

ZERO SEPARATION



PROLOGUE

Three miles straight down were the men he'd come to kill. He stood in the open door of the aircraft as the one-hundred-fifty-mile-an-hour slipstream buffeted him, trying to pull him closer to the emptiness that lay beyond. It was a moonless night and there was nothing below him but the darkness of the windswept desert.

Running without lights, the Lockheed C-130 was flying within a very specific set of coordinates over northern Iraq. Temporary markings on the four-engine Hercules read Royal Air Force; the crew wore stolen RAF uniforms and used a valid British call sign. The deception had been months in the making. To the outside world, the aircraft would appear to be flying a routine night-training exercise. Through his headset he heard the pilot tell him they were inside fifteen seconds. Thrill of the hunt. His heart rate accelerated. He could feel it pound in his temples.

When the jump light flashed green, he stepped out of the plane. He arched his back and stretched his arms as he dropped. The wind buffeted his body as he accelerated into a free fall toward the desert floor below. Searching the ground through his night-vision goggles, he finally located the pinprick of light that marked his target. Hurling earthward, he maneuvered to land far enough away so that no one on the ground would detect his arrival. At the last possible second, he pulled the ripcord and waited for the reassuring jolt that told him his chute had opened. The canopy filled, and as he descended he expertly manipulated the risers until his feet lightly touched the sand. Quickly he worked to shed his harness and then he gathered the folds of his parachute and stuffed the material into a black duffel.

He drew his silenced pistol and started toward his objective. Guided by night-vision goggles, he stayed low, favoring his right hip as he limped his way across the dunes. Inwardly, he cursed the pain from the old injury, but relentlessly pushed himself forward. As he closed in on his target, he flipped up his infrared goggles and waited for his eyes to adapt to the harsh light given off from a powerful lantern. Once his vision had adjusted, he rapidly located all four of the men he'd expected to find. Three were digging a large hole in the sand, and the remaining man was standing above, watching. Quietly, he moved in and positioned himself behind their truck. All four wore body armor, goggles, and each carried a side-arm. He recognized the man watching, he was a friend and compatriot, a deep cover agent who'd worked for months to learn the location of this cache. He also knew the three men digging were former American soldiers, each an exemplary fighter and a highly trained killer. They'd been recruited by a private security firm after their enlistments were up, but their actions tonight marked them as nothing more than mercenaries drawn by greed.

He moved silently alongside the truck and took a quick look inside the bed. He felt a rush of anticipation at being in such close proximity to his prize. Four common cylinders—each was a dirty gray color, four feet in length, a foot in diameter, with a simple valve screwed into the rounded end. They looked like nothing more than the common high-pressure acetylene tanks used by welders. But these cylinders had been modified to carry something besides acetylene, something extraordinarily lethal. The intelligence he'd gathered said there should be two more, for a total of six.

"You're about to have company." The voice sounded in his ear-piece. "The second half of tonight's party is coming fast from the south—they're four minutes out."

He acknowledged the warning and exhaled slowly to calm his racing heartbeat. Leading with his pistol, he stepped around the truck and fired at the closest man. Body armor necessitated head shots and the first man dropped instantly, followed by the second. The third managed to draw his weapon before his head snapped

backward from a single slug and he collapsed. The last man, the watcher, frantically ripped away his goggles to identify himself.

"Don't shoot! It's me!"

"Relax," he said as he lowered his pistol.

"My God, like some sort of ghost you silently materialize out of nowhere."

"The others are coming," he said. "How much money are they bringing?"

"The price was set at one hundred and fifty thousand U.S. dollars. How close are they?"

"We have time. What of the informant who told you of this place?"

"Dead."

"Will anyone be able to connect him to tonight's events?"

"Doubtful. There are many bodies in Iraq. One more will mean nothing."

"You're right." He raised the pistol and fired twice, the slugs expertly placed for a quick and painless death. His comrade, a confused expression etched on his face, buckled at the knees and fell to the ground.

"Sorry, old friend—but the mission has changed." He holstered his pistol and began to move. According to his internal clock, he had less than ninety seconds until the car arrived. He snatched an M4 assault rifle leaning against the truck, lowered his infrared goggles, and half ran and half limped toward the road. He flung himself against a small sand dune and threw the weapon to his shoulder. A quick check told him the magazine held the full thirty rounds. As the speeding black Mercedes came into range, he squeezed the trigger and sent a stream of bullets into the car, destroying the radiator, exploding both front tires. Using short bursts, he walked the rounds across the windshield until it crumpled inward. He kept firing until the car swerved and flipped, hitting on its side and rolling three times before it came to rest well off the road. Flames erupted from under the wrecked hood as the engine began to burn.

