

Chapter 1

Even though I was walking, I could feel my eyelids beginning to droop as the speaker droned on in a practiced midwestern accent. He was a lobbyist—something to do with guns, I think. The kind that button-holes you on the Capitol steps and doesn't let go until you either get into a car or get rude. Beyond his right ear, just to the left of his moving mouth, the instrument of this momentary torture, I caught a glimpse of my driver pulling up to the curb. I forced my eyes open to full alert and made my own mouth move. "Gotta go," I said, interrupting him. "My ride's here."

I slipped into the car wondering if every congressman and senator was as annoyed by these guys as I was. I have been in the Senate for almost two years now, and my disdain—no, my contempt—for these bastards has not diminished a bit, not a single iota. It's all about money, money, and more money. It's a child's pretend game. They pretend they are providing a service, and we pretend that what goes on is not a half-step away from bribery, if not closer. Once I was safely ensconced in my limo and moving away from the noxious presence, I could shake my head and put the annoying mini-drama out of my mind, like changing the channel from an especially soporific soap. Unfortunately, I knew in the back of my mind that I probably wasn't finished with these guys for today.

I forced myself to focus on what lay ahead of me. I was on my way to meet with a woman I had never met. She was not, thankfully, a lobbyist, or at least I didn't think so. And the voice on the telephone was redolent with such sincerity, such strength of purpose, and such clarity that my interest was piqued. Or at least piqued enough to agree to meet with a woman I did not know for a reason I only dimly understood. I have always been a sucker for women with sexy voices, and hers was one of the sexiest I had ever heard.

When I called for my ride, I gave George the address that the woman, Isadore, had given me. My thoughts turned to Isadore, the name attached to the sexy phone voice. There was something about her: a potency, a determination, something that enabled her to get through to my private phone without getting derailed by the various ploys routinely used by members of Congress to dodge real-time phone encounters. No one in this town wants to talk to anyone unprepared, and I am no exception to that rule. It keeps my life uncluttered, or at least less cluttered.

But Isadore vaporized those defenses like a twelve year old vanquishing mousy little figures in a computer game. When I picked up the phone, I glanced at Sarah, my secretary, the overseer of my entire office fortification. I looked at her with a question in my eyes as I picked up the phone, and she just shrugged. Fifty years old with thirty years experience at fielding calls, and she just shrugged. This caller must be something, I thought.

Isadore did not waste time once she had my attention.

"Senator Telemark," she began in a silky alto. "My name is Isadore Hathaway, Frank Hathaway's daughter. I need to see you."

The natural response to a statement such as this would be "Why?" For reasons I am still digesting, that little three-letter word did not cross my mind. It was her tone, I think, her certainty. It didn't hurt that she was related to the fabled Frank Hathaway, recently deceased senatorial powerhouse of the era just before I joined the Club. Frank had been revered by friend and foe alike, mostly because he was tirelessly committed to working the system. Legend has it that Hathaway did not talk to anyone on whom he did not have the goods. A walking, talking, late-twentieth-century inquisitor. He scared people on both sides of the aisle and even in other branches of government.

"When?" I asked Dora. Even now, as I am being driven to a small restaurant across the Potomac, I am not sure why she got to me so effortlessly. Hypnotic suggestion? Some mysterious powder she had planted on my phone? Don't be silly, I thought. She's just a woman. A compelling woman but a mere mortal.

"As soon as possible," she had said, without skipping a beat. "At the Emporia restaurant in Alexandria. Can you come this afternoon?"

I momentarily regained my senses. "May I ask what this is about?" I countered weakly.

"I will tell you more when I see you, but for now, please understand that I have something to share with you that matters to our country and in which you have a personal stake. You will understand as soon as I am able to explain it to you in detail. I am sorry I can't say more on the phone."

Silence. I was pinned to the mat. All she had to do was wait until I recognized it.

"OK," I said for lack of any real alternative. "I'll meet you in an hour."

When I put the receiver back, I realized I was sweating. Not out of anxiety, but out of, well, I am forty-eight years old, but I felt like a high school nerd who got asked out by the prom queen. All fluster and flush. It did not help that I was single and not involved with anyone at the moment. My last train wreck of a relationship had ended three months ago, and I guess I am still pretty vulnerable. But the wreck in question had only lasted about two months, so I can't really claim any profound emotional loss. I am just ready.

