

AFTERSHOCK

Also by Philip Donlay

The Donovan Nash Novels

Deadly Echoes

Zero Separation

Code Black

Category Five

AFTERSHOCK

A Novel

PHILIP DONLAY

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FIRST EDITION

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For Rebecca “Bex” Norgaard Peterson

There’s not a single scenario where I get to where I am today without you in my life. You have my eternal thanks.

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AFTERSHOCK

PROLOGUE

The mist swirled in the treetops and the steep trail rose into the opaque sky, then vanished altogether. Stephanie VanGelder felt both wary and excited. Towering above her, unseen in the fog, were three volcanoes; one of them, named Atitlán, was showing signs of life after lying dormant for nearly one hundred sixty years. The sounds of the forest were muted and soft in the damp air. In the gray, overcast Guatemalan morning, each unidentifiable noise made her hesitate and wonder, at least on some primal level, if the sound was coming from the volcano. She was thrilled to once again be heading to a photo shoot, and a little apprehensive that the assignment was an active volcano.

Stephanie felt the burn in her lungs and her legs. She was breathing hard in the thin air and tried to convince herself that she wasn't out of shape, that it was only a combination of the steep path and the ever-present camera equipment she carried. They'd been climbing for nearly two hours. She continued to put one foot in front of the other as she trudged up the damp trail, determined to keep pace with Rick Mathews, who was a dozen paces in front of her.

Rick was a volcanologist with the United States Geological Survey. He was tall and muscular, with seemingly endless energy. His intelligent eyes dominated his angular face—and he seemed on the verge of a perpetual smile. His head was topped with a mass of curly black hair badly in need of a trim. In fact, he needed both a haircut and a shave. His attitude was casual and carefree, reminding

her of an overgrown puppy. She joined up with this group because the USGS was keenly interested in the recent signs of life from Atitlán, one of the three peaks that made up the southern shore of the lake, and one of five active volcanoes in Guatemala. The job this morning was to hike up the mountain and place a seismometer in a predetermined spot to better follow the volcano. Stephanie registered satisfaction at the sight of sweat beginning to soak the collar of Rick's shirt. He was in his mid-thirties, a good ten years younger than she.

Behind her was Oliver Pelletier, an aspiring volcanologist who had eagerly volunteered to accompany Rick on this journey. In his mid-twenties, Oliver was short and very fair-skinned. His rounded face was smooth and his cheeks flushed easily. From what little Stephanie had gathered, he'd recently joined the USGS as an intern. Stephanie didn't know much beyond the fact that he was from Canada, and that he was working on his PhD in geophysics. Oliver seemed quiet and reserved, but he whistled softly as they climbed—she wondered if it was because he was musically inclined, or just nervous.

A young armed guard brought up the rear of their small group. Quiet, with a quick smile, he dressed in civilian clothes and toted a rifle, but, as they climbed higher into the foothills and left the town of Santiago Atitlán behind, she decided she didn't mind the idea of protection. The State Department reports of the general lawlessness in the country had been disturbing. This part of Guatemala was fairly remote and the USGS staff in Guatemala City had assured her that their small group would be safe.

"We're almost there," Rick called over his shoulder. He held up the small GPS unit in his hand to confirm. "It's just beyond the next rise."

Stephanie felt a little deflated—she hoped they would climb above the cloud layer or that the cloud deck would show some signs of burning off. She wanted a mix of sunshine and clouds to shoot. Rick warned her it was the rainy season and that the sun was somewhat elusive this time of year. Still, even with the sub-

dued light, observing these two scientists installing a seismic monitor in the rugged terrain would go a long way in her photo essay documenting the efforts of volcano researchers.

Atilán had been considered dormant until a week ago. There had been a series of earthquake swarms detected by the USGS lab in Guatemala City, followed by a cloud of steam and ash released from a vent at the summit of the mountain. The nearest seismic arrays were focused on Mt. Fuego and Mt. Pacaya, the active volcanoes located just outside Guatemala City. In a race to get a more accurate pulse of the mountain, to try to discover what may or may not be happening deep underground, Rick and Oliver were “wiring the mountain,” as they called it, and Stephanie had been granted the opportunity to photograph the process.

Stephanie had been a professional photographer for twenty-five of her forty-eight years, and she frowned as she studied the light coming through the swirling mist at the tops of the trees. As happened so often in her line of work, the site and Mother Nature would dictate how she approached the subjects.

“This is the place!” Rick stopped and spread his arms as if he were giving the clearing his own personal blessing. “Perfect.”