The gun was empty and he tossed it aside. He drew his pistol and limped over to what was left of the Mercedes and surveyed the interior. The two men in the front seat were dead; they'd taken the full brunt of the 5.56-mm rounds. The passenger in the back hadn't been so lucky; he was hurt, but alive, frantically praying aloud for Allah to spare him. He reached through the shattered side window and pulled a metal briefcase free from the clutches of the lone survivor. A quick check found stacks of American one hundred dollar bills. The fire was spreading fast and he was forced to take a step back to escape the heat. He then raised the pistol and with a squeeze of the trigger ended the man's desperate pleadings.

He removed his night-vision optics and replaced them with clear protective goggles; the burning Mercedes would now serve to light the night. He limped to where he'd stashed the duffel containing his parachute, and caught the faint whistle of turbines above the sound of the wind. Seconds later a blinding light erupted as all of the C-130's landing lights were switched on at the last second. The airplane roared over his head so close he felt the rush of turbulence trailing the big four-bladed props as the plane touched down on the road.

The chirp of rubber and the roar of propellers going into reverse pitch announced the arrival of the rest of his unit. The Lockheed C-130's rugged airframe and massive turboprop engines allowed it to spin around in a tight one-hundred-eighty-degree turn and power toward him. He stood on the centerline as the deafening whine from the turbine engines grew louder until the nose of the big transport eased into the orange-yellow light cast from the burning car. The engines remained running and the rear door of the C-130 swung down. He joined the lone figure who exited the plane carrying a satchel. Together they headed to their prize.

The new arrival scanned the bodies, peered into the hole, and then dropped the package he was carrying. "We need to hurry or the American AWACS is going to wonder what we're doing."

"Grab a shovel," he ordered. They quickly finished digging out

the two remaining cylinders and carefully lifted them into the back of the truck. As planned, they tossed the satchel of drugs they'd brought with them into the hole and half buried it with sand. The kilo of heroin would be discovered later, along with the bodies.

"Drive the cylinders to the plane and then bring the truck back here." The man with the limp ordered.

As soon as the truck roared off, he methodically searched the men he'd killed. He started with the mercenaries, relieving them of their identification, cell phones, and watches. He took a moment to close his friend's unseeing eyes as he rifled through his clothes and removed his possessions. He felt no remorse. It was unavoidable—the magnitude of this mission demanded a scorched-earth policy. No one with any knowledge of what had taken place here tonight could be left alive.

His hip and leg felt as if they were on fire. He sat heavily in the sand and stretched out his right leg. The pain in his hip was unrelenting and from experience he knew there was only one way to combat the agony—and it was time. From a side pocket he withdrew a small leather kit that held several prefilled hypodermic syringes. He had no time to waste rolling up a sleeve. He pulled the plastic cap off with his mouth then extracted a razor-sharp stiletto from a scabbard in his boot and sliced an opening in the fabric of his fatigues. He jabbed the needle into the flesh of his thigh and hungrily pressed the plunger. Moments later he felt the warm embrace of the morphine.

With the cylinders secured inside the plane, his comrade returned with the truck. He pulled himself to his feet, tested his hip, and limped as fast as he could to the C-130. The man at his side knew better than to offer any sympathy or assistance.

He climbed aboard and threw himself into a seat as the cargo door was closed. He strapped in, pulled off his helmet and goggles, followed by his watch cap and headset. In one practiced motion he unfurled the kaffiya he'd used to protect his face. He smoothed his shock white beard then ran his hands back through his equally

white hair. He wasn't an old man; only forty-three years of age, but after the plane crash that ruined his hip and the vertebrae in his back, his hair and beard had turned pure white.

The C-130 roared down the road at full power, lifted off into the night, and flew low and fast. His pain had eased and he leaned his head back against the bulkhead and closed his eyes. As he always did, he mentally replayed each element of the night's operation and analyzed each and every detail. The footprints and tire tracks would soon be obliterated by the shifting windblown sands. All they'd left behind was a collection of dead mercenaries and known criminals. Combined with the heroin and a burned-out, bullet-riddled car, it would look like a drug deal gone bad. He'd executed a perfect misdirection, and it was unlikely anyone would probe further.

