

A HARVEST OF THORNS

A NOVEL

CORBAN ADDISON



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798



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Published in association with Creative Trust Literary Group (www.creativetrust.com) and Baror International (www.barorint.com).

Interior design: Mallory Collins

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Addison, Corban, 1979- author.

Title: A harvest of thorns: a novel / Corban Addison.

Description: Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, [2016]

Identifiers: LCCN 2016027881 | ISBN 9780718042387 (hard cover: alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Secrets--Fiction. | Journalists--Fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3601.D465 H37 2016 | DDC 813/.6--dc23 LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016027881>

Printed in the United States of America

17 18 19 20 21 RRD 5 4 3 2 1

*For the women of Tazreen,
whose stories will never leave me.*



*On behalf of a forgetful world,
let me say I am sorry.*

What is done in our name must not remain invisible to us.
We are responsible for all the workers who make our goods.
—Yvon Chouinard, Founder of Patagonia, Inc.

PROLOGUE

Bangladesh

November 2013

MILLENNIUM FASHIONS FACTORY

DHAKA, BANGLADESH

NOVEMBER 4, 2013

8:53 P.M.

The sparks danced like fireflies in the semidarkness of the storeroom. They emerged from the wall outlet in a shower of white-gold radiance, casting a flickering glow across the concrete slab beneath them. The sounds they made, the snapping and crackling of suddenly electrified air, were drowned out by the rattling of three generators across the room, whose whirling magnetic coils were straining to satisfy the demand of hundreds of lightbulbs and ceiling fans and sewing machines on the floors above.

The cause was elementary, as the investigators from Dhaka would later discover—an aging circuit, copper wire exposed through melted sheathing, a worn-out breaker box, a peak load the factory’s designers had never anticipated, and the gentle, inexorable persuasion of time. A short, the investigators would say. A common fault in a building so poorly maintained.

But what happened next was far from commonplace. The fire that started to

burn in sacks of cotton jute—the leftover cuttings of T-shirts, sweatpants, and children’s apparel destined for Chittagong piers and American closets—would sweep farther and faster than any fire before it.

This fire would ignite the world.

MILLENNIUM FASHIONS FACTORY

FIVE FLOORS ABOVE

Nasima’s hands moved swiftly over the fabric before her, wasting neither motion nor strength. Her fingers joined textured labels to stretchy waistbands and fed them through her plain machine with a pianist’s precision, her foot caressing the pedal in time—on, stitch, off, rest, on, stitch, off, rest. After she completed each piece, she swept it aside for a helper to deliver to packaging, then took another set of pants and Piccola labels from the hands of her fourteen-year-old sister, Sonia.

Nasima and Sonia were the fastest finishing team at Millennium, a relentless symbiosis of diligence and productivity. They communicated with looks and gestures, seldom with words. Their bond was a matter of blood and history. At the age of ten, Nasima had attended Sonia’s birth. She had been the first in her family to witness the crowning of Sonia’s head, the first to look into her sister’s dark eyes, brown as river-fed soil. She had bathed Sonia, and changed her, and soothed her, and raised her like a surrogate, not because their mother, Joya, lacked devotion, but because she had four rowdy sons and a job on the sewing line that sequestered her from dawn to dark every day but Friday.

The Hassan family had come to Dhaka from Kalma, their native village, when Nasima was a toddler, after the great cyclone of 1991 washed away their fields and reshaped the land beneath their feet. The bustling city had offered them refuge and the chance of employment in garment factories springing up everywhere in the suburbs, fueled by the frenzy of globalization. Joya had started at Millennium as a helper, but with training, determination, and patience, she had worked her way up to sample sewing operator in the pattern room—a specialist in charge of translating designs conveyed by the clothing brands into samples that won contracts and set the standard for everyone else.

Nasima had followed her mother into the factory as soon as Sonia was old enough to attend school. Sonia had joined them when she was thirteen, though her employment documents recorded her age as fifteen, the legal minimum in Bangladesh. The hours were brutal, the influx of overseas orders relentless,

and the wages subsistence level and often paid late. But it was honest work, steady work, and with three of them collecting paychecks, the money had multiplied, allowing the boys to stay in school. It was Joya's hope—and Ashik's, her rickshaw-driving husband—that their eldest son would be the first in the family to attend college. Nasima's dream was simpler. She wanted to get married and have children of her own.

“Ēṭā ki?” Sonia asked in Bengali. “What is that?”

The question caught Nasima off guard. She pulled her fingers back from the plunging needle just in time. “What is what?”

Then Nasima heard it—the sound of shouting carrying over the clatter of machines and the whirring of fans. She looked around to see if anyone else had noticed. There were two hundred sewing stations in the cavernous room, four lines of fifty, each with an operator and a helper, along with ten supervisors and four line chiefs. Most of the workers were on task. A few, however, were glancing about with concern.

“Get back to work,” barked her supervisor. “No delays. The order must go out tonight.”