Stephanie joined Rick at the edge of what amounted to a small cornfield carved out of the surrounding vegetation. She turned and looked north, toward the lake. Through the trees she could just make out the water far below, and she felt a slight twinge of vertigo as she saw how far they’d climbed. Above her she caught sight of a sliver of blue sky through the drifting clouds. They might have sunshine yet.

“Oliver,” Rick said, as the two scientists stood together on the narrow path and surveyed the immediate terrain, “I think if we set up the equipment over there, at the edge of this field next to those trees, it’ll be fairly unobtrusive.”

“I agree,” Oliver replied.

“Which way is it—the volcano?” Stephanie asked.

Rick pulled himself up to his full six-foot-three height, spun his baseball cap smartly until the bill was pointed backward, and

pivoted on one heel to his left. He put out his arm and raised his thumb as if making a precision measurement. “Up above us we have the tallest of the three volcanoes, Atitlán, the object of our immediate concern. It rises to nearly eleven thousand, six hundred feet above sea level. Slightly to the north we have Tolimán, its cone is a shade over ten thousand, three hundred feet in height, and behind us, across the bay from Santiago, is San Pedro, another ten-thousand foot volcano. These three volcanoes form the southern edge of Lake Atitlán, which is actually a huge volcanic crater that filled up with water. The noted author Aldous Huxley once called this place the most beautiful on earth.”

“I might agree with him—this is amazing.” Stephanie shrugged herself free of her backpack and lowered it gently to the ground. “You do what you need to do, and I’ll maneuver around and see where I can get the best shot.”

“No problem,” Rick replied. “We’ll be over here where it’s fairly level, just before the path starts back up the mountain.”

Stephanie guessed that the clearing was a little less than an acre. It gave her enough room to maneuver and capture a variety of angles. While Rick and Oliver began to shed their gear, she slung two cameras over her shoulder and moved up the incline to shoot down the hill toward the lake. The air was perfectly still, and as she moved away from the two scientists and their conversation, she could hear the sounds of birds high in the trees. It took her several minutes to find exactly where she wanted to start, carefully eyeing the light and her subjects. Satisfied, she checked her beloved Nikon digital camera, removed the lens cover, and began to frame her shot. Slightly below her, Rick was leaning over, hands on his knees as he discussed something with Oliver. Beyond, shafts of light were penetrating the clouds, creating small irregular shapes of sunlight on the distant water. It was a beautiful sight.

Stephanie began shooting; first she zoomed in on the men, and then adjusted the lens to take in more of the surrounding area. Without taking her eye from the camera, she moved more to her right, then forward, seeing the results through the lens and fir-

ing off several exposures. Stephanie focused in for a tight shot of Rick, who was holding up a GPS receiver, a serious expression on his boyish face. She was still adjusting her framing when she saw him jerk his head downhill toward the path, a look of confusion in his eyes. Out of habit, she swung the camera to her left in one fluid motion and found a young girl running up the path. It took Stephanie a moment to understand the girl wasn't running for fun; her youthful features radiated stark fear—she looked like she was fleeing for her life. Stephanie zoomed in on her face, could see the terror in her large brown eyes. The girl was barefoot, wearing a bright red dress and loose-fitting white top. Her long brown hair flew back from her dirty face. Stephanie guessed she was no more than ten years old. Instinctively, her actions honed by years of covering war-torn locations around the world, Stephanie fired off a string of exposures.

Through her lens, Stephanie watched as the girl flung herself at Rick, who had moved to intercept her. She heard shouts, but the voices came outside her framed shot and she was forced to swing her camera back along the trail where the girl had appeared. She found three men charging up the path; they wore makeshift military uniforms. Each of the men moved quickly, rifles at the ready. Stephanie squeezed off three more shots, then swung back smoothly to Rick and the girl as the shouts grew louder.

As if she were completely separate from events, but only thirty yards away, Stephanie crouched to make herself smaller and continued to shoot. She focused on their security guard who had now raised his weapon. He was yelling in Spanish when a bright plume of red erupted from his chest. Stephanie caught the image as the single shot echoed through the clearing. In her viewfinder, Rick was pushing the girl behind him as the gunmen moved closer. Two more gunshots reached her ears, and she saw Rick's knees buckle, two crimson stains spreading out from the center of his USGS sweatshirt. The force of the bullets staggered him backward and he fell to the ground.

Oliver moved sideways, reaching for the girl, when a small

round hole appeared on his forehead followed by a plume of red mist from the back of his head. Wordlessly, he crumpled to the ground, landing face first in the dirt. Fighting her horror, Stephanie tried to make herself invisible behind the vegetation. Afraid to move, she watched as one of the gunmen grabbed the young girl around the waist and held her there as she flailed helplessly in midair.