He opened his eyes and took in the view of the cylinders now in his possession, and a small smile crept to his lips. It had taken a long time, but part of Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction had finally been recovered and were now his. He understood the destructive power. Inside each canister was a hundred pounds of anthrax spores. Once the spores were dispersed from an airplane upwind of a major city, the world's single deadliest terrorist act in history would be unstoppable.

He envisioned the scenario: The first flu-like symptoms would show up in about twenty-four hours. More than enough time for him and his men to escape, spread out across the globe, and vanish. While he sat back and watched the aftermath on television, hundreds of thousands of people would flood the local hospitals. Antibiotic stockpiles would deplete almost immediately. People would start to die from respiratory shutdown. High fever would give way to shock, then cyanosis as victims turned blue, gasping their last breaths. Within a week, millions would be sick and dying. The sheer numbers of casualties would spark a nationwide panic. Many of the infected would have traveled away from the target city before their symptoms hit, leading a frenzied population to believe that the unseen attacks had occurred in many cities. Rioting would

break out and from there the ensuing violence would threaten a complete breakdown of social services. The case fatality rate for inhaled anthrax spores was upwards of 75 percent, so in the end, as many as a million people could die from the contents of one cylinder. He had six. He felt a unique sensation of power as he savored the reality that he alone could annihilate millions of people. He pictured his first target, the gleaming white monuments: the Pentagon, the White House, and the Capitol building—when he was finished they'd all be deserted. He thought back on his training, to the day he'd become a firm believer in the concept that world peace was in fact possible—but a great deal of killing needed to happen first.



CHAPTER ONE

Six months later

"I don't like this," Michael Ross said from the pilot's seat. "We need to do something else."

A flash of lightning briefly lit up the darkened cockpit, and Donovan Nash saw the concern on Michael's face. Dead ahead, rapidly building thunderstorms boiled across the horizon, staccato bursts of cloud-to-ground lightning peppering the earth. Before he could agree with Michael, the Gulfstream sank abruptly.

"Hang on!" Michael shouted the warning as he shoved both throttles all the way to the stops. The Rolls-Royce engines spooled up, their distinctive high-pitched whine filled the cockpit, and the airplane strained against the unseen river of air. Turbulence slammed into the airplane and tossed them up and down in the violent night sky. For a split second Donovan felt the air in the cockpit turn supercharged, the hair on his arms buzzed a brief warning, and then it seemed that a flashbulb went off a foot in front of his face. Blinded, Donovan fought the spots that danced before his eyes and felt the sizzle of adrenaline hit his system. His ears popped from the pressure change. A moment later, he heard the deafening roar of thunder.

Michael banked the Gulfstream hard to the left. "We're out of here. I'm breaking it off to the south! Tell the tower we just took a lightning strike!"

Donovan blinked savagely to clear his vision while the distinct smell of ozone filled the cockpit. Heavy rain pelted the windscreen.

"What's flashing?" Michael asked. "How bad did we get hit?"

"We lost the right generator." Donovan took a quick look at the overhead panel as well as the circuit breaker panel. Cloud-to-cloud discharges bolted across the horizon. The orange-purple glow expanded as it danced upward toward the stratosphere. Tendrils of white-hot lightning arced from the maelstrom and peppered the ground below. The entire western sky lit up with so many individual bursts of lightning that it looked like a solid wall.

"I'm thinking we should break out of this any second." Michael called out as another blistering display of lightning lit up the sky around them.

Donovan found he was holding his breath, mostly out of wonder, but also some trepidation. He'd seen the weather charts before they'd left Washington D.C. A fast-moving front was sweeping down from the northwest, and now it was creating an unyielding line of severe weather marching southward across Florida.

It was just the two of them on this leg. The *Spirit of da Vinci*, one of Eco-Watch's, sixty-million-dollar special-purpose airborne scientific platforms, needed to be in West Palm Beach to begin a series of proving runs for a new camera system. Underneath all the added equipment, the *da Vinci* was essentially a Gulfstream IV corporate jet—minus all the aesthetics. In the rear cabin, among the racks of electronic gear, were modular science stations. The most recently installed was a state-of-the-art, high-resolution imaging system that was slated to begin official flight testing the next morning.

"This is getting uglier by the minute," Michael said as he tightened his harness.

