

PEGASUS DOWN

Also by Philip Donlay

The Donovan Nash Series

Aftershock

Deadly Echoes

Zero Separation

Code Black

Category Five

PEGASUS DOWN

A NOVEL

Philip Donlay

 **Oceanview Publishing**

LONGBOAT KEY, FLORIDA

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For my son, Patrick



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PEGASUS DOWN



CHAPTER ONE

THE FLASH OF the explosion lit up the night sky and the shock wave resonated deep into Lauren's bones. Thrown hard against her seat belt, her ears rang, and bright spots swam in her vision as the cabin of the Learjet plunged into darkness. The crippled jet banked hard to the left. What few lights were visible out of the small windows confirmed they were headed down. The familiar whine from the jet's twin engines faded to nothing, replaced by the shrill sound of bells from the cockpit and urgent voices of the pilots.

The pitch-black night was replaced by the glow of the emergency lights, and Lauren saw the frightened faces of the two other passengers, both men clutching their armrests as the airplane shuddered. One man she knew well; he was an old friend, Dr. Daniel Pope, an MIT colleague from years ago. The other was a man she'd only met a few days earlier. His name was Jakob Kovacs, a freelance operative brought in by the CIA. Their fear was justified. Lauren knew each second without the engines put them closer to the ground.

One of the pilots turned and yelled into the cabin. "Everyone strap in tight! We're going down!"

Lauren cinched her seat belt until it hurt. She'd chosen a seat that faced aft, she knew enough about airplanes to know that facing the tail was safer in the event of an emergency landing. She

also knew that a dead-stick landing at night, in a powerless plane, had a survival rate of nearly zero. The smattering of lights she'd seen earlier were gone. They were too low.

She thought of those she'd left back home and how much she wished she could be there for one more minute, to tell them goodbye and not to grieve. She looked across the aisle at Daniel; his face had gone shock white. He'd closed his eyes. At least she wouldn't die alone. The last thing she saw before she, too, closed her eyes and leaned down to cover her head with her hands, was her wedding ring. She whispered goodbye to her husband and her daughter.

Her fear was at a level she'd never known. Every muscle in her body wanted to flee—fight was an option long vanished. Lauren was slammed hard into her seat as the Learjet decelerated violently. The roar of the impact coursed through her body and reverberated in the small cabin. The airplane lurched sideways, and she was thrown savagely to the side as a final tremor ripped through the shattered airframe.

Lauren heard the unmistakable roar of water as it exploded upward and then cascaded down. The crippled Learjet spun in the current and quickly began to sink. Jolted into reality, she felt the first touch of cold water pouring into the cabin, as it swirled around her ankles. Lauren sensed the airplane was sinking nose first. She turned and saw that the cockpit was already flooded, telling her that the forward fuselage had ruptured in the crash. There was no way to reach the pilots.

She threw off her seat belt and on unsteady legs went to Daniel. His eyes were closed. A single groan told her he was still alive. In the glow from the emergency lights she could see Kovacs. His eyes were unfocused, his neck bent at an impossible angle. He was beyond help.

As the water rushed in, the torrent almost toppled her. She reached beneath the surface, and by feel, unfastened Daniel's seat belt and heaved hard to raise him up out of his seat. Lauren rolled him on his back, slid her right arm underneath him, and part swimming, part wading, hurried toward the over-wing exit. She planted her feet and furiously pulled on the handle. The hatch gave way, the open exit only inches above the water level.

She shed her shoes, and gripping Daniel's collar, she climbed out into the darkness and crouched on top of the wing. The rising water level inside the plane let her float him face up. Standing on the wing, she leaned back, and then with all of her strength, pulled Daniel's unconscious body through the emergency exit.

Moments later they were free of the Learjet and floating alone in the pitch-dark water. Lauren kicked away from the airplane and watched the sleek tail pitch upwards and then slip below the surface. The jet was gone. Lauren and Daniel were all that floated away in the swirling current. She cradled Daniel's head in the crook of her arm and used her free arm to tread water. She kicked to inch them closer to the bank, while allowing the current to do the bulk of the work carrying them downstream, away from the crashed jet.

Distant lights had told her there was civilization somewhere up ahead, but she had no idea how far. Lauren was swimming at a slow methodical pace, fighting the urge to panic as she continued to propel them toward the tree-lined shore. When her feet finally touched bottom, she pulled Daniel as far up the bank as she could, so they could hide under leafy branches she'd snap from the low-hanging limbs.