Stephanie knew she hadn't been seen. Carefully, she began to inch backward toward the trees. If she could make it to the heavier foliage, she could disappear into the forest. If she panicked, she knew she'd be killed along with the others. She tried to visualize how far she would have to circle around to make her way back down the mountain for help. She stayed low, backpedaling in the soft dirt toward the trees. She never took her eyes off the armed men as she inched her way toward safety. Stephanie hesitated as she sensed something behind her, more of a feeling than a sound, then she felt cold steel pressing into the tender skin just behind her left ear. She wanted to scream, but no sound came from her throat—it was as if in her final moments she'd been robbed of the ability to speak. She silently pleaded with the gods to let her live—but all she heard was the dry metallic click of a gun being cocked.

CHAPTER ONE

Donovan heard the helicopter long before he could see it; the sound echoing off the granite cliffs told him the chopper was coming low and fast. Probably the forest service. Several fires had been touched off by lightning a few days ago and aerial activity had picked up in the valley.

The morning sun had just peeked above the mountain tops in southwest Montana. Donovan was thigh deep in the cold water of the Bitterroot River, working his casts upstream toward an eddy and the big cutthroat trout he'd seen feeding on the surface. He made two false casts and then set the dry fly perfectly so as to drift naturally within striking range of the cutthroat. The fish inhaled the fly and Donovan set the hook and began stripping line to keep the tension. The fish powered downstream, using the current to take back the line that Donovan had fought to win. Forced to move downstream to stay with the fish, he maneuvered past a fallen log when the unmarked helicopter burst from behind the cottonwoods and made a tight turn overhead.

Donovan forgot about the fish, dropped his fly rod, and reached under his left arm for his holstered .40-caliber Sig Sauer. There was no need to jack a shell into the chamber. The gun was always ready. Slowed by his chest waders, Donovan ran up the path toward the cabin. He caught another glance of the helicopter through the treetops. It slowed to nearly a hover, and Donovan was convinced they were landing in the clearing next to his cabin, effectively cutting him off from communications and the remain-

der of his arsenal. There was no cell phone reception this far up the West Fork River valley and, in a rare lapse, he'd left his satellite phone in its charger.

The whine from the helicopter's turbine engine eased back to idle, telling Donovan it was on the ground. From the size of the helicopter there wouldn't be more than five on board, including the pilot. The Sig held fourteen rounds. Donovan slowed his pace, his rubber-soled wading boots moving him silently toward the intruders. He watched as a solitary man stepped out of the helicopter, seemingly unafraid. He was tall and solid, dressed in jeans and a leather jacket. His dark glasses made recognition impossible. Donovan guessed he was in his early thirties, both of his hands were empty, but he could easily be carrying a concealed pistol. In Montana, he would be the exception if he wasn't. The pilot sat behind the controls and made no move to exit the machine as the engine idled.

"Mr. Nash!" The man called out in the direction of the river. "We saw you as we flew over. I'm a friend of your wife, Dr. Lauren McKenna. She sent me to find you. It's urgent we talk."

Donovan surveyed the scene, two men against his fourteen rounds. He'd spent months practicing with the Sig, and was confident that if the interlopers caused any problems, the advantage was his. He lowered the Sig to his side and walked into the clearing. For Lauren to enlist someone to track him down from his self-imposed exile was more than worrisome.

"Who are you?" Donovan called out as he neared, mindful of the spinning rotor blades.

"I'm Special Agent Gregory Charles, Federal Bureau of Investigation. I understand I'm intruding, but please holster your weapon."

"As soon as I see some ID," Donovan said, as he closed the distance between them while holding a position that allowed him to keep an eye on both men.

Agent Charles slowly reached inside his jacket pocket and pulled out his FBI credentials. He handed them to Donovan. "Dr.

McKenna told me to expect this kind of greeting. I know what you've been through and, actually, I don't blame you, but we're losing valuable time. Can I brief you in the air?"

Donovan handed Agent Charles his ID and slid the Sig back into its holster. "I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what this is about. Start by telling me how you know my wife."

"I once did liaison work with the Defense Intelligence Agency. I met Lauren while working with her department on some classified matters. Since then, she's needed a few favors from inside the Bureau, as you both have. This is another of those favors."

"What's her boss' name?"

"Deputy Director Calvin Reynolds."

"Okay, why are you here?" Donovan felt his mistrust of the man diminish. He at least knew the right names.

"First of all, I need you to understand I'm not here in any official capacity. Today's my day off. Lauren called me early this morning. She said she'd chartered a helicopter and asked me to come get you."

