said, “I won’t.”

Cassie turned her head on the pillow slightly and then rolled toward him, pulling him toward her.

“You won’t what?” she asked.

She had a dreamy smile on her face as if Mahegan had spent the last hour finding every spot of pain and pleasure on her body, which was exactly what had transpired.

“I won’t do that again,” Mahegan said.

The smile faded and then grew into something more deep and meaningful. Her eyes opened a bit, green irises radiant as blazing emeralds. A tear fell off her cheek, the first of the day.

“I’ve been trying to hold back, protect myself from being hurt, but I can’t any longer, Jake,” she whispered. “Loving you is worth the risk.”

Mahegan said nothing. He let his heart receive her love, something that perhaps he had been incapable of doing before. Ever

self-reliant, Mahegan had enjoyed the company of other women, for sure, but the mission always seemed to come along and nip any budding relationship before it had a chance to bloom. Still, the others had been different. Maybe it had been fate just clearing the way for Cassie. She was unique. And they'd shared dangerous combat action together, not in the sandbox of Afghanistan, Iraq, or Syria—though they had both served in those locations—but in North Carolina.

"Are you just going to stare at me with your blue eyes and square jaw?" Cassie asked. She ran a hand along the fresh shaved sides of his head. Two days ago, he had gone to the town barber, a former Marine from Camp Lejeune just up the coast, who convinced Mahegan he needed a Ranger high and tight. Ten bucks later, he looked good as new.

"Pretty much," Mahegan said. "View of a lifetime right here."

More tears. Her fist pounded his shoulder.

"Don't you dare do this, Jake Mahegan. Don't make me love you," Cassie said.

Mahegan frowned but understood. They had all been through too much combat, too much loss to ever risk the pain of having this connection and losing it. Dull and muted emotions were more manageable than the highs and lows of plumbing the depths of love. Solitude enhanced decision making. There were no other factors to consider. He could die a hero instead of growing old—as the Croatan saying went—without the worry of hurting someone else. The ultimate selfless sacrifice: don't love, don't hurt, don't feel. Pure execution. In thirty years of life, he had lost his mother, father, and best friend in the worst possible ways. What good was love if it was just going to be snatched away from you?

"Don't give me that puppy dog look, damnit," Cassie said, sobbing.

He kissed her forehead and then her lips. She kissed him back, opening her mouth, pulling him deep.

"Don't *let* me love you, damnit," Cassie said, pulling away briefly and then diving back in for more.

Mahegan let his actions do the talking, taking them both for

another physical and emotional ride that ended on the floor, the sheets wrapped around them like a shroud. A rectangle of sunlight spotlighted them. The end table lamp lay askew on the floor and two pillows were scattered around them.

“Oh my God,” Cassie said, laying her arms flat on the floor. She looked outside and then back up at Mahegan. “I just hope you can keep up.”

Mahegan smiled. He was beginning to wonder, as well. Cassie was relentless in bed. At first, he’d chalked it up to her working out aggression or past issues, but now he believed something different.

She loved him. No question. And she was giving herself to him. Every bit.

The helicopter blades chopped in the distance. Mahegan reared his head like a German Shepherd sentry. His instincts had been muted, lost in the moment. This was what love did.

He rolled off Cassie, placing himself between her and the patio window, protecting what he held dear. Then there was a loud pounding on the front door, like a battering ram.

“My gun,” Mahegan said, turning his head.

But he never had time to retrieve it.

## CHAPTER 2

*L*UIZ YAMASHITA SMELLED NORTH KOREAN PRESIDENT PARK UN Jun's morning fish breath, thinking *I can't believe I'm this close.*

Jun had just finished his breakfast and now leaned in close to Yamashita, whose only job was to interview the president. Jun was small and seemed less of a caricature in real life than the thousands of pictures and cartoons Yamashita had seen. They sat across from each other on the man's favorite balcony adjacent to his palatial living quarters. Sloped and tiled roofs overlapped above them. The courtyard was well secured with heavyset armed guards at every possible entrance. The security personnel were heavily armed with Uzis and were wearing special glasses that provided situational awareness.