Once she felt as if they were somewhat hidden, Lauren knelt and checked Daniel again; he was still breathing. A warm wind rattled the leaves above them and the constant buzzing of insects

was the only other sound. The night was cloudless, and the stars of August filled the sky. Lauren waved at the insects that buzzed unseen in her face. She'd been deep in thought about who would come looking for them when the sun rose. A new sound began to fill the air, and it took her several seconds to understand she was hearing the roar from an approaching boat. She pulled Daniel closer and adjusted the leaves as well as she could to camouflage them both.

When she saw the high-powered spotlight searching the water ahead of the vessel, she reacted immediately, taking a handful of mud from the riverbank and smearing it on her face, then repeating the process on Daniel. Then she drew her legs up and made herself as small as possible.

The light pierced the darkness and in the harsh beam she would have been blinded if she hadn't looked away. In that instant she saw that Daniel's eyes were blinking open and she was terrified he'd try to move. She inched closer and whispered into his ear. "Daniel, it's Lauren. Don't move, don't make a sound. Do you understand?"

In the sweeping light from the approaching boat she saw him slowly nod his head.

Lauren thought they'd have until daylight before anyone searched for them. It was a miscalculation she'd not make again. Earlier, she'd been trying to calculate exactly where in Eastern Europe they'd crashed, but all she could say with certainty was they were somewhere between Bratislava and Budapest, which put them in either Slovakia or Hungary. There was a current, so they'd crashed into a river, but it seemed small for the Danube. Her biggest concern was being found by the people who'd shot them down, though being arrested by the police could be just as bad. At times, the Slovak and Hungarian governments were

indistinguishable from its criminals. She remembered the detailed briefing she'd received at Langley. The mission was covert. The CIA would maintain complete deniability, which meant no help was coming. She and Daniel were alone in a very hostile environment.

Lauren was almost afraid to breathe as the boat cruised closer, its throaty engine pushing against the current. The searchlight reached out from the bow and swept both banks and the water in between. She could see the brown, muddy water, as well as the tall trees that lined the shore. In the residual light she spotted armed men along the deck. As the boat cruised past, questions flooded her mind. How deep was the water, was there floating jet fuel from ruptured tanks, or other debris that would reveal the location of their crash? If the authorities found the wreckage, would they have any idea how many people were onboard? Would they be looking for survivors? She pictured the open emergency exit and instantly answered her own question. Of course they would—and then the hunt would be on.

A gurgle sounded from deep in Daniel's chest, and blood trickled from the side of his mouth. His body stiffened. "I'm sorry I dragged you into this."

Lauren cradled him protectively in her arms, her eyes fixed on the stern of the passing boat, looking for any sign it was slowing or turning. When she deemed it safe she replied. "Why did you ask for me?"

"I didn't think anyone else would come."

"That's not true," Lauren replied, absently stroking his face.

"I had to try to protect my daughter, Samantha, as well as be heard, and maybe get out of this place," Daniel said as he found Lauren's hand with his. He pressed a rubber-covered jump drive into her palm. "It's all in here. It wasn't for me, it was for the others."

“Samantha is safe,” Lauren said, relieved to see that the drive that Daniel had given her was a high-quality military grade. Whatever data Daniel saved would have easily survived the crash and the prolonged immersion in the river. “What do you mean? What others?”

“I built . . .” He choked and spit up more blood. “A small, stealth-capable jet. Remember the *Phoenix*? I reengineered it to be invisible to radar. It has the radar cross section of a sparrow.”

Lauren remembered the *Phoenix*, a design from their days at MIT, when they were together.

“My design was meant for a surveillance platform.” Daniel was now gasping for breath. “They modified it, turned it into a weapon.”

“Who are these people, and who do they want to spy on?” Lauren held him more tightly now.

“I don’t know.” Daniel’s voice was barely audible, the gurgling in his chest worse. “They might be Ukrainian, or Chechens. I don’t know, but when they do decide to act—I believe they will be able to use the *Phoenix* to deliver a nuclear weapon.”

“They have a nuclear weapon and you built them a stealth aircraft?” Lauren felt a cold stab of fear rush through her body as the implications fully registered.

“I didn’t know. When I made the discovery, I sabotaged the plane,” Daniel said. “I don’t know how much time I bought. Not long.”