Nasima gave her sister a reassuring look and slid another waistband and label into the machine. The pants were bright red and sized to fit a girl about six years old. How much would the child's parents pay in America? Five dollars? Ten? Fifteen? It was a guessing game she sometimes played to break the monotony. The fabric was nice. Twelve, she guessed. At her current wage of forty-two cents an hour, Nasima had to work four days to earn such a sum, but she felt no bitterness. Nor did she wonder—as she had when she was younger—how Americans could afford such luxuries. The West had grown rich, while much of the world remained poor. The ways of Allah were mysterious. It was not for her to question them.

Minutes passed. Piece after piece went through the machine. Nasima fought to maintain concentration, but the distant shouting did not subside. More operators looked up from their work, searching for an explanation. Supervisors began to stomp about, chastising the laggards for their indolence, but the ranks of the curious swelled. Finally, the line chiefs intervened. They marched brusquely up and down the lines, issuing orders and threats. Nasima hunched over her machine and picked up her pace. The supervisors were harmless. They had no power to hire or fire. The line chiefs, however, could dismiss workers at whim.

Then came the first explosion.

Nasima heard it and felt it simultaneously—a rumbling like thunder rising

from deep inside the building. The floor trembled. The walls shuddered. The lights flickered and swayed. Workers cried out as the sound reached a throaty pitch and then died away. The fire alarm began to ring. Nasima sat transfixed, clutching the pants she had just finished. In a glance she saw Sonia's fright and the fright of the workers around her. She turned toward the nearest line chief and saw him shouting into a radio. The worry in his eyes convinced her to move.

She stood up and took her sister's hand, walking briskly toward the central stairwell—the only way out of the factory. Her supervisor shouted at her to sit down, but she ignored him. Other workers left their stations, stepping over piles of fabric in their quest for the exit. They made it halfway to the stairs before one of the line chiefs placed his body in front of the door. He waved his arms wildly and yelled over the bleating of the alarm.

"Go back to your stations! Your work is not done! If you leave, you will be fired!"

Nasima hesitated, as did the rest of the workers. The crowd stewed about in confusion.

"Why is the alarm still going off?" a male sewing operator shouted.

"A generator malfunctioned!" the line chief yelled. "It is a mistake! Go back to your—"

He was interrupted by the second explosion. It was louder and more violent than the first and rocked the factory to its foundations. As the building quaked, Nasima's stomach twisted with dread. She pulled Sonia toward her, certain the factory was about to collapse. But the floor did not give way. Instead, the lights went out.

The workers began to scream. A great wave of bodies pressed against Nasima and Sonia, jostling them toward the now invisible door. Hands shoved. Elbows flew. One collided with Nasima's forehead. Stars swam in her vision. She clutched Sonia's hand and dragged her away from the crowd. It was there that she caught her first whiff of smoke. It was pungent, revolting. She coughed and turned back toward the stairwell. As her eyes adjusted to the dimness, she saw a mass of moving shadows and heard hysterical shouts.

"Open the door!"

"Get out of the way!"

At last, Nasima saw a wedge of rose-gray light along the doorframe. The crowd swarmed toward the opening, and Nasima and Sonia followed. For a few beats in time they made progress. Then the crowd stopped. The workers at the rear shouted in anger and dismay.

“Go! Move! Get to the door!”

Suddenly, a new kind of scream erupted from the crowd. It was more like a shriek, really, a crystalline expression of terror. The shrieks coalesced around a single word.

“Fire!”

The workers backed away from the door, then pirouetted and began to stampede. Nasima yanked Sonia out of their path, her mind spinning. The factory had no fire escape. The only extinguishers were on the first and second floors. The stairwell was blocked. In a moment of terrible clarity, she knew the windows were their only hope.

She pulled Sonia toward the outer wall of the room, covering her mouth to ward off the acrid smoke. The windows were not glassed in, but they were enclosed by iron bars and webbed netting—the owner’s attempt to prevent workers from stealing clothing by throwing it down to friends on the ground. The only way out was to sever the netting and dislodge the bars.

Sonia began to cough. Nasima pulled her into a crouch and told her to cover her mouth with her arm. It was then that she remembered the pants in her hands. “Use this as a mask!” she cried, pulling Sonia’s head toward her. She placed the crotch of the pants over her sister’s nose and mouth and cinched the legs behind her head. “Lie down!” she ordered. “The air is better!”

Nasima glanced toward the stairwell and saw an orange glow beneath the door. She covered her mouth with her headscarf and peeked over the windowsill toward the cinderblock dwellings where her family and most of the workers lived. On evenings when the neighborhood had power, lamps illuminated windows and bulbs lit footpaths. But the power was out. All light had vanished from the night.

Her eyes began to burn from the smoke. She coughed once, twice, then dropped to her knees, retching until her chest ached. At last, the paroxysm passed. She lay down beside Sonia, struggling to make out the contours of her sister’s face.

