

Samantha Stranger stared at the live news feed of the mayhem in Washington, DC, with a crushing sense of guilt. Such feelings were not common for her, as she had dedicated her life to the pursuit of accomplishment by unremitting discipline and focus. She had been working feverishly over the past few weeks to prevent just what she was watching on the screen, and seeing it play out despite her best efforts nauseated her.

As far as CNN could tell, the Lincoln Memorial was badly damaged, and hostile troops, hostile *American* troops, were storming the White House and other government buildings. Confusion and gunfire were everywhere. The police, the FBI, the Marines guarding the White House were returning fire, but it was difficult to determine who the enemy soldiers were. Innocent people were being shot for doing anything suspicious. Chaos was clearly in charge.

Samantha knew that this fit in perfectly with the purposes of the subversives. They were not looking for a military victory as such. They were looking to decapitate the federal government if possible; but their real aim was to create chaos by highlighting weaknesses in the federal system to buy enough time to implement other elements of their plan. The goal of that plan was to replace the federal government of the United States with a number of smaller, more “manageable” nations that would take the place of the sprawling federal superstructure. They had options for what to do then, and they knew that the federal government had only one: to find them and use force to crush them.

But the feds couldn’t crush what they couldn’t find. Even though the insurrectionist troops were spreading chaos and violence throughout the District, they were masters at deception. They wore no uniforms and identified each other by various, nonstandard tattoos on their bodies, the significance of which was known only to other troops. Their strategy was to attack, disperse, and reassemble at another attack point. Nor were they limited to a single agenda: they could attack any number of targets of convenience among a list of many in the DC area. The defenders would have a hard time mounting a defense with such random targets.

Nonetheless, Samantha believed she saw the outlines of a battle strategy in play on the small screen: subversive Sovereign Citizen troops were snaking their way toward the White House, the Supreme Court, and the congressional office buildings, attacking, scattering, and reassembling.

Samantha could see regiments of men in T-shirts, jeans, and loose-fitting jackets that had been a military phalanx a few moments before and was now an amorphous crowd, apparently no different from other crowds of terrified civilians searching for cover. She could see members of the regiment blending in with the general population and then reassembling at another point. Seeing this did not help her nausea.

Samantha Stranger was not alone watching these events. She was in the Public Hotel in Chicago, along with key team members she’d been working with to prevent this very cataclysm from occurring. Marie LeBrun, her compatriot and close friend, was there, as were Cherie Keenan, a woman who fled from her husband’s lead role in the insurrection, and Darrin McAlister, the police chief of tiny Rolla, Missouri, who had helped Cherie find refuge after her husband was murdered, and threw in his lot with her and with the federal agents who were working to preserve public peace.

There was silence among the team members. They were all entranced by what they were seeing on the screen, and each in his or her own way was sickened by it. Cherie Keenan’s face was streaked with tears; Darrin McAlister sat stone-faced watching the small screen. Marie LeBrun was taking deep breaths to control the rage she felt in her soul.

Samantha tore her eyes away from the screen and looked at the other members of the group. She got up then and walked over to Marie and put her hands on her shoulders. It was a sign of support and affection, along with some mild impatience.

“We will get through this, Marie,” she said softly. “We will hunt these bastards down and kill every last one of them.” There was not a trace of irony or hyperbole in her voice.

Marie turned a tear-stained face to look up at her friend. “Yes, we will, Sam,” she said. “Yes, we will.”

Sam turned to the others in the room. She did not see herself as a leader, more a highly competent worker bee. But she couldn’t stand the inertia and felt she had to say something to get the group moving.

“Listen up, everyone,” she began. “We lost this round. We were unable to stop this from happening.” She paused a moment and glanced down at the floor. “We knew something like this was in the works, and we did all

we could to prevent it . . . but, despite our best efforts, it happened anyway.” She looked at each person in the room directly in the face. Each looked back and nodded slightly.

“We all hate this. Now, it’s also true that we are in a better position than most to keep this fight alive. We know the players, we have a good idea of how they are organized, and we have solid intel about the whereabouts of most of the principals.” She paused again and looked around. “We also have a good idea of what they’re up to. And we have a window to stop this thing before it goes much further.” She looked at the television screen and frowned. “What you see on that screen is not the end. It’s the beginning of a fight. Whether or not these people succeed is up to us and to people like us. I want each of us to keep doing what we’ve been doing and shove these sons of bitches back into whatever holes they came out of before they permanently wreck our country.”

There was a collective sigh among the small group. It was not so much relief as it was a break from the trance induced by watching unbelievable images on the small screen. Each battle-weary person in that room knew that Samantha was correct and that the time for grief and shock would have to be postponed. There was work to be done.