"How did you know where to find me?" Donovan couldn't drop his suspicions. In the last year he'd almost been killed by a terrorist, and most recently, an enemy from his past had nearly destroyed everything Donovan held dear. People he cared about had died. That's why he was out here in the wilderness of Montana—he'd needed some perspective.

"Three months ago she alerted me to the fact that you'd rented this place. As a favor, she asked me to keep a general watch on the activity down here in the valley."

"Sounds like her," Donovan replied, not knowing whether to be touched by the gesture or pissed off that she was having him watched. "Now, what does my estranged wife think is so important that she's sent you out here to get me?"

"A Stephanie VanGelder is in Guatemala on a photo shoot. She's missing. It's a suspected kidnapping."

The words sent a sick icy chill straight to the pit of Donovan's stomach. He resisted the urge to lean over and put his hands

on his knees for support. Stephanie was one of Donovan's closest friends—she was like family, a younger sister—they'd practically grown up together. She was the niece of William VanGelder, the man who Donovan thought of as his father.

“What can I do to help?” Agent Charles asked. “Do you need assistance to close up the house? We're flying from here to Missoula. A chartered jet will be waiting to take you to Washington. Your wife has made all the arrangements. She told me to tell you William needs you, but that he doesn't know you're coming.”

“Give me five minutes to grab a few things and we'll be out of here,” Donovan said as he turned and ran for the house. The moment he was inside, he shed his fishing vest followed by his waders. He ran to his bedroom, slipped on a pair of khakis, a clean shirt, a pair of loafers, grabbed the go-bag he kept packed for emergencies and tossed it on the bed. He slid in the framed picture of his daughter Abigail he kept on his nightstand, his Sig, and two extra clips of ammo. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and stopped. He was lean and hard from a summer of chopping wood, fishing, and hiking the Bitterroot Mountains. He was toned and strengthened, and in better shape now than he was at thirty. His full beard was peppered with gray, as was his hair that easily fell past his ears, a by-product of cutting himself off from civilization. A few weeks earlier he'd turned fifty, but the reflection was that of a younger man. He'd shave and get a haircut when he could. He made a mental note to call the real estate agent and have her come and close up the house. He zipped the leather bag, snatched his briefcase, wallet, phone, and keys, then ran for the helicopter.

When the pilot spotted him, the turbine engine immediately began to spool toward full power. The moment the door was closed and he was strapped in his seat, the helicopter lifted off, pivoted smartly, and began to accelerate down the valley.

Donovan wore a headset against the noise of the helicopter. He stared at the shadow of the helicopter as it raced across the trees, rivers, and hay fields of Southwestern Montana. Lost in

the maelstrom of his thoughts, he inevitably spun back in time to when he'd last seen Stephanie. It had been a little over three months ago. They'd been together in the San Juan Islands in Washington State. He'd been there to pay his final respects to a friend, and Stephanie had shown up unannounced and helped him through a difficult time. She ended up staying with him a week. She'd traveled with him to Montana and helped him set up the leased cabin. They'd talked at length about death and transition, his separation from Lauren and the state of his marriage.

They also spent hours discussing her return to professional photography. He'd urged her to pick up her camera again and to get back out in the world. She was a brilliant artist. A decade ago, her photo reporting from Africa, chronicling child soldiers, had put her in the running for a Pulitzer. The fact that she'd been shooting pictures in Guatemala made him feel even worse, as if his nudging had led to her disappearance.

He couldn't imagine what his longtime friend William must be going through. Stephanie was all that was left of his family and the two were close. He doted on her, as would any uncle.

Donovan thought back to when he first met Stephanie. They were just kids, brought together because his family was close to her Uncle William. She grew up in London, but spent almost all of her summers with William—Donovan remembered her natural grace and athleticism were trumped only by her keen artistic talents. From the time she was ten, she always carried a camera that her Uncle William had bought for her, taking pictures of everything except other people. Her habit of waving him out of her field of view was maddening, and he could remember trying to peek into her shots, only to receive a verbal tongue lashing. In the end, what Donovan most liked about Stephanie was that she could mix and float in and out of any different social setting. A proper upper-crust debutante one moment; the next, yelling and cursing at him as they chased each other through the trees and meadows on his family's country estate in Northern Virginia.

When he was fourteen, Donovan had lost his parents at sea. He'd been the only survivor as their private yacht, caught in a storm, began to break up and take on water. It had been William who'd flown halfway around the world to be at his side after he'd been thought lost, and, not long after that, Stephanie had made it clear that she was there for him as well. In those dark days, she once described to him that she felt like they were cousins, and then later revised her position and pronounced that they were more like brother and sister. She was one of the few bright spots in a very difficult time in his life. Donovan loved her and would do anything for her.

