

SAM FLIGHT 719

28 NM EAST OF BODRUM TURKEY

2252 LOCAL TIME

The U.S. Air Force C-32A hit a brief pocket of turbulence, ice rattling in the tumbler held by the United States Secretary of Commerce.

Standing in the mid-cabin lounge, John Moore calmly gripped the back of the nearest seat to steady himself. He had lost count of how many of these junkets he'd made in the last three years, but he was beginning to feel like an old hand. He'd been appointed to the cabinet position by his old friend, President Jack Ryan. Moore had been a natural fit for Commerce: Georgetown Law, successful businessman, gregarious backslapper. He was now America's dealmaker, and he was grateful that in this late stage of life he'd found a way to give back to the country that had blessed him with so much.

He was standing with the dregs of a gin and tonic in hand and chatting with Ari Kovatsous, the CEO of a Greek shipping company. Kovatsous, judging by his wide eyes and clenched jaw, wasn't a fan of flying. Things smoothed out and Moore let go of the seat. It was the first ripple they'd encountered since leaving Tangier three hours earlier.

“As I was saying,” Moore continued, “port fees are determined locally, so I can’t help you there. But the tariff formulas are definitely in my wheelhouse.”

“That is something we hope to address,” replied the shipping magnate with forced composure.

“I can tell you we have a bill pending in Congress that will adjust the weight calculations based on the class of commodity. It’s the administration’s contention that—”

“Mr. Secretary,” interrupted the steward in a polite but firm voice. “I’m sorry, but we’ll be landing in ten minutes. I have to ask everyone to return to their seats.” The young man was wearing his Air Force Class A uniform, the standard for aircrew in the Air Force’s elite 89th Airlift Wing—the same unit that flew Air Force One.

Moore smiled genially, and said to Kovatsous, “We’ll circle back to this later.”

The Greek sat and Moore moved to the forward cabin. He settled into a plush seat next to his longtime aide, Monica Smith. Moore generally enjoyed his work, but after hours spent gladhanding his way across the Mediterranean, he was ready for few minutes of solitude. The C-32A was a highly modified version of the Boeing-757 airliner. There had been extensive upgrades to the interior; a mere forty-five seats were spread around the cabin, most arranged in clusters for small scale meetings.

“What’s the schedule when we land?” Moore asked. They were about to arrive in Bodrum, Turkey, which was hosting this year’s Southwest Asian Economic Conference. Speeches, panel discussions, and enough spicy food to aggravate his peptic ulcer.

Monica, a staid and level presence who’d been at Moore’s side since his corporate days, checked her phone. “Turkish Foreign Minister will meet us on the

tarmac. Shake hands with the heads of a few regional conglomerates, but no speech. Limo to the hotel and done for the night.”

“Thank God.”

Moore set his empty tumbler in a cupholder, and after a brief internal debate he decided against ordering another. He noticed Monica looking at him over the top of her tortoise-shell readers.

“No,” she said in a practiced low voice.

“I didn’t ask anything.”

“You were about to.”

He grinned. That was how long they had been working together. Moore recalled inquiring an hour earlier if there had been any messages from Foggy Bottom.

He said, “And on the Bodrum end?”

“I initiated a secure link about an hour ago to confirm the security arrangements with the advance team. They’re taking it pretty seriously.”

“As they should. Turkey is an Islamic country, and it’s had its share of unrest.” He looked over his shoulder cautiously. There was no one within earshot. “But nothing about our . . . last-minute addition?”

“Not a word.”

“That was a strange request. Why do you think the Agency chose this flight?”

“We happened to be in Tangier . . . right place at the right time. I can’t imagine it was anything else.”

“I suppose,” he said pensively. “But the next time I see the president, I’m going to ask him about it.”

Moore looked out the window, hoping for a glimpse of the Turkish countryside. He saw nothing but dense clouds in the wash of the landing lights.



The aircraft commander of SAM Flight 719, Air Force Major Tom Spears, looked outside and frowned. They had been in thick weather since beginning their descent. It was a murky night, and the forecast at the airfield gave little hope for improvement.

Captain Evan Goldman, his right-seater, said, "Remember, if we don't make it in, our alternate is Mikonos."

Spears grinned. The idea of diverting to an island playground on the Aegean Sea was a pleasant mental image. But nothing more. The cloud bases at Bodrum were three hundred feet, the visibility half a mile. Tackling weather like that at their home drome, Andrews Air Force Base, would be a cakewalk. Here, on a dark night at an unfamiliar foreign airport, it would be . . . a challenge. But Spears never really doubted they would get in.

"There's an updated weather observation," Goldman announced. "Still showing the ceiling at three hundred feet with half a mile visibility . . . right at approach minimums."