“I’m afraid,” Sonia said, her voice barely audible above the chaos of screams and pulsing of the alarm. “What are we going to do?”

Before Nasima could respond, someone kicked her in the head. She cried out in pain, but the man made no attempt to apologize. Instead, he yelled, “The bars are not secure! Help me!”

In the shadows behind him, Nasima saw the outline of a table. She ordered Sonia not to move and rolled into a sitting position, breathing through the fabric of her scarf. She blinked her eyes rapidly, disregarding the sting of smoke, and

took hold of a table leg. She helped the man pull the table toward the window. When it was flush with the sill, he climbed onto it, drew a knife from his pocket, and attacked the netting with all of his strength.

Nasima lay down again and placed a hand on Sonia's shoulder. "It's going to be okay," she said despite the doubt in her gut. "The fire service is coming."

Even as she spoke, Nasima knew it was a false hope. The closest fire station was half an hour away, and the lanes around the factory were too narrow for large trucks. The firefighters would find a way to get their hoses through. But they would almost certainly be too late.

By the time the netting fell to the ground, the temperature in the room had passed the point of discomfort. Sweat coated Nasima's skin, and her backside prickled from the heat. For the first time since the explosions, she thought of her mother two floors below them. Was she still alive? She *had* to be alive.

Suddenly, she saw the man's face in front of her. "Help me lift the table!" he shouted. "We need to dislodge the bars!"

Nasima blinked away burning tears. Behind the man stood a cluster of human shadows. They helped her to her feet, and together they picked up the table and threw it against the bars. The iron groaned, and mortar fell away into the night.

"Again!" the man commanded.

On the second try, all but one of the bars came loose. The man levered himself onto the windowsill and wrested iron from crumbling mortar, tossing it into the dark. He turned toward them for an instant, but Nasima couldn't see his face.

Then he jumped.

Nasima stared at the empty window in shock. It was not as if the thought had never occurred to her, but the sheer brutality of watching it happen shook her to the core. Five floors. Sixty feet to the ground. A fall like that was suicide.

But the man was not alone. Two women climbed onto the sill and leapt into the abyss.

Madness! Nasima thought, glancing at Sonia. There had to be another way.

She looked into the smoke-filled gloom of the factory. There were hundreds of unfinished pants at the sewing stations. If she could make a rope long enough to halve the distance to the ground, she and Sonia could survive the drop.

She crouched beside her sister and asked, "Are you okay?"

Sonia coughed once, then nodded.

"Stay here. I'll just be a minute."

Nasima crawled slowly across the floor, keeping her mouth low to the ground. When she reached the nearest sewing line, she gathered an armful of pants and returned to the window. She tied legs together one by one, tugging at them fiercely until she detected no slippage. She didn't know if the pants could bear the weight of a body, but she knew her knots would hold.

While she worked, more workers jumped from windows all around. She heard their screams as they faded into silence. She felt the waves of heat coming from the stairwell. Smoke billowed around her, choking her with stench and soot. Her lungs burned and her eyes ran with tears. Still, she pressed on.

Five pants became eight, then twelve. By the time she reached fifteen, she could no longer keep her eyes open. Her mind was slipping gears. She wanted nothing more than to sleep. But something in her resisted. Something made her rise up one last time.

She nudged Sonia. "Come, *Khamjana*," she said, using her sister's nickname—hummingbird. "It's time for us to go."

She helped Sonia to her feet and held her protectively. At the age of fourteen, Sonia still had the diminutive build of a preadolescent girl. She had been born six weeks prematurely, and her growth had never caught up with her peers. In the schoolyard and among her brothers, her slight stature had brought her much shame. Now, though, it was a gift.

They stood before the window, the night beckoning from beyond. Those who would jump had already jumped. The rest were shadows on the floor, some groaning, others still. Nasima looped the makeshift rope around a table leg and tied it securely. Then she threw the remainder out the window. She placed her forehead against her sister's and spoke words that belied her fear.

"You can do this. You must climb down and then drop to the ground. The rope will hold, but you must be quick. There is no time to waste."

"It's too far," Sonia replied weakly. "I can't."

Nasima looked into the dark wells of her sister's eyes and her heart began to break. It came to her that she might never see Sonia again. "You *can*," she said emphatically. "You *must*." She forced the rope into Sonia's hands and nudged her toward the window. "Go now."

Sonia hesitated a moment longer, then swung her legs over the sill, one after the other. She clutched the rope tightly and began to slide down.

Nasima leaned over the sill, willing the rope to hold. In the darkness, she could see only the crown of Sonia's head. *It's like the day of her birth*, she thought. *Please, God, let her live.*

In the seconds that followed, Nasima banished from her mind the death throes of the factory—the moans of asphyxiating workers, the numbing ring of the alarm, the roaring of the inferno. She heard only the sound of Sonia’s toes scuffing the wall as she descended.