“Where is it? Tell me where you were?” Lauren pleaded, but she knew he was fading.

“I’m sorry,” Daniel said his voice weaker. “I changed—different than before. Only you—”

Lauren heard the last wisp of breath slowly leave Daniel’s chest and then he was still. A wave of anguish welled up within her,

and she wanted to scream at the heavens and demand to know why. Daniel Pope was a good man, he'd reached out to her in his moment of need, and she'd come, only to have him die in her arms. She closed her eyes as a kaleidoscope of images of their time together assaulted her from every direction. She reeled at each crystal-clear memory, tears forming as she remembered the day they met, his impish uncertain smile, the flash of interest in his eyes. His laugh, his clumsiness, his intellect, their walks, the late nights, the seasons in Boston, but now he was gone. She was battered by the thoughts and images of the life they had once shared, and finally she had no choice but to give in to grief. She cried silently, for him, for his daughter, and for herself. The memories kept coming, an avalanche of their time together that gathered momentum, and threatened to completely unhinge her. Lauren's tears rolled down her face, fell on Daniel's skin, and then, drop by drop, met with the river and were swept away toward an unknown destiny.

CHAPTER TWO

DONOVAN NASH AWOKE as the sensation of soft breath tickled his cheek. He opened his eyes with a smile. His five-year-old daughter, Abigail, still in her pajamas, was perched wide-eyed, hovering over him.

“Daddy, my tummy is empty. Make me pancakes like you promised!”

Donovan reached up and grabbed her under her arms, lifting her free of the bed to hold her at arm’s length. She squealed with delight and put her hands out like wings, and Donovan spun her around like an airplane until he finally allowed her to drop next to him into the soft bedding.

Amidst Abigail’s giggles, Donovan threw back the covers, sat on the edge of the bed, and pulled on a t-shirt. He picked up his cell phone. No message from his wife, Lauren. That perplexed him. As a consultant for the Defense Intelligence Agency, she’d been called away to a meeting in Geneva, Switzerland. That had been five days ago, and she was scheduled to arrive back home at Dulles Airport this afternoon. Her flight out of Geneva departed at what would have been five in the morning Washington D.C. time, so she promised she’d send a message that she’d made her flight so as not to wake him. The lack of a message was odd, but not cause for immediate alarm.

He turned and motioned for Abigail to jump up for a piggyback

ride, which she did without hesitation. With a firm grip on both his phone and his little girl, he headed downstairs for the kitchen.

“Special pancakes!” Abigail cried out as she slid off Donovan’s back to sit on the kitchen counter.

Donovan opened the refrigerator, pulled out the orange juice, and poured Abigail a glass. “There you go, sweetie. Let Daddy start the coffee, and then we’ll make special pancakes, okay?”

Abigail nodded as she drank her juice.

With the coffee started, Donovan found the bowl with the spout he liked, pancake mix, milk, and eggs. He set the pan on the stove and began to prepare the batter to the perfect consistency.

“What time does Mommy get home today?” Abigail asked as she finished her juice.

“You know the answer to that question.” Donovan said as he whipped the batter with a wooden spoon. “We’ve talked about it every day since Mommy left for Europe. You tell me what time Mommy gets home.”

“Two fifty-five!” Abigail held up both hands as if she’d scored a victory, clearly overjoyed at her mommy’s return.

“What are we going to do before Mommy gets home?” Donovan asked, knowing the answer was going to further supercharge his daughter.

Abigail’s eyes grew even larger as her excitement accelerated. “Horseback riding! Daddy, make me a pancake of Halley.”

Donovan dropped some batter in the pan to test the temperature and found it perfect. Halley’s Comet was the full name of the Welsh pony that Abigail rode and loved dearly. Halley had been her pancake request for the last two months. Using a spoon, he carefully poured batter to make the horse’s torso, and then running legs, a neck and oval head, then he used tiny drops of batter for the ears, followed by a flowing tail. He grabbed two plates,

butter and syrup, and returned to the stove just in time to carefully flip his creation. With Lauren out of town, he and Abigail often ate in the kitchen with her sitting on the counter, one of the many father-daughter rituals they enjoyed.

“Ready?” Donovan asked as he slid the spatula under the horse and placed it on Abigail’s plate. Her face lit up and a peal of delighted laughter filled the kitchen. Donovan helped her with the butter and syrup, and she smiled with each bite.

