

SECONDS
TO
MIDNIGHT

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SECONDS
TO
MIDNIGHT

A DONOVAN NASH NOVEL

PHILIP
DONLAY

OCEANVIEW
PUBLISHING
LONGBOAT KEY, FLORIDA

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ISBN 978-1-60809-228-4

Published in the United States of America by Oceanview Publishing

Longboat Key, Florida

www.oceanviewpub.com

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

To the memory of Gary Shulze
Consummate bookseller and friend
You will be missed

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

WRITING BOOKS IS for the most part a solitary process, though I've grown to respect as well as appreciate the fact that success hinges on dear friends, colleagues, and experts. Without them, I have no doubt that my efforts would be futile, so I want to offer my deepest thanks to those who never fail to keep me pointed in the right direction. To my parents, Cliff and Janet, as well as my brother, Chris, and son, Patrick—thank you. To Scott Erickson, Bo Lewis, Pamela Sue Martin, Kerry Leep, Nancy Gilson, Thomas Brandau, Darcy Eggeman, Tex and Heidi Irwin, Philip Marks Jr., and Brian Bellmont, you've all played a bigger part in the completion of this book than you'll ever know.

I'd also like to thank my agent, Kimberley Cameron, and her team of talented professionals. Then of course there are the people who shed light on a myriad of subjects well beyond my expertise. Dr. Philip Sidell and Dr. D.P. Lyle, thanks for all that you do, both medically and literarily. Victoria Dilliott, Mark Hurwitz, David Ivester, Jeff Frye, Samantha Fischer, and Maddee James, you're all amazing, and I'm the first to admit that I couldn't do what I do without your efforts. To Oceanview Publishing, the people who turn my words into books—thank you.

And finally, heartfelt well-wishes go out to all of my brothers and sisters around the world, who, like me, battle Ankylosing Spondylitis and the associated nightmares that come with this fearsome disease. You inspire me each and every day to keep fighting and move forward.

SECONDS
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CHAPTER ONE

WHEELING IN THE rarified air at thirty-nine thousand feet, Donovan Nash and his entire four-person crew aboard the *Galileo* marveled at the spectacular brilliance of the Northern Lights. Sitting next to him in the cockpit was Michael Ross, flying their precise track in the empty airspace miles above Northern Manitoba, less than five hundred miles south of the Arctic Circle. In the eastern sky, the sun was only minutes from rising above the horizon, yet the remnants of the Northern Lights continued to swirl and dance with ethereal green and red tendrils. The largest solar storm ever recorded was in progress, bombarding Earth with massive solar radiation, and those aboard the *Galileo*, Eco-Watch's highly modified Gulfstream IV, observed the celestial extravaganza from the front row.

From the right seat, Donovan caught a momentary flash from far away. He squinted into the sun, a narrow sliver peeking above the eastern horizon, and saw nothing. Then it blinked again, a brief point of light in his peripheral vision. He turned to find what looked like a solitary contrail that blended perfectly with the snow-covered ground. Donovan followed the unfurling vapor trail until he found its source. What seconds ago was a glimmer on the horizon, quickly became a Boeing 737 closing in on them at nearly the speed of sound.

“Climb, Michael! Climb!” Donovan yelled.

Without hesitation, Michael pulled hard on the controls and simultaneously pushed up both throttles. They hurtled upward out of thirty-nine thousand feet, and Michael banked the *Galileo* to the left just as the Boeing flashed beneath them.

The sound of the stick shaker reverberated through the cockpit, warning of an imminent stall. Michael lowered the nose, trying to gain the speed he'd lost avoiding the Boeing. In one violent action, the Gulfstream descended into the Boeing's wake turbulence. The two horizontal tornadoes that streamed back from the 737's wingtips enveloped the *Galileo*, and the powerful vortex flipped the Gulfstream upside down before the inertia just as quickly flung them free. Michael kept the Gulfstream rolling all the way around until they were once again wings level.

Donovan watched the Boeing angle away from them holding a northwest heading. Behind them, in the back of the *Galileo*, were two scientists using the Gulfstream's complex sensors and optics array to record as much data about the solar storm as possible. A glance over his shoulder told Donovan that both men were still at their stations.

"Dear God, that was close," Michael said. "Do you still have him? What in the world is he doing out here?"

