

Chapter 1

Tuesday, July 4, 2006, 8:36 P.M.,
Washington, D.C.

“We need to begin immediately,” President James Stanford said the instant he entered the Cabinet Room. Conversations stopped in mid-sentence and automatically everyone stood. “This is a dire emergency. We need every second. Please be seated.”

Twelve men and four women sat quickly—shocked by the tone of the most powerful man in the world.

“We just received information that a terrorist attack will soon occur,” the President said, as his eyes betrayed barely contained anger. “It is likely that this action by a group called Allah’s Avenger’s involves a small nuclear device. By midnight hundreds of thousands of our citizens may die.” The President paused and focused his energy to deal with the gravity of the event rather than succumb to his emotions. “We don’t have the time to bat this around and develop consensus for a course of action. Unless we are very lucky and thwart this attack by morning, the entire country will panic. Folks, the very fabric of our great nation is at risk.”

When an aid delivered a single sheet of paper, the President’s attention focused on the CIA Director, Howard VanEman. “Anything new?” the President asked.

“No, Mr. President. At this time, we don’t know whether it’s Washington or New York. We’re doing all we can to find out. Both places have huge fireworks displays tonight, and no doubt that’s where they’ll direct the attack.”

“From their point of view it makes sense,” the President said looking at his watch. “It’s symbolic and devastating at the same time.”

“What’s our degree of confidence that this is really going to happen?” Secretary of State Marvin P. Mooney asked. “We’ve been burned before by the CIA.”

“We’re ninety percent sure at this point. I wish we could be more precise,” VanEman said, apologizing to the President.

The President frowned. For a second he winced as if some hidden malady suddenly bathed him in pain and he struggled to regain control of himself and the meeting.

“Based on that ninety-percent risk assessment and the time required to evacuate the throngs of people massed for the celebrations tonight, I’d say we have the following choices:

“First, we could issue immediate evacuation orders and create panic nationwide. If there isn’t an attack, the stampede might kill thousands. If there is an attack, it is possible that some would escape unharmed or suffer minimal injuries.

“Second, if we do nothing, we’ll at least avoid a stampede. If there isn’t an attack, no one should get hurt. If there is an attack, more will die. God I wish we had more time,” the President raged.

Everyone understood the futility of the situation and waited nervously to hear the President’s decision.

“I’ve decided not to evacuate the cities or cancel the celebrations,” the President said, knowing that he might be making the wrong choice. “At this point all I can do is pray that our information is incorrect or that by some miracle we find and stop whoever is responsible for this attack.”

“Is it possible that we’ve been fed false information at the last minute that causes us to overreact and look foolish to the world?” Secretary of Labor, Kathryn Henderson, asked.

The CIA director shook his head. “Anything is possible. We’ve verified that the Avenger radicals now have an Iranian twenty-kiloton nuclear bomb. Combine this with the Syrian information concerning the Avenger terrorists in our country I’d say attack probability is very high.”

The President turned to FBI Director Walter Lowery. “What assets do you have in place that might prevent this attack?”

“Assistant Directors Pincher in Washington and Bender in New York have every available agent covering the celebrations in both cities,” Lowery said. “Although we’re not officially on a Code Red,

we've learned our lesson the hard way, so the agency is already on a heightened alert status."

"That's at least one thing in our favor then," the President said. "Let's motivate those agents by telling them what we know. Just make sure they keep a lid on it so we don't create panic conditions."

"One other thing, Mr. President, we have a skeleton crew already at the Emergency Communications Facility working with the agents," Director of Homeland Security, Paul Chambers said. "We could bring in additional staff before the attack occurs. That might not save the day, but it won't hurt either."

"Again, do it quietly," the President directed. "We don't want the media spooked on any of this. They can only make matters worse by alarming the public when there is little that can be done."

"I can't believe that we can't do something to prevent this, Mr. President. Can't we put pressure on someone to stop this attack before it happens?" General Leland Sanders asked.

"Not at this time, General. We're just beginning to learn what this is all about," the President said. "We may need your expertise after this is over. Just don't lose the plans for dismantling Iran and Syria."