"Forget about landing in West Palm Beach. Once we get out of this, we can figure out where to go." Donovan winced as another burst of lightning lit up the cockpit. Michael was more than his longtime colleague—they were more like brothers. Their deep friendship and considerable flying experience had been honed by over a decade of flying together all over the world. Officially, Donovan was the boss, a detail that Michael frequently ignored, though

Donovan was smart enough to understand that that was one of the ingredients that made everything work. With a camaraderie and understanding that had been forged in hundreds of dangerous situations just like this one, there was no one Donovan trusted more at the controls than Michael.

They were out over the ocean, paralleling the worst of the weather. As they flew toward a small cluster of harmless rain showers that had popped up over the ocean, they clipped the top of the wispy clouds and the airplane buffeted momentarily. Michael couldn't avoid the next one, and the *da Vinci* hit it dead center. The precipitation hissed passed the windows and the Gulfstream reeled from the turbulence, its nearly hundred-foot wingspan flexed up and down in the dark clouds.

They blew through multiple cloud layers. Each sliver of clear air allowed them an all too brief view of the squall line dead ahead. Donovan often thought of this as a three-dimensional chess game played at three hundred miles per hour. They couldn't see the massive anvil tops above them, but he knew the line of thunderstorms blossomed well above fifty thousand feet.

"I saw some lights dead ahead." Michael pointed off the nose as the Gulfstream broke out of the clouds into smoother air. He wordlessly pushed up the throttles, and the *da Vinci* gathered speed immediately.

"We're due east of West Palm Beach. If we can—"

"You smell that?" Michael interrupted and snapped his head toward Donovan.

Donovan turned toward the darkened cabin and tested the air. It only took a moment to confirm what Michael had detected. Smoke.

"We need to get this thing on the ground. Now. Is that an airport out there?" Michael pointed. "See the rotating beacon, just this side of the interstate?"

"That's Boca Raton." Donovan typed KBCT into the flight management system and grabbed the microphone. Donovan

watched as the FMS data confirmed that it was the Boca Raton airport. The acrid smell of burning insulation continued to drift up into the cockpit.

"Tell them that's where we're landing." Michael pulled on his oxygen mask and then banked the *da Vinci* and began to slow the speeding jet.

"Tower, this is Eco-Watch zero one," Donovan transmitted. "We've got Boca Raton in sight at twelve o'clock and eight miles. We'd like a straight-in approach for runway two-three."

"Roger, Eco-Watch zero one. You're cleared for a visual approach to Boca Raton. Contact Boca Tower on 118.42. He knows you're coming."

Donovan clicked on a flashlight, turned, and pointed the beam of light into the cabin. The smoke was visible, and as Donovan played the narrow beam around the cabin, he guessed that the smoke was originating from the aft equipment rack.

"Still burning?" Michael said through his mask while concentrating on the fast approaching airport.

"It's not bad, yet. It looks like the lightning fried the new equipment we just had installed. We've still got all our aircraft systems—everything we need to get this thing on the ground is still working." Donovan spun in the frequency for Boca Raton. "We'll deal with it on the ground. Just keep flying. We're almost there."



CHAPTER TWO

Lauren peeked in on Abigail, making sure her two-year-old daughter was tucked in and sleeping peacefully. She adjusted the blanket and then lightly rested her hand on Abigail's forehead, taking in the smooth skin and the perfect smell of baby shampoo.

She quietly left Abigail's room and went back to her own bedroom. She checked that the baby monitor was on, and then collected the paperwork she'd brought home from the office. As a senior meteorological consultant with the Defense Intelligence Agency, the scientific articles were required reading and piled up quickly if she didn't stay current.

Lauren felt her frustration rise, Donovan should have called by now. She operated best with order and discipline in her world and right now, at least as far as her husband went, she had nothing remotely resembling order. He'd been especially distant and distracted before he'd left for Florida. She'd been thinking about it all evening and couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. There had been little signs for weeks now until Lauren wasn't even sure when things began to change—only that Donovan was different, or they were both somehow different. Theirs was a relationship trapped in a loop of silent discontent, and she wasn't sure how to identify the issues, let alone break the cycle.

Lauren headed downstairs to make herself a cup of hot tea, but as she passed the closed door to the study, she heard a small beep coming from inside the darkened room. She clicked on the light and went in to investigate. The smoke alarms were fine, they'd been checked recently. The bookshelves held nothing electric, so she moved to the desk just as the beep sounded again. Lauren

turned toward the credenza and pushed a key on the laptop computer. The moment the screen blinked to life, she found the problem—a low-battery alert. She located the power cord on the back of the drive and discovered that it was loose. She firmed up the connection and sat down to make sure the battery was going to accept the charge.