“Your turn, Daddy. What are you going to make?”

“I’m going to create a Gulfstream pancake,” Donovan said as he poured her a glass of milk.

“You always make an airplane,” Abigail challenged.

“I like airplanes.” Donovan grinned as he measured out the fuselage, wings, and tail of a sleek jet. From long practice he expertly added the batter that became the engines and then waited, spatula in hand, for the batter to bubble. He’d been making pancake shapes for Abigail since she was little, right after she’d fallen in love with the Little Mermaid. His first efforts were more symbolic than accurate, but he quickly improved. It was their special treat, one that Lauren left to him. A deft flip of the pancake and a perfect, golden-brown Gulfstream was cooking in the skillet.

“Is it an Eco-Watch Gulfstream?” Abigail asked with her mouth full.

Donovan smiled. Eco-Watch was the company he’d founded and now ran. It was the premier private scientific research foundation in the world. With two highly modified Gulfstream jets as well as two ocean-capable ships, Eco-Watch’s services were sought out by some of the most advanced universities, laboratories, and scientists in the world. A third ship was being built, and there were plans to add to the aviation section as well. At fifty-one years of age, Donovan had lived two lifetimes’ worth of success, and it was

Eco-Watch that made him the most proud. Very few people knew he'd founded Eco-Watch with his own money. Only seven people in the world knew the truth about Donovan, and his past, and he went to great lengths to keep it that way. The more he could distance himself from the man he'd once been, the more freedom he enjoyed. He was able to do work he was passionate about, and still do what he loved most, which was to fly. Eco-Watch was home.

"Daddy, make me another," Abigail said as she took the last bite of pancake number one.

Donovan stirred the batter and went to work. Two more horse shapes and one little surprise turtle pancake, and Abigail was finished and happy. As Donovan lifted her down from the counter, he got an impromptu kiss on the cheek before she bolted for her room to change clothes. He cleaned up the kitchen and managed to down some coffee before he, too, headed upstairs to get ready to go to the equestrian center. A quick glance at his phone produced a frown, still nothing from Lauren. He tried to call her mobile, but it went straight to voice mail.

"Daddy, come help me," Abigail called out from her room.

Donovan rounded the corner and found his daughter half-dressed. She was wearing her tan jodhpurs, a white blouse that needed to be tucked in, and she was combing her long reddish-blond hair in preparation for a ponytail. He helped her smooth her hair, gathered it in, and then secured the ponytail low on her neck so it wouldn't interfere with her riding helmet.

"I need my ribbon, Daddy," Abigail declared the instant her hair was set.

Donovan found two ribbons on Abigail's dresser, and held them both up for her to choose. Without hesitation she pointed at the white one dangling from his right hand. Abigail was the perfect mix of her mother's high IQ, matter-of-fact approach,

coupled with his sometimes-impetuous adventuresome streak. She was already a handful, but he wouldn't have it any other way.

Donovan carefully tied the ribbon the way Lauren had taught him, and got a nod of approval as Abigail checked his work in the mirror. Then he helped her fix her shirt. Once that was finished, Abigail launched herself on the bed and held up her right leg. He slid the first black paddock boot into place, then the second. She jumped up, made sure her boots were pulled up just below her knee, and then she slid on her jacket.

"You look perfect," Donovan said.

"Let's go!" she called as she strode past him for the hallway.

"Not so fast," Donovan said. "I need to take a shower and get dressed. You make sure you go to the bathroom, wash your hands, and then brush your teeth. Oh, and don't get any toothpaste on your jacket. No television. If you're bored, sit down and read something. I promise I'll be quick."

The exasperated sigh of an impatient five-year-old was all he heard as she tromped off to the bathroom.

Donovan glanced at the time, it was eight-thirty, late enough to make a call to Lauren's section at the DIA. If there had been a delay of some kind, hopefully they'd be able to tell him what was going on. He dialed the direct number, but didn't recognize the voice, or name, of the woman who answered.

"This is Donovan Nash. I'm Dr. Lauren McKenna's husband, and I was wondering if you could give me an update on her ETA to Washington."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Nash. I don't have that information."

"I'm just looking for what flight she may have taken. We're expecting her to arrive this afternoon."

"I'm sorry, you'll have to get that information from Deputy Director Reynolds."

“Fine,” Donovan said. He’d known Calvin Reynolds for years, but why would Lauren’s itinerary have to come from her boss. “Let me talk to him.”