"Syria? You think they're involved with this?" Sanders asked.

The President's face reddened and he clenched his fist as he fought to keep control. "We believe the Syrian government purposely delayed giving us the information for at least a day. They've wasted what little time we had to stop the attack and protect our citizens. As far as I'm concerned, they're as responsible for the attack as the terrorists."

The general shook his head in disbelief, but knew instinctively that obliterating an entire country might be the only way to stop repeated attacks on the United States.

The Cabinet Room door opened and Secret Service Chief Warren Arbogast entered and whispered in the President's ear.

"Ladies and Gentleman, I'm told that security procedures require me to be evacuated for the good of the country," the President said. "I have no idea whether Washington is the target or not. It's possible that I will never see you again.

"I'm truly sorry for this, just know that I'm very grateful for your wisdom, strength, and support while I've been in office. If we survive the night, let's remember this moment and channel our anger into holding our country together and preventing another attack. Thank you."

The President left quickly and everyone in the Cabinet Room reached for their cell phones to issue instructions or talk with a loved one.

Two minutes later, the President joined the First Lady aboard Marine-One, a dual engine, Sikorsky VH-3D Sea King helicopter for the short flight to Dulles International Airport. Due to the immediate nuclear threat, Security changed the President's normal departure point from Andrews Air Force Base to Dulles Airport where the President's 747 jumbo jet just landed.

The helicopter rose to an altitude of twelve-hundred feet where the President and First Lady saw the mass of people gathered for the National Symphony Orchestra and the spectacular fireworks display celebrating the birth of the Nation.

The President felt his wife's hand on his arm. "I know what you're thinking, Jim, but no one could prevent this tragedy."

The President bit his lower lip, but turned to look at his wife, "Marilyn, they were counting on me to protect them. Now I'm running for safety."

"The country needs your leadership and strength. Tomorrow morning your face will be the icon of hope for millions of people. You'll pull everyone together and punish whoever attacked us."

The President started to sob. "All of these people, killed—the Nation's Capital destroyed—it's more than I can bear." The First Lady remained quiet allowing her husband to vent his emotions. She had faith in his ability to recover from the stress of the moment. She knew once his inner strength surfaced, he would overcome the stress and this tragedy.

Directly in front of the President, a single light flashed on the communications console. "You'd better take that call," the First Lady said pointing to the light.

The President dried his eyes and blew his nose. "Thanks. It's time for me to be President again, I lost it for a minute," he said punching the button labeled Homeland Defense. "This is the President," he said into the telephone.

"Mr. President, I am Jocelyn Hafner, a communications specialist at the Emergency Communications Facility. Secretary Chambers directed me to relay the following information. He apologizes that he cannot inform you himself."

"Go ahead, Ms. Hafner, I'm sure he's very busy."

"Mr. President, we've determined from marine records that Perth Amboy, New Jersey, is the location of Ramesh Mohamed's trawler. Mohamed is the

son of the Syrian woman who claims he's part of a plot to attack the United States. We've confirmed that he's connected with Allah's Avengers."

"Have we located him yet?"

"No sir, because of Mohamed's location, Secretary Chambers thinks the attack will be in New York rather than Washington. His yacht, the 'Supernova,' wasn't moored and Mohamed can't be found. Local police are searching for him on land. The Coast Guard and police patrol boats are searching for his boat in the Hudson River and New York City Harbor."

"Let me know the minute we've located him," the President said.

"Yes sir, but with the fireworks celebration, the harbor channel is crowded with hundreds of boats."

"Thanks, Ms. Hafner, keep me informed."

"Yes sir."

The First Lady, curious about the nature of the telephone call, wanted to ask, but allowed her husband to respond to the information unhampered.

The President pushed the intercom button to talk to the helicopter pilot. "This is the President speaking, the situation has changed. Take me back to the White House."

The helicopter banked sharply to the right. "Yes, Mr. President."

The Secret Service Agent with him started to protest, but only nodded, knowing that the President's decision was final.