A U.S. based global technology company called Manaslu had provided the glasses. Yamashita knew this because Manaslu had hired him to conduct this interview about Manaslu's new corporate facility being constructed north of Pyongyang as part of an economic development initiative. The glasses were just one of many products the hegemonic tech giant had developed. Word had it that Jun was enamored with Manaslu and its enigmatic leader, Ian Gorham.

Yamashita was a Japanese reporter living in Vancouver, Canada. While he enjoyed the rainy days and the excellent coffee, he was ready for his big break. When a mysterious man named Shayne had reached out to him to conduct the interview, he'd leapt at

the opportunity. He had visions of his article appearing in the *Atlantic*, *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Huffington Post*, *Breitbart*, and other highly read news sources. Appearances on CNN and Fox News would follow.

He could see it now: *Luiz Yamashita, the man on the ground in North Korea, forging peace through economic development with Manaslu's enigmatic leader, Ian Gorham*. Gorham was viewed as the young new visionary. Bigger, more badass, and better than Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos, and Tim Cook combined.

Shayne had provided him the documents, the questions, the access, the \$100,000 advance—one hundred thousand dollars!—an unbelievable amount, and the unrestricted travel budget. Claiming to be a senior official with Manaslu, Shayne looked more like a young hipster than a corporate chief technology officer.

“Mr. Yamashita,” Jun began. “A Japanese reporter in North Korea. I am opening North Korea to many new experiences, aren't I?”

“Yes, Supreme Leader. You are forging a new path for North Korea,” Yamashita said.

Jun nodded and smiled. “I know you will be asking the questions in a minute, but I want to make sure you get me on the record as thanking Mr. Gorham for allowing North Korean workers and materials to build his Manaslu factory in North Korea.”

“Yes, Supreme Leader, I agree that Mister Gorham's generosity is unprecedented. But it is the strength and will of the good people of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea that have built this facility.”

Jun nodded and smiled. “I'm glad you understand.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Yamashita noticed several guards moving to his two o'clock, a far corner about ten yards away.

“Do not worry about my security detail,” Jun said. “They are the best.”

“I am not worried about anything in your presence, Supreme Leader,” Yamashita said, though the entire security detail had converged to one spot and their faces, all covered in sunglasses, were peering up at the morning sky. The tall ivy-covered walls pro-

vided only a small opening of fresh air. The sun peeked through the firs angling off the steep mountain slopes overlooking the presidential redoubt.

Concern creeping into his subconscious, Yamashita hurried with the interview. “What is it you are most excited about, Supreme Leader, when it comes to the opportunities that the deal with Manaslu will provide to the good citizens of the DPRK?”

“I am thankful that UN negotiations have provided for this opportunity,” Jun said. “As you know, the legacy of the Eternal President, my grandfather, is Military. The legacy of the Chairman, my father, is Self-Reliance. My legacy will be Economic Development while I continue the legacies of my mentors and family.”

“All great legacies, Supreme Leader. Do the people of the DPRK believe that hosting a Manaslu factory will offset the halt in nuclear weapons production you agreed to as part of the Beijing Accords?”

Jun smiled. His lips pulled back against his teeth, making him look like a Gila Monster. His oily black hair was swept back in a youthful swatch. The jowls on his cherubic face were beet red in the cool morning air. “Next question.”

Yamashita wondered, *Was he not going to comply with the accords? Of course not. No one expected him to.*

“What excites you about the Manaslu factory?” Yamashita pressed ahead. “You’ve said you will allow for the distribution of products but not the social media or search aspects of the Manaslu platform.”

“We have twenty-five million citizens who need the same products people everywhere need. They get their information from Korean Central Television. This is the only satellite and Internet we need. We are one people.”

Avoiding the topic of information and social connectivity, two of the most important and profitable platforms of Manaslu, Yamashita dove into the essence of the production and warehousing of products that Jun had agreed to perform. “What is your vision for Manaslu, an American company, in the DPRK?”