Scrape . . . Scratch . . . Scratch . . . Scrape.

“Keep going,” Nasima urged, fighting for breath. “You’re almost there.”

Then, in a terrifying instant, the rope gave way.

Nasima cried out in horror. She stared into the void and shouted Sonia’s name, but no reply came. She sank to the floor, her grief a blade buried to the hilt at the center of her heart. She sat paralyzed for uncounted seconds.

Then she opened her eyes and saw the flames.

The fire was no longer in the stairwell. It had spread to the floor. Scattered fabric went up like tinder. Oxygen raced in through open windows and fanned the flames until they rose up to the ceiling. The heat was unbearable. It was impossible to breathe. Nasima turned back toward the window, her twenty-four years of life resolving in a single thought—a quote from the Quran.

“Kullu nafsīn zaikatul maut.” “Every soul shall taste death.”

She climbed onto the windowsill, the blaze at her back. The choice before her was simple. If she stayed, she would burn, and her family would have nothing to bury. If she jumped, she would die, but her father and brothers would find her and put her to rest with Sonia. She mouthed a prayer, asking Allah to welcome her on the Day of Judgment.

Then she stepped off the ledge.

PART ONE

Cameron

November 2013



CHAPTER ONE

PRESTO TOWER, 16TH FLOOR

ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA

NOVEMBER 5, 2013

12:06 P.M.

The desk was a statement of pride, a great slab of black walnut from the Berkshire Hills of Cameron's native Massachusetts, ten feet wide and four feet deep and bur-nished to a red-brown shine. Upon it stood the usual accoutrements of a corpo-rate executive: a widescreen iMac, a stainless steel desk lamp, a multiline phone, a container for writing implements—and a few more personal pieces: a base-ball signed by the Boston Red Sox after the 2004 World Series, a Montegrappa fountain pen, and a glass globe his wife, Olivia, had bought in Prague. The rest of the vast surface was uncluttered, like the office that surrounded it, its only other furnishings a leather executive chair, a walnut file cabinet, a laser printer and scanner, and a pair of colonial-era wingback chairs arranged on the far side of the desk.

Cameron stood beside the floor-to-ceiling window, eating salad from a bowl before the draft minutes from a recent board meeting called him back to work. His office, located on the top floor of Presto's global headquarters, was a perqui-site of his position as senior vice president and general counsel. It was also a gift from Vance Lawson, the company's CEO and Cameron's best friend. Steps away from Vance's corner suite, Cameron's office faced east across the Potomac and overlooked the most famous skyline in DC—the Lincoln Memorial, the Washington Monument, and Capitol Hill. In the evening when the building

was quiet and Cameron was working late, the otherworldly glow of the monuments offered him a measure of solace. But in the forge of the workday, with two hundred fifty in-house lawyers to manage, five board committees and a dozen senior executives to advise, the view was just part of the background.

He turned his head and saw a ghost of himself in the glass—the arrow-shaped nose and sturdy chin, the moustache and thoughtful eyes, as dark as his ebony complexion. He was the only African American in the C-suite and one of only eleven black executives in the building, despite the diversity initiative Vance had instituted in his first week as CEO. But Cameron had never allowed his minority status—or the occasional discomfort it engendered—to affect his performance. He had grown up in a world of white privilege and learned early on to master its rules of success. While his skin was one of the first things people noticed, it wasn't what they remembered. They remembered his eyes and his mind, the sterling clarity of his judgment.

"Cam, will you come in here, please?" It was Vance on the speakerphone, his voice uncharacteristically grave. "We've got a problem."

Cameron put down his lunch and walked next door, tossing a wave to Eve, Vance's secretary, before entering the CEO's office through double doors. The corner suite was twice the size of Cameron's office and was laid out like a drawing room with artwork on the walls, two sitting areas, a wet bar and liquor cabinet, and an array of flat-screen televisions. The desk was almost an afterthought. Vance preferred to work standing up, conferencing with his team, or on the couch, documents spread out on the coffee table. It was the way he had been when Cameron met him at Harvard Business School, the way he had been for thirty years.

"What's going on?" Cameron asked, taken aback by the distress on Vance's face.

His friend was standing in front of the televisions, his lake-blue eyes moving from one screen to the next. There were four TVs, each tuned to a different news station. Ordinarily, their coverage was diverse, but occasionally, when a story was big enough, they became a refracting chamber, drawing light from a single source, as they were doing now.

The source was a burning building.

"It's a factory in Dhaka," Vance said as CNN zoomed in on flames shooting out of an upper-story window. "They'll show it again . . . There." He stabbed a finger at the screen. "I don't know who took it, but it's going to go viral. The whole world is going to see it."

In the frame was a photograph of a young Bangladeshi girl lying in the dirt, one arm splayed out at her side. The factory was behind her, engulfed in flame. There was blood on her forehead and a mask over her face. No, not a mask—a pair of child’s pants. Cameron looked closer. The pants had a silver label. The photographer had caught it cleanly. At the center of the label was the letter *P*. It was the logo of Piccola—one of Presto’s apparel brands.