"What in hell is that guy doing?" Rick Mathews, the third Eco-Watch pilot, said as he rushed from the cabin into the cockpit. "It happened fast, but that looked like a private 737."

The severe atmospheric conditions prevented any communication with air traffic control. "They're descending. Follow him," Donovan said, his fear tapering off, his adrenaline mixed with anger.

Michael added power and brought the speed of the Gulfstream up to redline. Traveling over five hundred miles per hour, the *Galileo* closed on the Boeing. "I think it's best if we come at him from above

and behind,” he said. “There’s something really off about all of this. I want to get a good look without him knowing we’re here.”

“I like that plan, Michael,” Donovan said. “Rick, did you get a look at his registration? Do we know what country he’s from?”

“No, all I saw was a 737 with what looked like green and gold stripes.”

Donovan picked up a telephone that served as an intercom to communicate with the two researchers seated in the back. “Dr. Samuels, is everyone still in one piece back there?”

“Captain Nash, what in the hell was that all about?” Dr. Samuels asked. “Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine, we had to take evasive action to avoid a midair collision with another airplane.”

“I thought Canadian air traffic control said there would be no traffic for the entire time we were on station?”

“That’s what they told us, which is why we’re following this guy. He’s flying without a working transponder, which is why there was no collision warning. With the sun coming up, I was wondering if you could use some of our optical equipment to help us identify them.”

“Let me see what I can do,” Samuels replied. “Exactly where is he right now?”

Donovan looked up and spotted the 737 just as it vanished into a deck of clouds below them. “He just went into the clouds. I’ll get back to you.”

“I’m going to offset our course a few degrees so we don’t run into this guy if he slows down,” Michael said as he swung the *Galileo* to the left to parallel the Boeing.

“I know we can’t communicate with the outside world via radio right now,” Donovan said to Rick. “But how far south do we need to be, to get someone via satellite connection?”

“On our way north out of Minneapolis last night, we lost all communication about an hour’s flying time south of here,” Rick said. “Though, from what Dr. Samuels was saying about the storm, communication access could continue to fluctuate.”

When the *Galileo* burst out of the bottom of the cloud deck, all eyes searched the sky for the 737. All that lay below them was the frigid snow-covered ground of Northern Manitoba.

“I’ve got him,” Michael called out, his eyes fixed low and to their left. He immediately throttled back and deployed the speed brakes to get the *Galileo* lower. “He’s slowed way down and is descending fast. I’m going to make a three-sixty to the left and come in behind him.”

“Are they in trouble?” Rick asked. “Is that smoke coming from somewhere in the rear fuselage?”

“Could be,” Michael said.

Donovan checked to make sure he had the emergency frequency dialed in the backup radio. “If he’s having a problem, the short-range transmissions should work, and we haven’t heard any kind of a distress call.” He dropped his eyes to the flight management display. The closest airport was Churchill, Manitoba, and it lay 140 miles east of them. He looked out and once again located the 737. With Michael’s massive descent and tight turn, they were quickly closing the gap.

The intercom to the back pinged. Donovan brought the phone to his ear without taking his eyes from the Boeing. “Doctor, what do you have?”

“We’ve got the camera array locked on to the Boeing. We have no Internet to gather more information, but from the onboard database I can tell you it’s a Boeing Business Jet, based on a 737-800. We captured the registration. It’s HZ-NCT.”

“That’s a Saudi Arabian aircraft,” Donovan said. “Any owner listed in our database?”

“No,” Dr. Samuels said. “From what we can see, smoke appears to be coming from the very aft part of the fuselage.”

“Got it, thanks,” Donovan said.

“Captain, wait! One of the over wing exits was just opened. There’s smoke pouring out of the fuselage. Oh Jesus, something just fell from the aircraft!”

“Track it!” Donovan could see the increase in smoke from the 737. Michael was coming in high and fast and gaining, but whatever was happening, the *Galileo*’s optics still gave them the best view.

“We have the coordinates of the object plotted,” Samuels said.

“Any clue what it was?” Donovan asked.

“I don’t know yet; we’ll have to enhance it later. It fell like something solid, but there was also fluttering, like cloth. I hate to speculate, maybe a body? Whatever it is came down in the forest.”

“Lock onto the 737 and keep recording.”