Before Jun could answer a question that truly had no answer—

Yamashita believed Jun's cooperation to be a ruse—he saw a drone hovering high overhead. It was a standard quad copter, though bigger than the ones he'd seen previously. Its four whirring blades held the unmanned system in a perfectly stabilized orbit over their heads.

While it was disrespectful to break eye contact with the Supreme Leader, Yamashita's self-preservation instinct took over.

"Relax, Mister Yamashita. This is my security. We have gone high tech," Jun said. He laughed a feminine, high pitched chortle.

"Then why is there an artillery shell inside the cargo claws?" Yamashita asked.

His question was too late. The shell dropped.

Luiz Yamashita's last thought before dying was that perhaps there was more to Manaslu's overture after all.

The explosion created a fireball that incinerated everything and everyone in the courtyard.

At exactly the same time Luiz Yamashita was watching a bomb drop from a plastic hover copter in North Korea, Janis Krukliis huddled in the bushes only four hundred meters from the mighty Eighty-second Airborne Division's basecamp along the Estonian border with Russia. While Krukliis had been unable to kill any of the famed paratroopers when he was serving as an ISIS mujahedeen, he was glad that someone had recognized his skills as a mortar man. He pushed the 81mm mortar baseplate into the ground, leveled it, and covered it with dirt. Then he inserted the tip of the mortar tube base into the opening on the baseplate, twisting it to secure it in place. Screwing the mortar sight onto the frame of the weapon, he began adjusting the angle and deflection of the weapon based upon the numbers he had received this morning by coded and encrypted e-mail.

He wasn't sure why he was shooting at the Russian army, but if it would result in killing American soldiers, then he was just fine with that.

One of many ISIS fighters to flow into Europe as the quasi-caliphate in Raqqa crumbled, Krukliis had returned to Latvia forlorn. His friends had wondered where he had gone, but he never

told anyone, though he imagined if someone were good enough they could monitor the chat rooms he had visited as he had prepped for war in Syria. A former sniper and mortar man with the French Foreign Legion, Kruklis missed the combat and had turned progressively against the West based upon the atrocities he saw his peers commit in the Central African Republic.

Over the past week, he had used a flat bottom boat to transport his forty rounds of 81mm mortar ammunition to his hide location less than a kilometer north of Latvia. He had good cover and concealment and hoped that he could fire all forty rounds, race to his boat, and escape to Latvia before the counterfire became too intense.

In the cool October evening, Kruklis checked his phone one last time, confirmed the elevation and azimuth of his settings, and waited for the prompt, which came almost immediately. Kneeling in the damp ground, he sighed, his breath turning to vapor. He lifted the first bomb, which looked more like a nerf football with fins than a weapon.

He lowered the fins into the tube, released the body of the projectile, and then turned away. The mortar made a loud *thunk!*

*Loud enough to hear a mile away*, he thought. Knowing that while the round would be in the air almost a minute, Russian and American radars had already detected it. He raced to get as many rounds into the tube as he could, one right after the other.

*Thunk! Thunk! Thunk!*

He heard the explosions that were some three or four miles away in Russia, thunder reverberating back toward him.

He was over halfway through his pile of ammunition when he heard Humvees along the road leading from the American paratrooper base. Machine-gun fire whipped over his head. They didn't know exactly where he was, couldn't see. They may have had the grid coordinate, but it would take them another minute to find him. That was at least ten more rounds.

He shot all but three mortar rounds before American soldiers surrounded him.

"Cease fire!" one soldier wearing night vision goggles shouted.

As Kruklis raised his hands, he heard the familiar whistle of ar-

tillery rounds screaming overhead. Russian counter battery fire. He smiled. He would kill some American paratroopers after all.

The heavy artillery tossed him into the air, along with the Americans. It was incessant and unrelenting.

His last thought was that these were big bombs, not the little ones he had been shooting at the Russians. As he lay there dying, he stared at the open eyes of a dead paratrooper and smiled again.