Cameron’s jaw fell in silent alarm. After three decades of dueling and deal making in the Beltway swamp, he had developed the carapace of a crocodile and a monk’s sense of poise. The picture, however, left him wordless, thought-deprived. But only for a moment. Then the poise returned, along with the instinct for self-preservation.

The iPhone was in his pocket—his digital leash. He called Presto’s senior vice president of communications. “Kristin, we need you in Vance’s office. Now.”

“Coming,” she replied.

His next call went to the legal department, compliance section. “Declan, there’s been an incident at an apparel factory in Bangladesh. I need you to find out if it’s one of ours.” Cameron saw the words at the bottom of the BBC feed. “It’s called Millennium Fashions.”

When Declan came back with the answer, Cameron spoke to Vance. “The factory is on our Red List. We deauthorized it six months ago because of safety concerns.”

Vance’s eyes flashed. “Then what the hell are our pants doing on that girl’s face?”

“I don’t know,” Cameron replied, struggling to remain calm.

A moment later, Kristin Raymond appeared at their side. Sharp, sassy, and supremely qualified, she had a master’s degree in communications from Columbia and an extensive résumé in both network and cable news. Cameron briefed her in three sentences.

“We need to get out ahead of this,” she said. She took out her phone and called her secretary. “Leslie, assemble the critical incident team in the fourteenth-floor conference room. Put all calls through to my mobile. No one talks to anyone on the outside except me.” She hung up and turned to Vance. “We need a company-wide lockdown. All information needs to go through my team. Cam can draft the e-mail, but it should come from your account.”

“I’m already typing,” Cameron said, his thumbs flying across his iPhone’s touch screen. “Short and sweet. Circle the wagons. No breaches.” He read the message out loud for them to hear, then hit Send. “I copied Eve.”

“We’ll get it done,” Vance said, walking toward the door. “Kristin, keep me posted.”

Cameron turned back to the televisions, acid churning in his stomach. It was a nightmare scenario. Only three days ago, Presto had released an abysmal third-quarter earnings statement—eleven points below estimate. The spring and summer buying seasons had been soft. Store traffic was anemic, and online had barely seen a bump. Analysts were speculating about Presto’s viability. And Class-A shareholders who had never been denied a dividend were wetting their pants. To appease investors and pundits alike, Presto needed a near miraculous fourth-quarter rebound. Ads were already running across the country fueling the holiday frenzy. Black Friday promotions would be historic. On Vance’s orders, Presto had bet the house on the compulsive spending of festive consumers. If they didn’t contain the damage from the fire quickly, heads would start to roll, and those in the C-suite would be first in line.

“I’m heading downstairs,” Kristin said. “I’ll start drafting an investor memo, but I don’t think we should put out a statement until we see how bad this is going to get. It’s still nighttime over there. We have no idea what we’re going to see when the sun rises.”

“Stay positive,” Cam said, feeling just the opposite.

“I’ll get out my ruby slippers,” Kristin quipped, breezing out of the room.

Vance returned a moment later and wandered over to the window. Cameron followed him, knowing he would speak when he was ready. Outside, the November day was golden, the forests on Theodore Roosevelt Island flecked with color.

“This could eviscerate our market cap,” Vance said, his voice whisper-quiet. “Our customers could bolt. God knows how many options they have.”

“We shouldn’t overreact,” Cameron countered softly. “We have a solid foundation, and consumers have a short memory. If it comes to it, we can do what BP did—hire a PR firm and do a glossy ad campaign. ‘People First.’ It’s always been the core of our business.”

“It’s a good idea,” Vance said. “But it’s not enough. I want answers from Bangladesh.” He took a ponderous breath. “That girl is Annalee’s age.”

Cameron nodded, understanding. Gifted with limitless advantage, a magnetic charisma, and an indefatigable will, Vance had only failed at one thing—family. He was an inveterate philanderer. His exploits were Solomonic. Not even Cameron knew the whole of it, but it was his job—first as Vance’s attorney, now as his general counsel—to keep the women distant and quiet.

Vance had only been married once, an ill-fated experiment with a French super-model that had imploded after two years. But the union had produced a child, Annalee, now thirteen and living with her mother in Paris. She was the love of Vance's life, and also his greatest wound.

"I want this to be top priority," Vance said. "Bring the Risk Committee up to speed, but don't involve the full board. When the time comes, we'll go to them together. Paper the file. Make this about liability and keep it confidential. I want to know how this happened. And I want to know what we can do to prevent it from happening again."

Cameron took a long, slow breath. "I'd like to know that too. But there's a risk to asking questions. We don't know what we're going to find."

"It doesn't matter," Vance said with a shake of his head. "You've said it more times than I can count—integrity is essential to performance. Someone needs to take responsibility for this."