“I’m afraid he’s off-site today.”

“If you talk to him, have him give me a call,” Donovan said. “He’s got my number.”

“I’ll pass your message along, Mr. Nash.”

“Thanks.” Donovan hung up, checked his phone once again for any message from his wife, still nothing. He hurried toward the bathroom for his shower. As the hot, needle-sharp spray peppered his skin, Donovan found he couldn’t shake the cloud of questions swirling in his head. Where was Lauren? Why hadn’t she contacted him?

CHAPTER THREE

LAUREN OPENED HER eyes and found that the sun had risen far above the horizon. Something had woken her from a restless sleep. The mud on her face had cracked and dried, and the smell of putrid fish hung heavy in the air. Daniel was still in the shallow water beside her. During the night she'd managed to take his belt and used it to secure him to a log so he wouldn't float away. In the sunlight, she studied his slack features. They'd been in their mid-twenties when they were together. He was in his mid-forties now, but the man she'd known was still clearly visible. He was thin, a runner, with dark hair and brown, fiercely attentive eyes. He never possessed leading-man looks, but she'd been attracted to him for his clumsy sense of humor and considerable intellect.

From his dossier she knew that life hadn't been easy or kind to him since school. He'd married years ago, not long after graduating from MIT. His wife had left him and their daughter, Samantha, and run off with another man. Daniel had raised his daughter as a single parent since she was ten. From what Lauren had read, Samantha had never been in trouble, and Lauren had no doubt that Daniel would have given her the love, attention, and energy his daughter needed. Over the years, Daniel had gone from project to project without any real focus or drive only to end up here, dying in a muddy river in Eastern Europe. Lauren had no real idea how all of this could have happened.

When Lauren heard the sound of men talking, her attention immediately snapped from Daniel to the voices. She could make out at least three different men. Farmers, soldiers, she had no idea, but they were getting close. She caught sight of them through the brush. There were three of them and they were on foot. They were only thirty feet away on what looked like a crude path. As they walked past, she remained motionless until they moved beyond her hiding place. Then Lauren quietly slithered out from beneath the pile of brush, and climbed the bank until she spotted the men in the distance. She crouched behind a thick bush and evaluated her situation. Two of the men were in uniform, carrying rifles. The third looked to be a civilian. He wore gray pants and a shirt that may have once been white, a blue bandana around his neck, and a straw hat perched on his head. A farmer perhaps, a man used to being out in the sun.

Lauren took in her surroundings. Where the trees ended, there looked to be a wider path or a primitive road; on the other side of that were more trees. As much as she wanted to get away from this place, in broad daylight, the best move was to stay where she was. Careful to mask her footprints, Lauren slid down the bank and crawled back under her makeshift canopy.

She thought back to the night before. The pilot briefed her that he intended to stay low until they reached the outskirts of Budapest, where there was a small airfield. He was going to climb into Hungarian airspace from there, appearing as if they'd just taken off. From there, the plan was to fly to Vienna. They hadn't been airborne very long, which meant someone either knew where they were going or that Daniel had been followed. High in the morning sky, Lauren spotted the contrail from an overflying jet, it was headed west, the direction she wanted to go. Home was due west, but help would not be coming. The entire mission to

extract Daniel was off-book, which gave the United States government complete deniability.

Lauren began to grasp the enormity of her situation. She swatted a large bug that was crawling on her wrist and grimaced as it fell away. She fought the overwhelming desolation of being alone in a hostile land. Her first order of business was Daniel. Her eyes filled with tears at what she needed to do, how horrible it was for him to end like this. She couldn't help herself as her thoughts drifted back to a different time, to when she'd met him, how different they'd been, yet they'd gravitated to each other.

It had been a fall afternoon, she was leaving class, and up ahead of her, Daniel had just pushed through the doors to leave the building. He'd glanced behind him and spotted her just as he'd let go of the door. He'd tried to recover, to get the door, but his momentum was all wrong. He twisted his ankle, swore, and managed a partial recovery as Lauren, amused, watched through the glass. He was embarrassed, hopping on his uninjured foot until he could finally pull open the door for her.

Lauren smiled at the memory—classic Daniel. He was so wounded and harmless, she agreed to have coffee with him, and that's how she discovered the intellect behind the boyish charm. She remembered being struck by how dissimilar they were. Looking back, maybe that was part of the attraction.