"Shouldn't be a problem," replied Spears. "Landing checklist."

The challenge-response began.

"Flaps," Goldman read from the checklist card.

"30 set."

“Speedbrakes.”

“Armed.”

“Autobrakes.”

“Three set.”

“Landing gear.”

“Down, three green lights.”

“Landing checklist complete,” Goldman announced.

The tower controller’s voice crackled over the radio in thickly accented English.

“SAM 719, you are cleared to land Runway 28 Left. Wind three five zero at six knots.”

Goldman read back the landing clearance.

Spears was the pilot flying, but for now the autopilot was doing all the work. The big jet nosed over and captured the programmed descent path that would guide them to the runway. In spite of the poor visibility, the air was smooth, and the hum of the big Pratt & Whitney engines remained steady.

Goldman made a standard callout one thousand feet above touchdown. An instant later, he said, “Boss, I’ve got an amber NAV flag.”

Spears was so engrossed in monitoring the instruments, it took a moment for his copilot’s words to register. “A NAV flag? But I show us tracking fine on the—”

His words cut off when the cloud cover broke. It was as if blinders had been suddenly pulled away. Through the forward windscreen the jet’s brilliant LED landing lights illuminated the ground. Only to both men’s horror, they didn’t see a runway.

Directly in front of them was the side of a mountain.

The pilots of the 89th were among the best in the Air Force, yet no amount of training or discipline could save the situation. Spears's brain sent an instinctive command to his hands to wrench back on the controls.

It never arrived.

THE RYAN HOME

CHESAPEAKE BAY, MARYLAND

1705 EST

The low sun was muted by distant clouds, and wind swept in off the bay with its customary autumn chill. From the broad front porch of his home, Jack Ryan embraced it all with a profound sense of calm.

This place had long been his haven, his refuge from the intractable chaos of the White House—the place where all the world’s problems seemed to land with a thud. That contrast, the tranquility of this place versus the turmoil of Pennsylvania Avenue, seemed to deepen with the passing of time.

Ryan had a theory about that. The memories of raising a family here with Cathy were indelible, although the earliest of them were beginning to fade. He supposed it was only natural. His kids still gathered here when they were in town, but it was an increasingly rare occasion for all of them to visit at the same time. Everyone was moving, onward and upward, tackling the world in their own way. Jack Ryan would forever enjoy spending time with his family; the good-natured bantering during meals,

the football on the lawn, the games of Battleship. Yet more than ever, he found himself drawn to these rare moments of solitude, notwithstanding the heavy Secret Service contingent guarding the perimeter.

“Here you go.”

He felt a familiar hand brush his shoulder. Cathy set a steaming cup of decaf on the table that split their Adirondack chairs. For reasons he couldn't quite fathom, she looked more stunning than ever. Her mid-length hair was nicely cut, accented by a few blond highlights, and she was as trim as ever. Yet nothing captivated him more than his wife's smile. It was open and honest, reflecting a woman who was deeply at peace. On good days, Ryan imagined he had something to do with that. On the others he was glad she managed it in spite of him, or more accurately, in spite of his job. Either way, he felt more smitten with his wife every day.

He looked down and noticed she hadn't chosen a mug sporting the presidential seal, of which he had dozens. This one had pictures of his kids as infants—the classic “What do I get Dad for Christmas?” bailout.

“Thanks,” he said.

Cathy took the other chair and cradled a cup of herbal tea.

“I got a text from Katie,” she said. “She wants to bring Commander Knepper with her for Thanksgiving.”

Ryan shot his wife a guarded look. His daughter had been seeing a submariner, the XO of the USS *Washington*. “This is starting to sound serious.”

“If it's Katie . . . it's serious.”

He smiled. “Yeah, she does rarely change her mind once it's made up.”

“True. But thankfully, she seems to have made a good choice.”

“The commander is welcome any time.”

Cathy was about to take her first sip when she abruptly looked up.

“What is it?” he asked, noticing her sudden alertness.

“Inbound.”

Her hearing had always been sharper than his own, and a life spent around the machines of war and enduring jarring explosions had only widened the gap. But soon he heard it too. The resonating *whump whump* of an approaching helicopter.

He looked to the right and saw a VH-92A from Marine Helicopter Squadron One, its red beacon blinking in the dusk. The aircraft swept out in a wide arc and settled on the outer lawn. Ryan looked right a second time and spotted two identical birds circling in the distance. This suggested he wasn't looking at a simple visit from one of his senior staff. He himself was about to go for a ride—or at the very least, have the option of doing so.

“Was this on your calendar?” Cathy asked warily. She was reading the situation precisely as he had.