“He’s putting down flaps,” Michael said as the *Galileo* drew up less than a quarter of a mile behind the stricken Boeing. “Dear God, he’s going to try and put it down.”

“All of these lakes are frozen,” Donovan said as he studied the terrain below, then turned to Michael. “Could he pull this off?”

“I don’t have a clue how much snow is on top of the ice, but it looks like we’re about to find out,” Michael said. “Give me twenty degrees of flaps. I want to slow down to stay behind him.”

“He just put his landing gear down,” Donovan said. “He’s picked his spot, the lake three miles dead ahead. It looks long enough.”

“This is crazy. No distress call, no nothing,” Michael said.

Donovan found himself holding his breath as the Boeing, still trailing smoke, cleared the tops of the snow-covered trees along the shore. Then, in a blur of billowing snow, everything vanished from his view. Michael swung the *Galileo* into a left turn as they flew over the top of the Boeing. All Donovan could see was a rising cloud of snow that completely obscured everything but the top of the tail.

The second they raced beyond the 737, Michael added power and cranked the Gulfstream around to the right to bring them back around for another look.

The Gs from the steep turn pushed Donovan down into his seat as Michael expertly maneuvered the *Galileo* only a hundred feet above the trees. As the Gulfstream swung around, Donovan strained to catch sight of the Boeing. It took him a moment to find the jet. The blizzard it had created on landing was still gently floating down onto the 737. As Michael flew back across the Boeing, the 737's wings rocked as bluish fissures raced out in all directions from the ice cracking beneath them. The Boeing lurched and then bucked sideways as the once solid surface of the lake collapsed and gave way. The entire airplane dropped straight down through the ice and splashed into the lake, geysers of water exploding upwards. As Michael flew closer, Donovan spotted a figure stagger from the smoking cabin through the emergency exit and fall, landing hard on the wing. As the *Galileo* drew closer, Donovan saw the person stand up and run unsteadily toward the wingtip as the Boeing began sinking, tail first.

As the Gulfstream flew low and raced straight for the sinking Boeing, the person on the wing stopped and looked upward, and Donovan could see it was a woman. Thrown off-balance by the abrupt motion of the metal shifting beneath her feet, she slipped, careened sideways, and then jumped in an effort to clear the open water and make it to the ice.

"Michael, did you see that?" Donovan said as his friend pulled the *Galileo* into another steep turn to bring them back around. In the turn, Donovan saw the swath that the Boeing had made in the snow, the soft blue coloring from the ice just visible in the morning light. "Did she make it?"

“I see her, she’s in the water.” Michael swiveled his head to keep the sinking Boeing in sight as he flew. He made the turn toward the 737. Only the cockpit of the Boeing was still above the water.

Craning his neck, Donovan spotted the woman. She was clutching the edge of the ice trying to pull herself out of the water.

“I don’t see anyone else in the water,” Michael said as he banked for another low pass. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“I say we do it.”

Michael’s eyes narrowed as he looked out the window at the lake. “The Boeing cleared a long enough swath of loose snow on the lake to use as a runway. My concern is stopping on the ice.”

“If the reverse thrust isn’t enough, you can edge the landing gear into the snow and slow us down that way,” Donovan said. “The ice will hold. We’re a good thirty thousand pounds lighter.”

“The 737 has underwing engines, and they’re hanging down by the main gear only a couple of feet above the ice. I think that’s why they broke through the ice,” Michael said as he started to slow the Gulfstream. “Our engines are up on the tail far above the ice. My concern is our brakes melting the ice and then freezing. If that happens, we’ll be stuck here. The key is to keep the wheels turning, so I’m not shutting down the engines, or stopping this thing for more than a few seconds. The moment we’re stopped, the airstair goes down, you jump off, and I keep us moving.”

“Rick, take my place.” Donovan threw off his harness. He gave Michael a nod of understanding and slapped his shoulder as he exited the cockpit. His trust in Michael was complete, forged in the cockpits of Eco-Watch jets over the years.

“I’m not wasting any time,” Michael called over his shoulder. “Be ready to go.”

Donovan stopped at the crew closet just behind the cockpit. He pulled out heavy boots, and as he laced them up, he called to Dr. Samuels and Dr. Yates. "Strap in, we're going to land, and once we land, stay seated. You'll understand when we get there."