She'd been instrumental in getting him to talk about the loss of his parents. William tried, as did many others, but it was Stephanie who got through to him, helped him honor his grief, yet keep pushing forward. Two years later, her own family was killed in an automobile accident on the M4 outside London. It was July, and Stephanie had been with him and William in Virginia when they received the news. The three of them boarded the Concorde, and Donovan remembered the depths of her sorrow and loss as they flew to England faster than the speed of sound.

They each had seen how quickly the universe could snuff out the life of a loved one, and the specter of that violence created an even tighter bond. As time had passed, the one element they always had in common was the fact that they were both identically wounded.

Donovan noticed the change in the sound and speed of the helicopter. The Missoula airport was straight ahead. After Donovan said his good-bye to Agent Charles, he walked across the ramp toward what looked to be a brand new Falcon 900, the airplane that would have him in Northern Virginia in three hours.

He settled into his seat and his thoughts drifted not to Stephanie, but to Meredith Barnes. A woman he'd loved and lost twenty years ago in Costa Rica. Instead of suppressing the inevitable memories of Meredith, he allowed his guilt, anguish, and rage to wash over him. It was a volatile mixture that threatened to

undo him, but it also provided an almost divine focus and clarity of purpose. Meredith was dead and Stephanie was alive. Despite what William, or Lauren, or anyone else thought of his current emotional state—Donovan promised himself that nothing on earth was going to stop him from going to Guatemala. Regardless of the cost, he'd do everything in his power to save her. The clock was ticking, and rescuing Stephanie became as important as if he were trying to save his own life. He'd do whatever it took—even if he died trying.

CHAPTER TWO

Donovan deplaned in front of the Eco-Watch hangar at Washington Dulles International Airport. He'd spent his time on the chartered flight on the computer, pulling up everything he could find about Guatemala. He'd found it odd that Stephanie's disappearance wasn't mentioned in the news. He'd debated calling Lauren to announce his arrival, but since she was the one who set it up, she knew damn well when he'd land. He decided to wait and talk with her in person.

He let himself into the hangar. On Sunday, no one would be around, which suited Donovan. The hangar was home to Eco-Watch's two highly modified Gulfstream jets. The *Spirit of da Vinci* was out of the country on a research mission in Africa, and the *Spirit of Galileo* was flight-testing a new instrumentation platform in California. Donovan operated under the title of Director of Flight Operations for Eco-Watch. Very few people knew that he'd not only founded the company, but that his hidden fortune also funded parts of the private research organization. Besides the two Gulfstream jets, Eco-Watch operated two ocean-going research ships, and the keel had been laid for a third. One was based in Hawaii and served the Pacific Ocean arena; the other called Norfolk, Virginia, its home port and sailed the Atlantic. Both the Eco-Watch Aviation and the Eco-Watch Marine divisions were booked months and sometimes years in advance.

Donovan walked into his office and found it exactly as he'd

left it all those months ago. Michael had taken over the day-to-day operations, and all that waited on Donovan's desk were several pieces of personal correspondence. He turned to go, but hesitated at the sight of a picture taken the day Eco-Watch had begun. Twelve years earlier, he and Michael had arrived on the ramp outside with the very first Eco-Watch Gulfstream. Standing in front of the jet was the first handful of employees, but the person truly responsible—was missing. Donovan's thoughts once again spun back in time to Meredith Barnes, the woman he couldn't ever seem to bury.

It seemed a lifetime ago they'd met, but in ways it felt like yesterday. In all that time she'd remained the same—the dead earn that privilege. She was still twenty-eight years old, an intelligent, fiery redhead with emerald-green eyes and freckles. A brilliant woman who'd changed the world. First, by her environmentalist-themed bestseller, *One Earth*, then, by her wildly popular television show and string of documentaries about saving this planet we live on—our one earth. She became larger than her accomplishments. She became the face of an exploding environmental movement. Part celebrity, part television star, part global emissary, Meredith flew into the face of any and all opposition to accomplish her goals. Her followers, fueled by a media that loved her, ensured that her message was received by nearly everyone on the planet.

Robert Huntington at the time was a rich, brash young man who'd been elevated to CEO of his family's oil company. He was smart and driven, a shrewd businessman, as was his late father. Robert was also smart enough to surround himself with the best and brightest men in the business. He was a playboy, a high visibility partygoer in Hollywood. It wasn't unusual for his picture to be on the cover of a business magazine the same week he was on the cover of the gossip tabloids. He always seemed to have yet another beautiful A-list actress on his arm, while his wheeling and dealing propelled Huntington Oil into a major powerhouse in the global energy business.