Ian Gorham, the CEO and founder of Manaslu, Inc., the conglomerate that had overtaken Facebook, Amazon, and Google in the social media, retail distribution, and advertising marketplace, sat in the back of his chauffeur driven Tesla S70. He stared at the information being piped to his iPad via Manaslu's microsatellite constellation he called ManaSat.

He had four such satellite constellations in the atmosphere as he prepared for his mission. Gorham viewed himself as a bona-fide genius. A Mensa member at an early age. Trouble understanding and relating to others as a child. His lineage was of average education—rural farmers and manufacturers. He had somehow hit the jackpot in the brains department. A one in a million chance. An odd mutation that combined the best of everything from both lineages—separated wheat from chaff—and distilled into his cerebral cortex.

Algorithms and code were a first language, English a second. Rapidly acquired wealth led to newly interested parties—women, men, transgenders—in his late teens. It was all so confusing.

In his early twenties—a few years ago—he'd read about the Jungian study of deep psychotherapy and realized he needed to unpack his brain so he could understand it better. With his wealth, he'd hired the best deep psychiatrist in the world. Given his exploration of the Deep Web, he'd thought it was fitting that he was going through therapy with an expert of deep psychology.

As the Tesla idled, exhaust plumes rose like fog. The bar was the target. It had a sign that read MOTOWN MIXER. Actually, a cook in the bar was the real target. In a few seconds, Gorham had a

complete dossier on the bar and its owner, Roxy Bolivar, who was no longer alive. She had bequeathed the bar to her son, who ran the place. He was gay and had the beginning stages of pancreatic cancer. His medications had just started, but the doctors didn't believe there was much hope.

He had mined this information through the ManaWeb, Manaslu's own private domain within the Deep Web, where algorithms and machine learning matched information and automatically continued to dig and match until a complete profile had been developed . . . within seconds.

During his search, he had profiled everyone associated with the bar. One profile frustrated him. The apparent cook, reported for duty at six pm, had hacked the ManaWeb. This person had penetrated the domain Gorham thought was impossible . . . and improper. It was like penetrating his own psyche without permission.

In response, Gorham had launched a delivery drone with a spy camera to the Internet Protocol address location. It had followed someone wearing a hoodie pulled over the head and face, a chef's white shirt hanging beneath the hoodie, and black pants. The cook went into the back of the Motown Mixer. The drone had attempted to gain facial recognition, but the hacker's hoodie was like a tunnel hiding the face way back in a cave.

On the brink of executing his elaborate plan, Gorham could ill afford a minor issue. The hacker was an issue. Gorham's considerable business experience taught him that minor issues often became major problems. And this hacker was an issue. He began to spin, cycling faster and faster, thinking of possible outcomes, some not so good, others very bad.

With a shaky hand, he looped his Bluetooth earpiece around his right ear and pressed a number from the RECENT selection in his phone.

"Yes, Ian," the voice said. Part melody, part syrup, part Eastern Europe. She always gave him pause.

"Doctor Draganova," Gorham said. "Spin cycle, again."

"Please. As always, I must remind you, it's Belina," she said.

There was noise in the background. Banging, as if she were in a construction zone or kitchen somewhere.

He couldn't call her Belina. She was as beautiful as the name. He stared at the picture on his phone. Long black hair. Light blue eyes. High cheekbones. Full lips constantly pursed. Fashion model collarbones. Long neck. Slim hips.

No, he had to call her Doctor Draganova. He couldn't think of her as an object of desire *and* a therapist. It was counterproductive. "I'm spiraling a bit," he said.

"This is not a regular session, Ian. You pay me well, but we schedule our sessions. I'm almost always available, but right now I have little time."

"It's . . . okay. Just soothe me. I'm about to do something . . . high stress. I know my motives. You've helped me understand them. I know the purpose of my genius. I'm bringing all of that together. We've unpacked my mind, layer by layer. Now I need to bring it back together so I can execute."