His work at MIT in aerodynamics had garnered attention from aircraft manufacturers around the world. He was a fierce lab rat, not a field guy. Growing up in Chicago, he'd been a gifted student but avoided athletics, or any team sports, preferring to be inside. She, on the other hand, jumped at any opportunity to go out in the field when she was in school. She loved chasing tornados in Kansas, flying with hurricane hunters in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and observing volcanoes in Alaska. After graduation,

their differences had outweighed their connection, and they'd finally broken up. She'd gone to work for the Defense Intelligence Agency and Daniel began to drift.

Lauren replayed the sequence of events that brought Daniel back into her life. Ten days earlier, Daniel had managed to send an email message to the Defense Intelligence Agency. The short paragraph explained that he was being blackmailed, held somewhere, perhaps in Slovakia, and that he was going to make his escape, but his action would put his daughter, Samantha, in danger. The only person he trusted, or would surrender to, was Dr. Lauren McKenna.

The email launched an immediate investigation by both the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency and Lauren was summoned by the CIA to Langley. Technically, Lauren was a contractor to the Defense Intelligence Agency, her PhD in Earth Sciences from MIT having led to her recruitment years ago. She was an analyst, but over the years, her close proximity to Donovan Nash and Eco-Watch had molded her into a field agent of sorts. Her most formidable weapon would always be her brain, but she also knew rudimentary field craft, and how to use a weapon.

Accompanied to Langley by her boss and friend, Deputy Director Calvin Reynolds, she'd sat down across from a man named Quentin Kirkpatrick, who had been placed in charge of Daniel's extraction from Eastern Europe. Lauren found him overdressed, overmanicured, a little too polished, as if he were trying hard to project something he wasn't. Once she and Calvin had taken their seats, Kirkpatrick dawdled in a clear attempt to emphasize his superiority.

"Can we get this meeting underway?" Lauren didn't bother to mask the fact that she'd had dealings with the CIA before and she didn't much care for their tactics.

“Yes, of course,” Kirkpatrick took one last look at the papers in front of him before addressing them both. “The CIA has the hardware and manpower in position, but we need you, Dr. McKenna, to anchor the mission to extract Dr. Daniel Pope. The situation requires you to fly to Geneva, where you will meet with a field unit. They will brief you based on local conditions and the fluidity of the operation.”

“Does Daniel know we’re coming?” Lauren asked.

“We have no idea. Using the email address he used to send the original message, we sent Daniel Pope a single phone number, with instructions for him to use when he was in position at one of three airfields in Slovakia. Once he surfaces, we’ll fly in and get to him before anyone else does. That a world-class aeronautical designer has been blackmailed to work on a project of unknown origin is, how shall I put it, worrisome.”

“What about his daughter?” Lauren said. “Have you found her?”

“Samantha? She’s in an Orange County, California, hospital. She was injured in a car accident, but she’s expected to survive. We’re looking into the accident itself, but on the surface it looks like another driver ran a red light. He was tested at twice the legal blood alcohol limit. It’s not his first DUI; he’s still in jail.”

“Is Samantha conscious?” Lauren asked. “Does she know her father’s whereabouts?”

“She’s in and out. She had surgery to remove her spleen, and she has two broken legs, a fractured collarbone, as well as a concussion. All she’s given us is that her father is working on a contract in Europe, for a company in Germany.”

Lauren nodded. Several years ago she’d read that Daniel’s latest project for a company called Dynamic Composites, had failed to produce a viable prototype for DARPA, the Defense Advanced

Research Projects Agency. The failure had resulted in the company being dissolved. It struck Lauren as odd that Daniel would accept a contract abroad. From what she remembered about his conservative nature, he just wasn't that adventuresome.

"We're checking to see if any aerospace companies have contracts or joint contracts in Slovakia," Kirkpatrick continued. "We're also trying to retrace Pope's movements prior to getting on a plane for Europe."

"How long has Samantha been in the hospital?" Lauren asked.

"Five days."

"That's not Daniel's style. I doubt that he ever went to work for any company in Europe. It's a cover story for his daughter," Lauren said. "I wonder if she was being used as leverage. If so, she's still a target. My guess is that Daniel, is, or was, being forced to work in exchange for his daughter's life."

"If he failed to deliver, they probably threatened to kill her," Calvin added. "Daniel would get to talk to her at certain intervals, and if she wasn't available, as in being in the hospital, Daniel would no doubt presume the worst and try to bolt."