I guess I wanted to be intrigued. I wanted to have some sexy female voice on the other end of the line entice me to lunch at a restaurant in the middle of my work day with vague promises and even vaguer intentions. Besides, DC is beautiful in the spring, and the three thousand Japanese cherry blossom trees don't hurt. I'm a romantic at heart; I just play a senator on TV.

George pulled up to the Emporia, got out, and opened the door. This little door-opening ritual continues to embarrass me. Even though I am a life-long republican, the scion of a family of multigenerational republicans, we did not have money. Or servants, or drivers, or any of the other perks that come along with the kind of money that most of my colleagues in the esteemed chamber of the Senate have had from their earliest days. Both my parents were teachers. Smart; loved their work; loved me. But money was scarce. I did have an uncle once who people said was loaded, but he could have been the mayor of some town in Kazakhstan for all I saw of him, or his cash. In our family, life was simple and honest.

I looked at the restaurant and realized that I had no clue who I was looking for. The woman with the sexy voice. Maybe I could ask the dozen or so women within my field of vision to say my name. On the other hand, I would prefer to leave lunch without getting arrested.

It didn't matter. A woman who could only have been named Isadore Hathaway was walking straight toward me without a hint of hesitation in her stride. I blushed; it wasn't just her voice. Tall, thin, elegant—very attractive. Dressed in a simple black dress with a single strand of pearls with matching earrings. The kind of body men long for, the kind that is splashed across more than one weekly style magazine to entice male and female readers alike.

"Mr. Telemark?" She asked, extending her hand, which I was relieved to take. "I am Isadore Hathaway." Her voice was the same strong alto I had heard on the phone. Her handshake was firm and her gaze unwavering.

I tried to respond with similar strength. I looked her straight in the eye and said, "Call me Jake."

"Call me Dora," she said, softening just a tiny bit. I did not think it was an invitation to familiarity so much as a more efficient way of relating, of doing business. "Please come with me," she said, and turned on her heel and headed into the main dining room of the restaurant.

I followed and had to pick up my pace to stay with her. She seemed headed toward a table at the back of the room, and the fifteen seconds it took to get there gave me some time to organize my first impressions. She was a very attractive, pedigreed woman who obviously had an agenda. I wondered why I had never heard anything about her before. If she was this potent a presence, was associated with DC, and was the daughter of Frank Hathaway, it didn't seem likely that she could fly under the radar. Not with her lineage.

To my surprise, she walked straight into the kitchen through a door at the back of the dining room. She did not even turn to make sure I was following. I guess she just assumed I would. Pretty sure of herself, I thought. The nagging sense that something was amiss wasn't improving. Why had I not heard about this woman before?

Dora walked straight out the kitchen entrance of the restaurant and nodded to a car waiting in the alley. She did not need to say the words. Our eyes met momentarily as I opened my car door and she opened hers. She knew she was in complete control as she had been since the unexpected phone call an hour or so ago.

The car was manned by a huge African-American who drove slowly down the alley. I could see his eyes in the rear view mirror flit back and forth across his field of vision as he edged the limousine slowly into the street. As soon as he entered traffic, he picked up speed. Just beyond the speed limit. He was headed south.

“Mr. Telemark. . . I mean, Jake,” Dora began. “Thank you for meeting with me. I asked to see you because I have recently become aware of something I hope you can help me with.”

She paused and glanced at her hands, as if organizing her thoughts for the presentation. “There are some men of my acquaintance who are planning to overthrow our government. I need your help to stop them.”

As soon as she said this, it clicked. The reason I had never heard of this delicious and enticing woman before: she’s a nut case. Crazy as a loon. Paranoid. A conspiracy theorist. I was instantly embarrassed that I had allowed myself to be so taken in so easily. Her name probably wasn’t Hathaway, or if it was she was probably from some branch of the Hathaway family that broke off generations ago to think up kooky thoughts in the hinterland somewhere. The hills of Tennessee, maybe, or the badlands of Montana. I took a deep breath but made no move to speak. I immediately began to think of how I could get away from this crazy woman who was wrapped in such an agreeable package. But it was her car and her three-hundred-pound driver in the front seat; so nothing seemed plausible at the moment. I tried to look calm on the surface.

“What I am about to share with you is something I trust you will hold in the highest confidence.” She pulled out a small, high-end laptop and opened the screen.