When Robert Huntington met Meredith Barnes, sparks flew. She very publicly tore up a three-million-dollar check he'd written toward her environmental causes and threw the pieces in his face. The media went wild, and Robert Huntington felt as if he'd met his match.

Their relationship progressed slowly and steadily, until they both acknowledged their feelings for one another on a romantic night in New Orleans. Robert had been at a conference dealing with offshore oil platform safety reforms. Despite heavy opposition to his costly recommendations, Robert had promised that Huntington Oil would proceed without a consensus to help create a zero-tolerance attitude toward any type of oil spill.

They were an unlikely power couple—the environmentalist and the oil tycoon. Members of both camps loudly denounced the relationship. There were constant murmurs that he was using her and vice-versa. They didn't care and made future plans for themselves as a couple, as well as their common vision for a better planet. Their entire future came to an abrupt halt when Meredith was kidnapped and murdered at an environmental summit in Costa Rica. Robert Huntington was never a suspect in terms of the authorities, but in the public eye he may as well have pulled the trigger. Robert Huntington murdered the world's beloved Meredith Barnes, and no amount of evidence would ever change the public's mind.

The fallout was massive. Crowds threatened Huntington Oil, there were bomb threats, violence against employees, sabotaged equipment in the field. Shareholders demanded Robert's resignation. Almost overnight, Robert Huntington had become the most hated man on earth. The threats became deadly, so much so that Robert wasn't able to attend his fiancée's funeral. Meredith was buried in Monterey, California, and he hadn't been there to mourn or even say good-bye to the woman he loved.

What the public didn't know was that Robert had asked Meredith to marry him. They were waiting to make their announcement until after the Costa Rica meeting. Then, as he tried

to grieve the loss of the woman he had planned to spend the rest of his life with, a reporter released a series of photographs depicting him romping on some remote beach with an unidentified blonde, instead of mourning his loss. The images were from years earlier, but the collective shriek of public outrage reached new and more dangerous levels.

Robert withdrew deeper into an alcohol-and-pill-infused depression. His best friend and guardian, William VanGelder, asked him candidly one night if he'd thought about ending his life. Robert admitted that he had. William's response was: "When do you want to get started?" That night marked the beginning of the end of Robert Huntington's life and the beginning of Donovan Nash. Barely three months later, Robert Huntington was killed when the plane he was piloting crashed at sea. A vengeful public cheered, funeral parties were thrown worldwide, the media spread the message that the universe had delivered Robert Huntington the violent ending he deserved.

Donovan tried to shake off the thoughts of Robert and Meredith, but, as always, found it difficult. He still missed Meredith, and he thought about her every day. He didn't miss Robert Huntington. When Robert died, he became a new man, a blank slate, and Donovan had become twice the man that Robert was ever going to be. He'd built Eco-Watch, the preeminent nonprofit, private scientific research organization in the world. He provided funding for university projects, expeditions both on earth and in space. He maintained a fleet of state-of-the-art platforms, be it Gulfstream jets, helicopters, or ocean-going ships, all for the single purpose of furthering scientific research. Money was never an issue when it came to understanding the planet. He liked to think that Meredith would be proud of him. Eco-Watch was the monument he built to honor Meredith's memory.

He fished out his keys and began the drive home, not exactly sure what he'd find. Would Lauren and Abigail be there, or would she have maintained her distance and gone somewhere else? Their marital stalemate was an ongoing process that defied

predictability. He swung onto Pleasant Valley Road, drove past the golf course, and Cox Farms. Up ahead was Virginia Run Elementary School, where he turned left and headed the final few blocks home. As he rounded the gentle curve of their street, he saw a familiar car in the driveway. The vintage green Jaguar belonged to William.

Donovan shut off the car, let himself in the front door, and called out to whoever was inside. He heard the familiar shriek of his four-year-old daughter followed by urgent footfalls as she raced toward the sound of his voice. She rounded the corner, all smiles, her curly reddish-blond hair flying in the wind when she abruptly stopped, her smile replaced by confusion.

Donovan knelt, he understood his beard and long hair wasn't what she'd expected. "It's okay, Kitten, it's Daddy."

With the reassurance she needed, Abigail flung herself into his arms. Donovan felt the tears well up in his eyes as her little arms clamped fiercely around his neck. He drank in the smell of her shampoo and marveled at how much she'd grown since he'd last seen her. All of the things Skype doesn't allow. Through the separation she'd seemed fine, she'd rolled with the travel, and if what she told Donovan was true, she thought of it all as a grand adventure. His daughter was a dreamer like he was, less analytical than her mother.