“No. I wasn't set to go back to the White House until tomorrow morning.” He checked his secure comm device and saw no urgent messages.

Ryan stood and walked to the broad steps that led down to the lawn. The entry door of the chopper opened, and a familiar figure descended. Director of National Intelligence Mary Pat Foley. She walked across the lawn with her signature stride, compact and direct.

Ryan stepped down to the grass but stopped there, letting Mary Pat come to him—the sound of the helo, even at idle, would be difficult to talk over.

“Good evening, Jack,” she said, addressing him in the familiar as she typically did in private.

“I’m thinking maybe not,” the president replied.

“There’s been an accident, an air crash in Turkey.”

“Turk—” The word snagged like a docked boat jerking on its mooring line. “A jet from the 89th?” he ventured.

“I’m afraid so.” She paused a moment, as if preparing him for more.

“Survivors?” he asked.

Mary Pat shook her head. “There don’t appear to be any.”

The president held steady. It was an agonizingly familiar reaction for Ryan, honed by a lifetime shock and disaster. He knew many of the 89th’s personnel. Yet the vivid image of one face came unshakably to mind. “John Moore.”

She stepped closer and put a comforting hand on his arm. “I’m sorry, Jack. I know the two of you were close.”

He nodded somberly. He had met Moore in college, and although they’d gone their separate ways immediately after—John to law school and Jack serving in the Marines—they had stayed in close touch over the years.

“He was one of those larger than life people. When I considered who might be effective running Commerce, John came straight to mind. He was so good at . . .” The gears in his head seemed to disengage. “Monica?”

Mary Pat nodded. “She was with him, like always.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah, she was one of the good ones.”

“Is there any hint of . . . you know.”

“This happened only a few hours ago. The initial reports are just coming in from first responders. The State Department is sending down a team from the embassy in Istanbul. So far there’s no suggestion that this was an attack of any kind, but our information is extremely limited. And we also have to consider the other complication.”

“Fulcrum.”

Mary Pat nodded. “It does seem like an incredible coincidence. Given the circumstances, I thought you’d want to head into the office.”

Ryan didn’t even feign surprise. Mary Pat had distilled the situation faultlessly. She had weighed the event, the consequences, his reaction, and come up with a course of action.

“Yeah, you’re right. Let me go throw on some better clothes. I’ll be ready in five.”

Mary Pat looked up at Cathy, who was still on the porch. The somber look on her face was clear. “I guess you overheard?” Mary Pat said.

“Enough. That’s terrible news. Elaine wasn’t with him, was she?” Cathy asked, referring to Moore’s wife.

“No, she didn’t go on this trip. I guess there’s always something to be thankful for. Someone from Commerce is on the way to their house to make the notification.”

“Can you let me know when that’s been done? I’d like to reach out to her afterward.”

“Absolutely. I’m sure she’d appreciate that.” Mary Pat didn’t ask Cathy if she was going to join them for the trip to the White House. The First Lady had been spending most of her time here lately, coming into D.C. only for special events. The Ryan family had gone through a lot over the years, and its matriarch had been at the epicenter. In recent months, however, when Cathy wasn’t seeing patients or performing surgery, she increasingly seemed to end up here.

Mary Pat walked back to the helo and disappeared inside.

Minutes later, Jack returned to the porch. He shrugged on his best tweed blazer.

“I’m sorry about John,” she said.

“Not as sorry as I am. This could be on me.”

Her expression turned doubtful. “What are you talking about?”

He looked at his wife plaintively, desperately. As was too often the case, he had to rely on their unspoken contract. The one that bridged the awkward divide between their strong marriage and his unfathomably demanding job. Sometimes silence had to suffice.

She pulled him close and held him for a moment. “It’s okay,” she whispered in his ear. “We’ll talk about it later. But whatever happened, this was *not* your fault.”

He pulled back, and the look in his eyes said otherwise.

Jack Ryan gave the love of his life a failed smile and trotted across the lawn. He slowed at the helicopter’s boarding stairs to return the salute of the waiting enlisted Marine. “Semper Fi, Marine,” Ryan said.

“Semper Fi, Mr. President,” the young man replied enthusiastically.

For all his years in office, even in the most dire and distracting moments, President Jack Ryan did not waver on customs and courtesies. He took no private pleasure when people saluted him and addressed him as Mr. President. But he expected it. It had nothing to do with ego. It was about traditions, about respecting the chain of command. Ryan had learned it as an O-1 in the Marine Corps, and it would carry on long after he was gone.

He stepped up into the VH-92A, and at that moment it became Marine One. Seconds later, the engine noise rose to a crescendo and the pilot hauled up on the controls. The grass rippled in waves, and soon the big chopper was thundering northward up the bay.