"We're of like minds, Dr. McKenna. Samantha is under twenty-four hour guard," Kirkpatrick said and then tapped the face of his watch with a forefinger. "Dr. McKenna, if there are no more questions, your flight to Geneva leaves in a few hours. Your cover is that you're going to a meeting with your European intelligence counterparts. You can study the dossier we've prepared on the flight over."

"Slow down for a minute," Calvin pointed a finger at the CIA agent.

"Problem, Calvin?" Kirkpatrick replied.

"We're a long way from anyone climbing aboard a plane. We're here as a courtesy, and just so we're clear, we're not under any

directive to cooperate. If Dr. McKenna wishes to proceed, she'll do so as a volunteer, not because you said 'jump'. I'm also going to want to hear your assurances as to how you will safeguard Lauren's well-being. And while we're at it, let's have a little reciprocity here, Quentin. What does Dr. McKenna get in return for helping you?"

Kirkpatrick extracted a thick file from the top drawer, and never taking his eyes from Calvin, let it drop to the table. "There's your reciprocity. Dr. McKenna still owes us. She can volunteer for this mission, or I can have her locked up for treason. Instead of Geneva, she'll be on a flight to a classified federal holding facility. Dr. McKenna, it's your call."

Lauren didn't need to open the file. She already knew the contents. It was the official investigation into her actions in withholding information from the CIA, and aiding a known fugitive and suspected spy. A CIA agent in Paris had died two years ago. She'd avoided major issues when it happened, but only by the slimmest of margins after Donovan had intervened. She'd always suspected that her actions would resurface. Now they had.

"Lauren, we can fight this," Calvin said.

"It's okay, Calvin. I was going to volunteer anyway, even before the slimy tactics. All I ask is that this makes us even. I go get Daniel, the file goes away."

"That decision is above my pay grade," Kirkpatrick said, a not-so-subtle smirk lingering.

Lauren's focus on Kirkpatrick was broken by a large insect crawling on her neck. She flicked it away and forced herself not to look at its size. She thought about home. Donovan would be worried that he hadn't gotten a text from her when he'd woken up this morning. Abigail would be going a million miles an hour because it was horse-riding day. Donovan would have his hands full.

Lauren felt her throat tighten as a barrage of images raced through her mind. She and Donovan, after surviving a difficult time in their marriage, were healing. They were back together, talking, planning. It was as if a severe storm had enveloped them and their relationship, and they'd survived, stepped out into the aftermath, and found the air sweeter, the grass greener, as if their problems had been scrubbed clean by the maelstrom. Donovan, despite his many demons, had managed to shed most of them. He'd become a better husband and father and as a result—a happier man. They were as content as they'd ever been. Sooner or later, he'd understand that she'd lied to him about why she was going to Europe, that the mission involved Daniel Pope, a former lover.

When she didn't check in, Lauren knew that Donovan's first move would be to reach out to Calvin. Even if Calvin would confide in Donovan, she wondered how much intelligence her office at the DIA would be able to uncover. All anyone really knew was the plane was missing, as were the five people onboard. Satellite surveillance would show nothing, no wreckage; the crew wouldn't have transmitted a Mayday call, so there'd be no intercept by the NATO AWACS planes typically watching Russian airspace. By crashing into the water, the Learjet had simply vanished. Lauren had no idea what protocols or time frames were in place to notify the next of kin, but Donovan would be told fairly soon that she was missing, and presumed dead, along with Daniel Pope. She could only imagine the pain and betrayal that he would feel, and there was no immediate way for her to prevent it.

Lauren took a deep breath, it was time to get to work. She ventured away from the river and began to look for what she needed. It took her the better part of an hour, and several trips, but she finally gathered enough rocks to do the job. She slid down into the water next to Daniel and waved away the insects that had

already accumulated. She opened the first three buttons on his shirt and began to pull rocks from her pile and slip them inside the shirt. When no more would fit, she buttoned it to the neck and then slipped smaller rocks into his trouser pockets.

As a test, Lauren loosened the belt that kept him afloat and he slipped beneath the water. Lauren re-tightened the belt to keep him in place. She used the back of her hand to wipe at the hair that clung to her forehead. She'd have to wait until dark, then she'd swim Daniel out into the main channel and say goodbye to him forever as she sank his body below the surface.