"We saw everything. She managed to pull herself out of the water, but she collapsed running for the shore," Dr. Samuels said. "We'll have blankets ready."

Donovan threw on his heavy parka and made sure his gloves were in the pocket. He'd already heard Michael lower the landing gear and felt him maneuver the Gulfstream around to land. Ready to go, Donovan moved forward and sat in the jump seat between Michael and Rick.

When the tires kissed the ice, the aircraft began shaking violently from the imperfections in the ice. Instantly, Michael yanked on the reverse thrust handles and pulled them to maximum. The *Galileo* shuddered under the onslaught of the reversers and the uneven surface. Donovan was forced to use both hands to brace himself as Michael slowed the Gulfstream down to the speed of a brisk walk. He retracted the flaps and stowed the reversers and spoilers in preparation for a quick departure.

"This is about as close as I dare get us to the hole in the ice," Michael said. "When you open the door, she'll be fifty yards directly off the left wing."

Donovan slipped on his sunglasses to face the harsh morning sunlight, pulled on his gloves, donned his watch cap low on his head, and stood ready. The moment the *Galileo* lurched to a stop, he lowered the airstair, raced to the bottom, and hit the ground moving. Standing in the doorway, Rick began to raise the airstair so Michael could keep the Gulfstream rolling and the brakes warm.

Donovan's first breath of cold air was painful enough to bring tears that immediately froze on his cheek. When he exhaled,

condensation billowed and clung to his skin. The snow made the going slow, but he followed Michael's directions and spotted the woman. Above the dull roar from the *Galileo's* engines, he could still hear the ominous sound of cracking ice spread out in all directions. He ran faster toward his target.

Once there, Donovan slid to a stop, dropped to one knee, dug his arms into the snow, clutched her body firmly, and lifted. He was surprised when she didn't budge. He dropped to both knees and rocked her back and forth in order to pry her frozen clothes free from the ice. The instant she was free, Donovan rolled her on her back and gathered her up. He was startled that her eyes were open. For a moment he thought she might be dead. Then she blinked.

"Don't—"

"Who are you, where were you going?" Donovan asked as he lifted her up off the ice and cradled her in his arms.

"Don't let anyone know about me," she said, her voice weak and fading. "They'll kill us all, even our families. Don't tell—"

"Who are you?" Donovan asked. All around them he could hear the ice pop and screech as broken sections rubbed together. She closed her eyes and her head slumped sideways. Donovan made sure he had a firm grip on her and began to run.

As Michael spotted him, he swung the slowly moving Gulfstream around so the cabin door would face Donovan's side. Moving as fast as he could, each breath a dagger in his chest, Donovan continued to trudge toward the *Galileo*. He could hardly see through the ice that had built on the lenses of his glasses as he intercepted the Gulfstream and reached the first step. He staggered briefly and felt Rick reach down and take part of his load. Together they lifted the woman up the stairs and into the warmth of the cabin.

Donovan turned and took one last look at the open water where the Boeing had slipped beneath the surface. He spotted no other

survivors. In the frigid air, the water was already skimming over with ice. He turned away as Rick moved past him to close the door.

“Rick, tell Michael to crank up the heat,” Donovan said over his shoulder as he hurried to where the woman lay in the aisle. He ripped off his gloves and peeled off his useless glasses. He saw her face clearly for the first time. Even with her eyes closed, and her face nearly drained of color, soaking wet and half frozen, she was hauntingly beautiful. She was maybe in her mid-twenties, with jet black hair, long enough to reach her shoulders, high cheekbones, and a distinct jawline. As he crouched and searched her neck for a pulse, the *Galileo* lurched forward and began to trundle down the rough makeshift runway. Once again, Donovan had to hold on to steady himself as Michael guided the powerful Gulfstream back the way they’d come. The engines spooled up to maximum thrust, and they accelerated away from the hole in the ice. The airframe shook and the wingtips rocked and flexed as the Gulfstream powered through the ridges in the ice and raced across the lake until the pounding stopped. The *Galileo* lifted free and climbed steeply into the frigid Canadian morning.

Airborne, and with the help of the two other men in the cabin, they began peeling off the woman’s wet half-frozen clothes. They used towels to dry her skin and then wrapped her tightly in blankets. As they worked, Donovan gathered her clothes and quickly checked the pockets, finding nothing. All he had was an unknown woman and her solemn warning.