It seemed odd that the cord could have worked itself out. In a house with a two-year-old, Abigail was usually the easiest explanation, but she wasn't ever allowed in this room. A row of books lined the wall behind the computer, and as Lauren looked closer, she noticed some dust. In the dust she spotted marks that told her the dictionary had been slid in and out recently.

Curious, Lauren knew that when Donovan needed help spelling something, he defaulted to the computer. There was no way he was going to wrestle with the massive volume to verify a word. She pulled the dictionary out and was surprised when a DVD slid out from between the pages and fell to the floor. Using her thumb and middle finger she picked up and studied the disc. The title, *One Earth*, was printed in bold black letters, followed by the warning that the DVD was an Academy Screener copy, for awards consideration only and not for public viewing.

Lauren knew exactly what she was holding. *One Earth* hadn't been released yet, but somehow Donovan had gotten his hands on a reviewer's copy of the documentary about Meredith Barnes. Over the years there'd been many television shows about the life and untimely death of celebrity conservationist Meredith Barnes, but this was a major Hollywood production and there was early Academy Award buzz for the project.

They'd both known that the movie was being made, and when she'd asked him about it, Donovan hadn't seemed concerned or even acted interested. Despite his history with Meredith. Despite the certainty that he would be depicted poorly in the film. His position was that everything between him and Meredith had happened twenty years ago and that he was happy Meredith's work was still relevant after all this time. End of subject.

She slid the disk into the computer and moved through the prompts until the first images appeared on the screen. A dirt road cut through a lush jungle, the faint sounds of screaming began to grow—there were shouts of alarm and the distant wail of emergency vehicles. The screams began to draw closer and were filled with more immediate urgency. An image began to take shape, a light-colored object surrounded by darkness. Slowly, the screen came into focus to show stark images of Meredith Barnes's murdered body being discovered in a muddy field outside San Jose, Costa Rica. A rapid-fire burst of still pictures ripped across the screen, actual photos from that day. Meredith's sightless eyes, her hair and chalk-white skin matted with blood from the single bullet wound to her forehead.

Lauren watched as the scene faded and was replaced with a young Meredith Barnes, smiling and laughing for the camera. Images showed a warm photo montage of her love for the outdoors as she went through adolescence and then graduated from college. Lauren, as well as most of the world, knew the story. Fresh out of school, Meredith Barnes had traveled the world researching and writing what would become her best-selling book, *One Earth*. Part science, part spiritual expedition, her book, along with her movie-star good looks, thrust her center stage. Her message wasn't just about what was wrong—but how each and every one of us could do something to heal our planet. Hollywood, captivated by Meredith's passion for life, showcased her journey and her message in a motion picture. The world fell in love with her.

After the movie, she produced and hosted a wildly popular television series about the hot-topic issues. Crisscrossing the globe, she and her crew dramatically illustrated how we were harming our planet. She highlighted what needed to be done to stop the damage. She was a frequent guest on late night talk shows. She participated in hot-topic political discussions. She held court at countless environmental rallies, speaking for a voiceless planet and championing a better future. She enlisted powerful allies—Princess Diana, Bono, Elton John, as well as other high profile A-list celebri-

ties to further her causes. The public couldn't get enough—Meredith's fiery temperament coupled with boundless compassion made her a media darling. She influenced politicians and policy makers on a global scale, yet she always came across as warm and genuine.

Meredith's message: peace and conservation, a no-borders philosophy that would serve to save our "one earth" from everything we were doing to destroy it. As Lauren watched and listened, she understood all over again how Meredith had become such a cherished figure in the eyes of the world—and why she was still relevant. Part emissary for the planet, part celebrity, Meredith had touched millions of people. Beautiful and intelligent, powerfully charismatic, using soft-spoken kindness when needed—and her intense passion when calm diplomacy failed.

Lauren fast-forwarded through Meredith's college years then began watching again when she recognized the famous footage of Meredith tearing up a three-million-dollar check written to her foundation by billionaire oilman Robert Huntington. Meredith threw the pieces in his face, poked him in the chest with her index finger, and demanded to know how the heir to the Huntington Oil fortune could sleep at night. She rattled off a dozen ways his multinational company was killing the planet. The narrator of the documentary used the confrontation as evidence of ground zero in a bold conspiracy employed by Robert Huntington and Huntington Oil to murder Meredith Barnes.