What appeared to be a home page was emblazoned with a large cross, the kind that you see a hundred times a day in various settings across our country. It was rough-hewn, a symbol of ignominy or splendor, depending upon one’s point of view.

The image faded into a collage of twelve faces, each one smiling sanctimoniously. I recognized three or four of them, men I had met during my time in DC. Men I did not particularly like. One was a senator, another a representative, and another an appellate judge. Another may have been a military man of some sort, a colonel perhaps or maybe a general, but not a high ranking one. I wasn’t certain. The collage was distasteful to me; an unsavory collection of militant evangelicals, the kind that have haunted the District since the original swamp was drained to build there. Men most people just tolerated.

Dora looked at me. “You recognize at least some of these men,” she began. “You probably don’t like them.”

As crazy as I was sure she was, she had my biases nailed. “That’s correct,” I replied, still pondering escape scenarios in my mind.

“These men want to replace our current form of government with a managerial council of twelve. As you can see, they have very clear ideas of who those twelve people—all men—will be.”

I looked back down at the computer screen. It was indeed a website of evangelical government officials, the type that has grown increasingly common these days. It was fashionable in this segment of time in the US for educated officials in the government to flaunt their religious preferences. They were always praying in public and advising others to do the same. Websites like this were popping up all over the Net. I thought it was revolting.

Dora was watching me watch the screen. I thought maybe she could sense the disgust that must have been written somewhere on my face. When my eyes rose to meet hers, the businesslike air was gone, replaced by a look of warmth and conspiratorial empathy. “These are dangerous men,” she said softly.

I am such a sucker for smart, pretty women. Every cell of my higher brain pointed to the fact that this was a deranged, sick woman lost in a conspiracy theory she may have constructed all on her own out of bits and pieces of news strung together in her mind to support it. My limbic system, however, was more equivocal; more disposed; more attracted. These animal/rational collisions were not uncommon in my life. I was always

disgusted that, for the most part, the animal won. I began to have that sinking feeling that always accompanied the abandonment of my good sense.

“Dora,” I said. “What in the world are you talking about?”

Dora leaned back a few inches against the soft leather interior of the limo as if she had won. I was still sure she was nuts, but I was not in control of the vehicle, so I leaned back too, wondering what her next move would be. I did not have to wait long. Dora launched into a detailed story that didn't sound so whacked out as it might have twenty years ago. She spoke calmly, even thoughtfully, as she detailed just how twelve fanatical government officials planned to turn the US into a theocratic oligarchy.

I had to admit, if there was a plot, it was a pretty good one as sinister plots go. The gist of it was straightforward: these twelve driven men were going to provoke a crisis, call for a constitutional convention, and propose that democracy as it has been practiced in the United States for the past two hundred years had had a good run, but that it was inefficient, dangerous to the safety and to the morals of the country, and could advantageously be replaced by an executive council of twelve chosen from all parts of the United States land mass who would serve twelve-year terms to safeguard the economic, social, and moral well-being of the citizenry. The long terms of office would give them a chance to keep the longer-term interests of the populace in mind, and the attentions of the country would not be so distracted by frequent elections the way it has been these two centuries. Given the mess that the country is forever in, they were banking on the educated populace doing what an educated populace had done on more than one occasion within the last hundred years, i.e., surrender their rights for greater efficiency, greater security, and more relief from fear. You did not have to look back to the Third Reich to see that this strategy could work; you just had to review some of the legislation that followed the horror of 9/11.

In addition to the crisis, there were two other elements of the strategy that were high on the agenda of these men. One was to neutralize the independent judiciary so that no threat could come from the courts to claim that what they were doing was unconstitutional, even though it violated every authentic American impulse. The second was to stage a catastrophe in an effort to entice the citizens of the US to surrender their rights voluntarily in an effort to be safe, the kind of thing that started with the Patriot Act after 9/11. Open records; surveil anyone; dismantle the Bill of Rights. In process, I thought.

There were obstacles of course. They needed a credible crisis, not just another three-hour headline on CNN. And it couldn't be something that struck the US from afar. That would just coalesce the status quo and rally patriotic fervor around the existing system. No, what was needed was a home-grown act of terror, something that reflected the extreme moral decay of the prevailing political and cultural mores. What they needed was a renegade liberal, a deranged hippie, an amoral lunatic who was both widely known and who could credibly be accused of trying to destroy the country. What they needed was Willy Maelstrom.