Cameron stood in silence, vaguely disquieted by the exchange. In the corner office, there were moments when deliberation was more valuable than decisiveness. For Vance, however, patience had never been a virtue. Eventually Cameron asked, "What's the time frame?"

"Whatever it takes. The same goes for resources."

Despite his reservations, Cameron gave his friend a cautious smile. "Consider it done."

CHAPTER TWO

PRESTO TOWER, 16TH FLOOR

ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA

NOVEMBER 5, 2013

5:15 P.M.

The story of Presto was a legend in American business. Like Romulus and Remus, the myth had its twins—the husband-and-wife team of Hank and Dee Dee Carter—and a birthplace in the Roman countryside. On a visit to Italy in 1962, the Carters had discovered that commerce in the villages was both communal and centralized. Shops were arranged around piazzas where friends met and musicians played. It was shopping made easy. Everything in one place. But the dance of buying and selling was more than materialistic. It was organic, personal, and enjoyable.

Upon their return to the United States, the Carters had a conversation that reshaped the world of retail—or so went the legend. Hank was an entrepreneur with half a dozen variety stores in his portfolio. At fifty-five, he was ready for a new challenge. Dee Dee, too, was in transition, her children all married and starting lives of their own. Over pasta—could it have been anything else?—the couple charted a new course. They would bring Italy to America in a novel kind of store, an “omnishop,” as Hank christened it. Its departments would be organized around a plaza that, while enclosed by a roof, would feature greenery, benches, and sunlight. They would call it Presto, after the Italian word and the magician’s invocation. But their motto was quintessentially American: “Everything you need at the snap of your fingers.”

In an era of profound social transformation, when department stores were old news but shopping malls were still on the horizon, Americans greeted the first Presto omnishop—opened in Fairfax, Virginia, in 1963—as a vision of the future. They flocked to its resplendent displays and kaleidoscopic wares and lingered to eat ice cream in the plaza. In 1965, Hank opened three more stores. When they succeeded wildly, he became more ambitious. Over the next ten years, he launched thirty-eight stores in twelve states. By the time he died in 1984, Presto had grown to one hundred stores in thirty-two states. But it was still a family-owned enterprise with only two shareholders—Hank and Dee Dee. They had resisted the gilded promise of Wall Street because they had no interest in building a corporation. They cared about community. Their goal was to give Americans access to quality goods at an affordable price, and to donate a portion of their earnings to charity. “Invest in people,” Hank often said, “and people will return the favor.”

It was all in the company handbook, hand-delivered to new hires on their first day. Cameron had received his from Vance, along with a flippant “Read this. Inspiring stuff.” In truth, it was more hagiography than history. Hank Carter was not a saint. He had driven countless Main Street retailers out of business. But this much was true: Hank never wanted his company to become the behemoth his son, Bobby, created after his death—with two thousand five hundred stores across America, three hundred fifty thousand employees in thirty-three countries, and annual revenues over one hundred billion dollars.

Cameron opened the black file folder on his desk and slid the memo he had just written into it. Beneath the memo were e-mails from Vance and Blake Conrad, chairman of the board’s Risk Committee, formally requesting an inquiry into the fire. The documents were critical to preserving the confidentiality of the investigation. As long as Cameron was rendering legal advice, not business advice, all of his communications within the company were privileged. Yet the distinction between the two was notoriously shifty. It was his job to make sure that anything that went into the “Black File”—board’s eyes only—stayed there.

He donned his suit jacket, stored the folder in his filing cabinet, and locked the drawer with a key only he and Blake Conrad possessed. Then he headed toward the door, briefcase in hand. Behind him, the shadows of dusk stretched across the rooftops of Washington, and lights winked on in buildings and monuments.

In the hallway, he spoke to his secretary, Linda. “I’m headed to the conference room. Please forward all calls to Anderson.”

He walked briskly down the hallway, past the wood-paneled executive

lounge with its Pellegrino-stocked refrigerator and Italian Nespresso machine, past framed portraits of Hank, Dee Dee, and Bobby Carter and the two CEOs who had succeeded them—Rick Mason and Vance Lawson—and entered the C-suite conference room, the site of executive strategy sessions and meetings of the board. The room had three predominant features: a black granite table with twelve high-backed chairs, a wall of windows, and a massive flat-screen television. Two people were seated at the table—Declan Mays, director of global compliance, and Manny Singh, Presto's director of sourcing for South Asia.

Cameron dropped his briefcase in front of them and then switched on the TV, tuning in to CNN. "This is what millions of Americans are going to be watching tonight," he said just as the network cut from Wolf Blitzer's face to live footage of the Presto Tower. "As you can see, we are the lead story. It's our job to find out why."

He took a seat and turned up the volume. Blitzer was in front of the camera again, introducing Karen Hwang, assistant director of the Global Alliance for Worker Rights in San Francisco, and Beatrice Walker, a spokeswoman for the US Chamber of Commerce.