CHAPTER TWO

DONOVAN STRIPPED OFF his coat and boots and stuffed everything in the closet. He fished in his briefcase until he found his phone and then went back and stood over the woman. He took numerous pictures of her face, turned her head gently to the side, and snapped several profile shots. He asked Dr. Samuels for a sheet of white paper and unwrapped the blanket around her just enough to extract her right hand. He couldn't help but notice that her skin was cooler than his own. He turned to the side, ran his index finger in the recessed seat track until it came out black from the dry graphite they used as a lubricant. He smoothed it uniformly onto her thumb and forefinger and then pressed each one against the sheet of paper. He blew the excess powder away and examined the makeshift prints.

He tucked her hand back inside the blanket and then turned to Dr. Samuels. "There are some hand towels in the lavatory. Can you dampen them and heat them in the microwave? We'll wrap them around her neck and wrists to try to heat the blood traveling through her arteries and veins." Donovan thumbed through the images he'd shot and then pocketed the phone and went forward and sat in the cockpit jump seat.

Michael turned to face him. "Is she going to survive?"

"I'm not sure," Donovan said, scanning the instrument panel and spotting the airport code Michael had programmed as their new destination. "CYWG. Is that where we're headed?"

"It's Winnipeg," Michael said. "We're still too far north to talk to anyone, so I chose the closest city with first-class medical facilities. As soon as we can talk to air traffic control, we'll report the crash and give them the coordinates."

"I need to let you guys in on something," Donovan said. "As I carried her to the plane, she whispered for me not to tell anyone about her, or 'they'll kill all of us, and our families.'"

Michael turned in his seat to look at Donovan over the tops of his sunglasses. "That's a hell of a thing to say to someone trying to save your life."

"She might not survive," Rick said. "If that's the case, then those were her final words, a little disconcerting to say the least."

"We all agree that the Boeing 737 was not supposed to be in this airspace, it acted erratically, and minutes later it crash-landed. She's the lone survivor, and neither she, nor the wreck, is going anywhere soon," Donovan said. "I have pictures and fingerprints that I'm going to send to Montero the second we can reach the outside world. What do you two think about waiting for some further information before we turn this into an international incident?"

"I hear what you're saying, and it's a fine line," Michael said. "At the moment, we've broken no laws. The solar storm won't let us talk to anyone, so we're doing what any Good Samaritan would do, which is to get the survivor to a medical facility."

"Exactly. Let's find out more about her and the 737 before we elect to land in Winnipeg. The last thing I want to do is end up in the middle of a crashed airplane media storm—or worse."

"We'll have a satellite window in ten or fifteen minutes," Rick said. "Radio communication in maybe another hour."

Donovan glanced at the display. Winnipeg was only an hour and a half away. He needed to work fast.

“One more thing,” Michael said. “We know nothing about what happened back there. In fact, she could be the one who caused the Boeing to crash in the first place. I’m just saying, keep an eye on her.”

“Got it.” Donovan hurried to the back of the plane and found Dr. Samuels sitting cross-legged next to the woman, taking her pulse. Hot air was pouring from the *Galileo*’s vents and warm towels were wrapped around her neck.

“Any improvement?” Donovan asked as he sat down at one of the science stations.

“Hard to say. Her pulse is a little stronger, but not by much. I’m not sure why she’s unconscious, unless she was injured when she was thrown into the water or she’s been drugged.”

“Do we have Internet connectivity yet?” Donovan asked Dr. Yates who sat at the adjoining workstation.

“Not yet,” Dr. Yates said, swiveling one of the larger monitors turned toward Donovan. “I thought you should see this. I went back and reviewed the telemetry we recorded of the Boeing. It’s impossible to identify the object that was thrown from the emergency exit, but I do think it’s a body. I also noticed this.”

“What am I seeing?” Donovan said as he leaned closer to the monitor.

“It’s only there for a moment, but as the camera follows the object, it briefly pans across the registration number of the Boeing. It looks like something has come loose or peeled back slightly. I’m thinking it looks like a decal, or adhesive of some sort, and just underneath there is something that looks to me like black paint.”

“We don’t know what it says, but we know what it is—the actual registration number.” Donovan leaned back in the seat. “The

Saudi identification is bogus. Someone has slapped it over the real registration.”