Depth psychology focused on understanding the motives behind particular mental conditions in order to better resolve them. Draganova had been focusing Gorham on discovering the catalyst for his actions whether they be conscious, unconscious, or semi-conscious. All the big names in psychology had contributed to this field of study: Jung, Blueier, Freud, and so on.

"It's . . . it's not that simple, Ian."

Was she worried? Ian thought she sounded concerned. Her soothing voice took him back to that place he didn't want to be—viewing her as an object of desire instead of the mechanic of his mind.

More noises in the background. Some shouting. She was busy doing something. It never occurred to him that she may have a personal life. Perhaps she was entertaining guests and preparing a big meal or just in a noisy restaurant with friends . . . which made him a little bit jealous.

"I know," he whispered. "It's been a month since I've seen you."

"We've talked on the phone since. Sixteen times. We've even used ManaChat," she said. Manaslu's equivalent of FaceTime or Skype.

“What are you doing?” He realized his question sounded too familiar, and said, “I mean, what are those noises?”

“Ian, we can talk tomorrow. You know your drills. Please do them. Good-bye.”

The silence in his ears was a screwdriver through the brain. Just like a Ferrari needed the world’s best mechanic, his mind needed Dr. Draganova. Regardless, no matter how much he tried, he couldn’t unpack his drive and desire for her. She had become shorter and shorter with him on their phone sessions. In person—always in a neutral place to which they both had flown at his expense—her clothing had been more and more provocative. Was she teasing him or challenging him to focus? Like Tiger Woods’ father rattling change when he was a kid practicing putting. Perhaps that was her technique for getting him to focus on the matter at hand.

But she had helped scramble his mind, unpack it completely to its core. The drive and ambition to create a dominant global tech conglomerate came with personality traits that he needed to understand. Draganova had helped him reach in his mind and more objectively observe his mania, his fears. Obsessed with success and power, Gorham was relentless, but to his credit he wanted to know more about himself. Or was that just more megalomania coming out? He didn’t have time to think about all that now.

He was at the moment where he needed to be able to synchronize a global operation. He could do it, of course. It would just be harder. Require more thinking. More individual construction of his mental faculties. Put everything back together himself instead of with her help. And he needed to do it right now.

*You know your drills.*

He did a few body meditation drills, working his hands into his quadriceps and hamstrings, massaging and pulling. Then he pulled at his face, stretching it in every direction, relieving the tension. Dax Stasovich, his faithful bodyguard, was outside pacing, impatient.

After a few minutes, Gorham felt well enough. He needed to move now. The car with his commandos came rolling around the corner, parking two blocks away. Stasovich looked at him through the car window and shrugged.

It was go time.

Gorham stepped out of the car, tugged the Tigers cap down low over his face, thinking, *get your shit together, Ian*. He was one of the most recognizable men in the world. Bezos, Zuckerberg, Brin, Page, and all the other brilliant entrepreneurs were equally recognizable. In the last two years, though, he had become the hot property. He had to be careful.

He pulled the ball cap bill low over his forehead. Stasovich, a giant of a man, walked in front of him about ten yards. The man's legs pushed out and forward with every step. His bulk swayed. His arms barely moved. The man was nearly seven feet tall. Hard not to notice. That was part of the drill. Like a magic trick. Everyone look at this freak of nature friend, not the normal looking curly haired guy walking behind him.

They entered the bar and Gorham grabbed a booth. There was a slight crowd. He immediately noticed a good-looking short-haired blonde sitting at the bar. Next to her was a big man with a Mohawk haircut. He wasn't as big as Stasovich, but close. What did she see in him?

He looked at his ManaWatch, what he called his equivalent of the Apple Watch. The ManaWatch used the ManaSats and was therefore encrypted. Two messages popped up from Shayne with little green check marks next to them.

Estonia

NoKo

The plan was in motion. He glanced at Stasovich, a bull scraping his hoof looking at a red cape.

Gorham typed a message and hit SEND. "Go."

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