"Karen," said Blitzer, "let's start with you. Seven months ago, the collapse at Rana Plaza claimed the lives of more than eleven hundred Bangladeshi garment workers. Now a garment factory in Bangladesh is on fire. We've seen gruesome footage of bodies on the ground, including a photo of a young girl that everybody's talking about. We don't have a lot of details yet, but I have to ask: Why are factory disasters like this continuing to happen?"

"Unfortunately, Wolf," said Hwang, "this tragedy was entirely preventable. The global market for consumer goods—clothing, toys, electronics, et cetera—is fueled by a system of labor that is, in many cases, as exploitative as the sweatshops that existed in this country at the time of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire a century ago. The primary driver of this exploitation is economic. Corporations like Presto thrive in environments where labor protections don't exist. They go wherever they can get the lowest possible price."

"That's quite an indictment," Blitzer said. "Beatrice, you represent the business community. What's your response?"

"Despite Ms. Hwang's unflattering portrayal," Walker replied, "US companies care deeply about worker rights. Many of our members participate in initiatives like the Fair Labor Association that monitor factory compliance with international labor standards. After the disaster at Rana Plaza, apparel brands in North America and Europe formed the Alliance and the Accord, which are

currently inspecting all registered factories in Bangladesh. The brands have pledged millions of dollars toward improvements. This fire is a terrible tragedy. Our hearts go out to the victims and their families. But to lay the blame at the feet of American business is offensive.”

Cameron hit the Mute button. “Obviously Ms. Hwang has a twisted conception of what we do every day, but she’s far from alone. That’s why this inquiry is so important. Declan, when we spoke earlier, you said we moved Millennium Fashions to our Red List six months ago. Do you have the last factory audit report?”

“Right here,” Declan replied, pushing a stack of paper across the table. Born in Dublin and raised in New York, Mays had the tenacity of a bulldog and a star-studded CV—economics at Cornell and Oxford, law at Georgetown, and a decade in practice as a compliance specialist at Cameron’s old law firm, Slade & Barrett. He was the first person Cameron had hired after moving to Presto. When it came to ferreting out the truth, no one was more effective.

After scanning the audit report, Cameron could barely contain his indignation. “Three fire extinguishers for a thousand workers. Exposed wiring. Aging breaker box. Generators in a storeroom of flammables. How did we ever authorize this factory in the first place?”

“We didn’t know how bad it was,” Declan said, his voice laced with disquiet. “The audit company we used before was compromised.”

“You mean corrupt.”

“We couldn’t prove it, but we think so. The new audit company is more expensive but beyond reproach. As soon as we got their findings, we put Millennium on the Red List.”

“And you communicated that to our sourcing folks in Dhaka?”

Declan nodded. “We informed them immediately.”

Cameron tossed the report on the table. “So here’s the fifty-million-dollar question—and I mean that literally. The negative publicity alone is going to cost us that much in sales. What were our pants doing at Millennium last night? Manny, tell me about the order.”

Singh folded his hands. “It’s nothing unusual,” he replied. “A hundred and twenty thousand pieces. Six-week turnaround time. Our supplier is Rahmani Apparel—one of the best in Bangladesh. The shipment is due at the harbor in Chittagong in three days.”

Cameron stared at Manny until the sourcing executive began to fidget. A veteran of the retail industry and the direct hire of Rebecca Sinclair, Presto’s

senior vice president of sourcing, Singh was incontrovertibly competent but accustomed to deference. It was the mien of his department. Sourcing was Presto's skunk works. As long as each new product line appeared in stores at the price point set by the costing analysts, no one looked behind the veil.

Cameron opened his briefcase and took out the picture of the girl, which he had printed on photo paper. He slid it toward Manny. "Take a good look at her. We don't know if she's dead or alive. What we know is that she's wearing our pants—*kids'* pants, mind you—like a mask. Are you telling me our clothes were not at Millennium?"

Singh looked suddenly nervous. "I'm not saying that. I can't explain it."

"You were responsible for the placement of the order, were you not?"

"Our Dhaka office chose the supplier. It was Rahmani Apparel. I signed off on it."

Cameron nodded. "At last, a semblance of transparency. Keep going. Connect the dots. Did Rahmani subcontract the order to Millennium?"

Singh shrugged. "I don't know. It's four in the morning over there."

Cameron allowed his displeasure to show. "You can't be serious. A factory is burning, people are dying, our company is getting trashed in the international press, and you're concerned about somebody's sleep? Get them out of bed."

Singh looked at Cameron in astonishment. "Now?"

Cameron shook his head, exasperated. "No, tomorrow. You can use the phone over there. Or you can go back to your office. Just get me an answer."

Singh leaped to his feet. "I'll be back in a few," he said, then disappeared out the door.