“We’re showing a green light for Internet connectivity,” Dr. Samuels announced.

Donovan connected his phone to the computer terminal and began uploading the pictures he’d taken. He pulled down an e-mail screen and began to type. Once finished, he attached all of the images to his message and hit send. The second he confirmed it had gone out, he leaned back and hoped that, half a world away, Eco-Watch’s new Director of Security would be looking at her e-mail.

Former FBI Special Agent Veronica Montero was not only a good friend, but she had been at one time one of the most complex, intelligent, and formidable opponents he’d ever come up against. Years earlier, while she was with the FBI, she’d put him in the crosshairs of an investigation, and even though he was innocent, it had threatened to destroy everything he had built over the last twenty-five years. Ultimately, they reached an uneasy peace and ended up bringing down a man who would have been one of the deadliest terrorists in history. Since then, she’d become close with not just Donovan, but with his wife, Lauren, and their daughter, Abigail. Over the last year, Montero had demonstrated her loyalty and her superb investigative skills, and as long as no one called her Veronica, she was happy. If anyone could get a jump on the identity of the unknown woman, and who owned the Boeing, it was Montero.

He thought of his wife, Lauren, and their six-year-old daughter, Abigail. With Donovan immersed in studying the massive solar flares, Lauren had taken Abigail to Innsbruck to visit their dear friend Kristof and his daughter, Marta.

Donovan missed his family but knew Abigail would have a wonderful time at the chalet. Rumor had it Kristof had brought

in horses for her to ride, Abigail's current obsession. The other Eco-Watch jet, the *Spirit of da Vinci*, was in Savannah, Georgia, home to Gulfstream, for maintenance and upgrades. Until a few minutes ago, it had been a fairly quiet week at Eco-Watch.

"I just scanned several Internet news outlets," Dr. Yates said. "There's no mention of a missing airplane anywhere in the world."

"There will be shortly," Dr. Samuels said. "I see on the inflight display that we're headed to Winnipeg?"

"That's the closest major city with first-rate medical facilities," Donovan said, repeating Michael's reasoning.

"You know the Canadians will question us for hours, maybe days." Samuels pressed on his temples as if enduring a great pressure. "This solar event isn't going to wait for the slow wheels of bureaucracy to run its course. I'd like to be back up here tonight if at all possible."

"We will if we can," Donovan said. "I'm waiting on some information I just requested from Eco-Watch's Director of Security."

"Are you talking about Ms. Montero?" Dr. Yates asked.

"Yes," Donovan said. "You both met her in Virginia."

"I know that Eco-Watch has the well-deserved reputation of being the preeminent privately funded research organization in the world, but how did you hire her? She's famous," Dr. Yates said. "She's the FBI agent that took out the terrorist trying to attack Washington, D.C. She was even on the cover of *Time* magazine."

Donovan shrugged. Though the actual story regarding the terrorist had been altered at the highest levels of the FBI, Eco-Watch, Donovan, Lauren, and Montero had all been at the center of the attack. Stopping it had been a team effort, but he'd gladly pushed the spotlight onto Montero so his family could be left out of the media frenzy. "I hired her because she's very good at what she does. I'm glad you two understand her capabilities. Hopefully we'll hear back soon and make a decision."

“What kind of a decision? What are the other options?” Samuels asked.

“This is probably as good a time as any to tell you what I know. When I got to the woman, she was still conscious. She whispered for me not to tell anyone about her. She said they’ll kill all of us, and our families.”

“That’s messed up,” Samuels said as his face turned red. “I mean, we saved her. How could she say something like that?”

“That’s what I’m trying to find out,” Donovan replied. “I thought you two should know.”

“To hell with her,” Samuels blustered. “I say we fly straight to the United States and turn her over to the FBI.”

Donovan held up his hands in a calming gesture just as he spotted the arrival of an e-mail from Montero. “Gentlemen, Ms. Montero just replied; let me see what she has to say, and we’ll proceed from there.”

With a click of the mouse, Donovan opened the e-mail and was surprised by its brevity.

This woman is listed by Interpol as a Jane Doe, a woman who was possibly abducted three years ago in Krakow. A year ago, a German diplomat was murdered in Berlin and she may be connected with that homicide. Nothing but unanswered questions. Do not land anywhere until we can talk. I’ll call as soon as you’re in range.

—Montero