The movie continued. Following the fireworks from that first meeting, it explained that Robert sought Meredith out, used her, and manipulated her by proposing a series of initiatives that led Huntington Oil to appear as if they were on the forefront of responsible energy-recovery methods. But the film implied that Huntington had another agenda: he seduced her to get close enough to orchestrate her death. The screen filled with images of the two of them as they traveled the world, their movements tracked by both Hollywood and Wall Street. One shot in particular of Robert and Meredith kissing distressed Lauren to the point

that she looked away, as if she were intruding. The narrator continued to reiterate that Huntington was nothing more than a ruthless sociopath. A deeply flawed man who had no problems using a potent combination of charm and his unlimited supply of money in a premeditated, brutal plan to destroy Meredith Barnes and her message.

Lauren watched as the narrator explained that Huntington continued the charade of their relationship, that he exploited their combined influence by arranging an environmental summit in Costa Rica. An unprecedented gathering of political dignitaries and business leaders from all over the world convened to reduce the destruction of the rain forests, to develop alternative energy for emerging economies, and to set controls on commercial fishing as well as ban harvesting of oceanic mammals. By all comparisons to previous attempts, the Costa Rica summit promised to be an epic rally on behalf of our planet, but according to the narrator, Robert Huntington had other plans.

What followed was a series of events Lauren had never heard. The narrator provided details. That despite threats against visiting diplomats and even toward Meredith herself, she and Huntington had left the safety of the host hotel. The trip was unannounced. En route to a rented villa, their limousine was stopped, their driver killed, and Meredith taken at gunpoint. The only living witness to the alleged abduction was Huntington himself, who was beaten badly. Later this was used as evidence of how far he was willing to go to destroy Meredith. A ten-million-dollar ransom demand materialized almost immediately by way of an anonymous letter left at the hotel. The summit evaporated. Weeks of investigations by the police, plus unending posturing by the Costa Rican and American authorities, resulted in nothing except Meredith's death.

Huntington, it was explained, did very little at first. He was a billionaire and yet the ransom demand was initially ignored. It was only later that he started assembling the cash, a delay that pointed to his culpability in Meredith's demise. When he finally had the

money, he demanded proof of life; he wanted to speak with Meredith. When the phone call finally came, Robert took the call. It was late at night, and to this day, no one knows what was said. The equipment that should have recorded the conversation was somehow switched off by the police on duty. The next day, Meredith's body was found in a muddy field. She'd been murdered. The backlash was immediate and unyielding. Blamed for everything from refusing to pay for her release to being the actual murderer, Robert Huntington was charged, tried, and sentenced in the court of public opinion. No one was sure what happened to the ten million dollars. Virtually overnight, Robert Huntington became the most hated man in America—if not the world.

Meredith's funeral, attended by a Who's Who of politicians and celebrities, was broadcast around the world. Robert Huntington was notably absent. Instead, a series of photos were published, showing Robert Huntington on an unnamed beach with a young blonde woman. The images fueled the public's unwavering rage toward Robert Huntington—a bitter hate still alive after twenty years.

Family and close friends of Meredith Barnes were interviewed, as well as an array of celebrities and law enforcement experts. All expressed their belief that Meredith had been murdered by Huntington and his oil industry cronies and this verbal condemnation led up to the vivid *New York Times* headline that announced that Robert Huntington was dead. Lauren cringed when the plane crash death of Robert Huntington was celebrated, as if the planet itself had exacted some sort of karma for his atrocities and killed him for what he'd done to Meredith Barnes.

Lauren hit the stop button and was relieved when the screen went black. She hated what she'd seen, and for the moment she didn't know what was real and what was fabricated. This was the first she'd heard of previous threats against Meredith, or the delay in assembling the ransom, or the final phone call, or that there was a question about the ten million dollars. She, of course, knew a much different story, the one that couldn't be told. First and fore-

most she knew that Robert Huntington hadn't died in a plane crash. She knew he'd been devastated by Meredith's death. She knew that he had eventually orchestrated his own death, that he'd gone to Europe for appearance-altering surgeries. Lauren was one of six people in the world who knew the truth. The reason she knew all of this: the man who used to be Robert Huntington was now Donovan Nash, the man she'd married.