Abigail pulled away and gave him a big smooch on the cheek, then touched her skin where the whiskers had rubbed and made a face. She took his hand and began to lead him down the hallway. "Daddy, Mommy and Grandpa are in here. They won't know who you are at first, either. Then I want to show you my room. I'm not a baby anymore, and I have a big bed and a desk. I drew some pictures for you. They're of airplanes. The *da Vinci* and the *Galileo*."

Donovan rounded the corner and found Lauren. She looked like she'd lost weight, and her auburn hair was longer. She looked good, as if being on her own suited her. They hugged, and Donovan kissed her on the cheek. It was then he noticed that her

eyes were red. Lauren was not only one of the smartest people he knew; she was also one of the strongest. She was a doctor, a scientist who for the most part looked at the world with a calm sense of methodical reasoning—one of the many things he loved about her.

“I’m glad you’re here,” she said, as she hesitated a moment and studied his beard and long hair. She reached out and stroked his whiskers, then brushed some of the hair away from his ear. “I like it. Go talk to William. He needs you. He’s in the study. I’ve already heard most of what he thinks might have happened, but you need to hear it as well.”

Donovan nodded, though the tone of her voice unsettled him.

“Come, Abigail,” Lauren said to her daughter. “Daddy has to talk to Grandpa for a little bit, and then he’s all yours. Remember what we’re going to do now?”

“Yeah!” Abigail said as she jumped up and down with excitement. “We’re going to make Daddy a chocolate cake for his birthday!”

“I’ll meet you in the kitchen,” Lauren said as she followed Abigail.

Donovan let himself into the study. William was seated on the sofa. As usual, he was wearing one of his trademark tailored suits, complete with vest and carefully knotted tie. Donovan knew he purchased his wardrobe from a small, but exclusive, shop in London. Tall and wiry, William had a head full of shock-white hair and piercing dark eyes that were surrounded by the lines of age. He was seventy-six years old, but as tough and hard-charging as men half his age. Donovan often joked to William that he would outlive them all. In the Washington, DC, inner political sanctum, William was revered by many and outright feared by others. He’d been a special envoy to the State Department for the better part of three decades. William had amassed a huge fortune, first as Donovan’s father’s right-hand-man at Huntington Oil, then as Robert’s.

They'd been inseparable in life and business since Donovan was a boy. William had raised him from the age of fourteen when he'd become his legal guardian. Guided by William's vast experience and expansive view of the world, Donovan knew that nearly everything he'd accomplished was either directly, or indirectly, the result of his relationship with William. He was one of six people in the world who knew the truth—that he was once Robert Huntington.

"Lauren finally admitted she'd contacted you," William stood to meet Donovan. The two men shook hands warmly, and then it quickly turned into a hug. "I had mixed feelings, but I'm glad you're here."

"I came as fast as I could." Donovan pulled back. Etched on William's lined face were dark circles and overall signs of stress, reconfirming Donovan's commitment to help in any way possible.

"How are you, son? Are you okay?" William asked as he looked him up and down.

"I'm fine," Donovan replied. "I took the time off. I needed it. But I'm here to talk about you and what's happened to Stephanie."

William lowered himself back to the sofa. He rubbed his eyes as if trying to compose himself in preparation for what he was about to say. Donovan waited. He knew William well enough to know the statesman was nothing if not deliberate.

"I've already given Lauren a quick version of events as I know them. I'll admit, I have serious reservations about telling you any of this, but in the end I know you'd never forgive me if I kept you in the dark. Four days ago, there was a minor eruption of a long-dormant volcano in Guatemala. As you may or may not know, Stephanie had recently decided to resume her career in photography. At the behest of a former editor, she immediately boarded a plane and flew to Guatemala City, where she joined up with a United States Geological Survey team that was en route to the volcano. That's the last anyone's seen or heard from her. That was twenty-seven hours ago."

“Then what?” Donovan asked, fearing the answer. He could see that William was trying to gauge his next words carefully.

“This morning, the Guatemalan police searched the mountain where the USGS team was headed. They found the bodies of the two scientists and the guard who was assigned to protect them. They’d all been shot and buried in shallow graves. There was no sign of Stephanie.”

Donovan shifted uncomfortably, he knew what was coming and could feel the sudden heat as his face went flush. There was a ringing in his ears, and his shoulders slumped as if a great weight had been placed on top of him. His mind raced back and forth between Stephanie and the unavoidable memories of Meredith Barnes. The effect was quick and devastating. Donovan pressed his fingers to his temples as both guilt, sorrow, and anger all fought to consume him.

“We don’t know anything for sure,” William put his hand on Donovan’s shoulder. “She may have escaped. She could simply be out of contact in some village. I can tell from the look on your face I was right in being hesitant to tell you about any of this.”

