

23.

Los Angeles – Malibu
June

The telephone rang a few minutes after seven.

“Dr. Connor?” It was a woman’s voice. “Dr. Connor, Governor Patterson would like to speak to you. Could you hold, please?”

Governor Patterson? CIA Director Patterson? What the hell is this about?

“Dr. Connor, this is Jay Patterson.” The voice was modulated, slightly nasal, Eastern, the manner formal. Jason thought of the television images of the man’s Senate appearances – tall, ascetic-looking, with sharp blue eyes behind rimless glasses held toward the end of the nose.

“We haven’t met, but I imagine you know something about me. As of yesterday, I’ve learned something about you.” There was a slight pause.

“I should apologize for breaking into your early morning there, and I do. But I should also tell you that I don’t normally make telephone calls of this nature – and would not be doing so unless the matter was of the greatest and urgency. So I’ll come to the point quickly. I understand that you’ll be traveling in the next few days or so, for a conference.”

“Yes. I leave the day after tomorrow.” Damascus? He wants to talk to me about Damascus?

“I’d like to ask you to help us.”

Help the Agency? They need help? A small, cold wave of disbelief washed over him. .

“What are you talking about?”

“Dr. Connor, this isn’t something I can discuss on the telephone. I’d like to have two of my associates tell you what it’s about. I hope you can see them.”

Jason could think of nothing to say.

“Dr. Connor?”

“Look, Governor, I don’t want to disappoint you, but I don’t know of anything I can help you with. If you were briefed about me, then you know I left the Agency more than eight years ago. I’m sure I still have friends in the service, but I haven’t spoken to them or had anything to do with them for years. When I left, I left for good. I have another life.”

He thought for a moment, then spoke again, his voice rising. “I can’t imagine why you’re calling me. I can’t think of any help I can give. I’m not in the business anymore. Governor, I don’t *want* to be in the business.”

What’s he doing? He shouldn’t be calling me. I’m out of it.

There was a short silence before Patterson spoke again, now with an undertone of urgency.

“Dr. Connor, I wouldn’t be calling unless it was a matter of the greatest need –”

“*What* is this about? What do you want me to do?”

“The first thing I’d hope you could do is listen. Just that. I’d like you to see two of my associates. Receive them and listen to them, please. Then make up your mind.”

A fly buzzed against the windowpane. Outside, a car passed on the street. The intrusions of normality on the insane.

“Who are they?”

“One is my exec, Zack Martinsen. You know him, I think –”

“I’ve met Zack –”

“The other’s from another division. I’d rather not say more about that now. If you can see them, I’d suggest not in your office. At your house, would be best.”

“When. Tomorrow – Saturday? Sunday’s out. I leave Sunday.”

“Today.”

“*Today!* When would they get a flight?”

“Dr. Connor, they’re in the air now. They should be arriving at Los Angeles a little after noon.”

The seconds counted away before Jason replied, in a voice so low that the man at the other end barely caught what he said.

“All right, Governor. I’ll see them. But it may be a short meeting.”

Jason cradled the receiver and tried to push away the dark thoughts of a world he had left long ago that crowded up against him.

Trapped, he thought. Snared. He felt shamed at how quickly he had said yes to the voice on the other end of the line. Whatever it was, he’d have nothing to do with it. The meeting would be very short indeed.