Donovan straightened as if regaining his strength. “I’m fine.”

“I understand how you feel, that on many levels this is probably harder on you than it is on me,” William said the words quietly, as if he could sense that Donovan was poised between two worlds, fragile. “You’ve been through a great deal in the last few months, I’d understand if you needed to sit this one out.”

“We all went through the same ordeal and survived. That’s the last I care to hear about how damaged I might be.” Donovan stood abruptly and went toward his desk. “It’s already been twenty-seven hours. We can be in Guatemala City later tonight.”

“Sit down,” William motioned Donovan to come back and join him on the sofa. “I’ve already been in touch with the State Department. Stephanie and one of the murdered scientists are US citizens, so I’ve called in a few favors. There is a State Department jet flying us there first thing tomorrow morning.”

“I can get us there faster.” Donovan picked up the phone and prepared to dial.

“It’s not about speed,” William said. “It’s about making correct, well-thought-out decisions. If we come screaming in on an Eco-Watch jet and start taking names, we’ve done nothing but draw unwanted attention to ourselves, and perhaps even panic the people who may have Stephanie. Now please, hang up and come sit; listen to what I have to say.”

Donovan’s impulse to act was at odds with William’s calmer, more reasoned approach—a no man’s land that Donovan had always hated.

“Put the phone down,” William repeated. “If I thought rushing down there would solve anything, I’d already be on my way, and we’d be having this discussion via satellite phone. I’ve spoken at length with Michael. He has no idea you’re here, by the way. I’ll leave that for you to explain. Anyway, he informed me that an Eco-Watch mission to Alaska, centered on the volcanic eruption of Mt. Resolute, was scheduled to begin in a few days.”

“Yeah,” Donovan replied. He thought about the development of the new airborne drone that would aid scientists in observing volcanoes. Michael Ross, the man Donovan had left in charge, was doing exactly what he should be doing—solving problems.

“Michael is canceling the Alaska mission and bringing the entire test to Guatemala. Eco-Watch will have a presence there, but it will be due to the volcanic activity, not the disappearance of my niece. Michael is fully briefed and staffed for the mission. He’s going to arrive in Guatemala City as soon as he can. You can fly with me tomorrow on the State Department jet, as an emissary between Eco-Watch and the Guatemalan scientific community. My plan is to work the official diplomatic channels—my position as a diplomat-at-large actually requires that approach. I’m guessing the kidnappers know who Stephanie is and her connection to me. My arrival in a government jet sends a message that I’m ready to do business. She’s fine for the moment because everything is static. It’s when the deliberations begin that considerations start

to shift. It's understandable after your history with Meredith, that waiting is difficult. But together we can cover all the bases and make this happen in a way that works for Stephanie."

Donovan couldn't help but think that the bureaucratic delays and red tape over trying to secure Meredith's release twenty-two years ago were beginning to play themselves out again. If Stephanie were indeed kidnapped, only the name of the country had changed, Guatemala instead of Costa Rica. One set of third-world politics and politicians for another. He had failed before, and Meredith had paid for it with her life.

"I think we should bring Buck into the loop," Donovan said, cell phone still in his hand. "We may need his particular skill set."

"I've already spoken to him. The injuries he received in Alaska are healed. The doctors have cleared him to return to work. He's joining us on tomorrow's flight," William answered. "I'm not taking you down there without a chaperone. Who'd be better at that than Buck?"

Donovan nodded. Howard Buckley, former Navy SEAL, had joined Eco-Watch less than a year ago. Donovan hadn't hesitated for a moment to hire Buck, as he was affectionately called, to head up security for Eco-Watch. He'd become an indispensable member of the Eco-Watch team. They'd need every advantage in Guatemala.

"We'll handle this differently than we did Costa Rica. I promise, which brings me to my next concern. I know I can't talk you out of going with me. I won't even try. Promise me if you come, you'll act within the parameters we decide are best."

Donovan nodded his agreement. He knew his impulsiveness, while at times effective, perhaps wasn't the best play this time around. "You have cash, for a ransom?"

"I've arranged for four million dollars. We'll take it with us under the umbrella of diplomatic immunity. If they want more, we'll have to adjust. I'm expecting more information on the situation from the embassy this evening," William said. "I think we'll have a better picture in the morning."

“What time does the flight leave?” Donovan asked.

“I’ll have the driver swing by and pick you up at five-thirty. We’re leaving out of Dulles, which saves us the drive across town to Andrews Air Force Base.”

“Okay,” Donovan nodded. “I’ll be ready.”

“You’re sure you’re good to go?” William asked.

“Yes,” Donovan said, though all he could imagine were the problems, everything that could go wrong, as well as the consequences.