"That was pleasant," Cameron said evenly, retrieving the photograph without looking at the girl's bloodstained face. He couldn't handle the despair it evoked in him, not in the midst of a crisis. A year and a half he had trained his mind to forget. But Olivia was always there, lying beside him in the darkness of the roadway, her lips unmoving, concealing the scream that never came. *Let her go*, he commanded himself. *You can't change what happened.*

He turned back to Declan. "You know how these things work. Explain it to me."

"You said it yourself," Declan answered. "Rahmani subcontracted to Millennium. Or they subcontracted to another factory that subcontracted to Millennium. It's hard to turn around a large order in six weeks. Rahmani might not have had capacity for it. Or maybe they ran into delays. Manufacturing is dynamic. We don't see most of it."

“But Rahmani signed our Code of Conduct,” Cameron objected. “All sub-contracting has to be approved by us or they’re in breach.”

Declan leaned forward in his chair. “Without Manny here, I’ll be frank. As long as our supplier gets the shipment to the port in Chittagong on time, nobody in sourcing really cares how it gets done. The Code of Conduct is window dressing.”

Cameron’s studied calm began to slip. “Why have I never heard this before?”

“Because I can’t prove it,” Declan said simply.

Cameron took a moment to think. The Code of Conduct was an addendum attached to Presto’s supplier contracts—all twenty-two thousand of them around the world—that set forth requirements relating to factory safety, worker rights, environmental protection, corruption, and financial integrity. Every retail company had one, but Presto’s was more thorough than most. Cameron had written it himself. Occasionally, suppliers were found in breach. That was why Presto conducted factory audits twice a year—to enforce compliance. But the notion that Presto’s own sourcing team treated the code dismissively left him profoundly unsettled.

“Has a supplier ever ignored the Red List before?” he asked.

Declan cleared his throat. “I’ve heard rumors, but again, I have no proof.”

Cameron turned toward the television and watched as firefighters shot streams of water into the conflagration. Against his better judgment, he pictured the girl again, imagined her terror as she chose gravity over flames. He knew what fear felt like on the meridian between life and death. For a vanishing moment, he was there again with Olivia as shadows and metal twisted around them. He closed his eyes and banished the memory.

“So what you’re telling me is that Millennium is not alone,” he said. “There are other high-risk factories out there making our products without our knowledge.”

Declan looked at him gravely. “I don’t know how many, but yes.”

Manny reappeared at the door, a line of sweat on his brow. “I spoke to our office director in Dhaka. He was horrified. He told me the order is with Rahmani, not Millennium. He promised to look into it right away.”

Cameron looked Singh in the eye, thinking, *Why am I not reassured?* An idea came to him then. It was highly unconventional, but the situation was dire. “I’m starting to believe he may need some additional motivation.”

Manny regarded him in confusion. “What do you mean?”

When Cameron made the decision, he knew it was right. “Go home and get packed, both of you. We leave for Bangladesh in the morning.”

CHAPTER THREE

THE GANGPLANK MARINA

WASHINGTON, DC

NOVEMBER 6, 2013

6:17 A.M.

Candlelight flickered on the tablecloth, diamonds danced on her fingers, but Cameron saw only dismay in Olivia's eyes. His phone was in his hands, the screen bright with Vance's words, anxiety and apology etched upon the dreamscape of his memory. "Just got off the phone with Red. Ravenswood acquired a 4.9% stake right before close. Confirms the rumors. Getting crisis team together at 8. Need you there. Sorry for the timing. Tell Olivia I'll make it up to her." Cameron didn't want to go, but Vance's orders were clear. He suggested to Olivia that she stay through the weekend and take the train home. But he knew she wouldn't do it. She didn't want to spend her birthday alone. *It's time*, he heard her whisper, later on. He felt her skin beneath the covers, her warmth all around him. He hated the thought of leaving. He wanted to stay with her forever. But she insisted. *It's time to go*, she whispered again, a touch louder. *Cameron—*

His eyes shot open in the darkness, and he breathed to steady his racing heart. For an instant he thought he was back in their old apartment, hearing Grayson, one of Olivia's Russian Blue cats, scratching at his post. But then he realized it was water sloshing beneath the hull of his sailboat. The apartment was gone—he'd sold it almost a year ago. Grayson and his sister, Bella, were with his parents in Boston. He was living on the *Breakwater*, his custom-built yacht, the only artifact from his previous life that didn't feel haunted. Olivia had never enjoyed sailing. It was Vance who went with him in search of blue water.

He looked at his watch and climbed out of bed. After a quick shower, he ate a bowl of granola in the galley, dressed in a navy suit and red tie, and then grabbed his suitcase and went topside, locking the companionway door behind him. He had never quite gotten used to it, living at the marina. It felt transitory, impermanent, but that was the way of things now. Olivia had been his polestar. When she died, his world had spun like a gyre and never stopped.

He left a note for the harbormaster and drove his Lincoln sedan out of the lot. He made it to Reagan airport in eight minutes. The Gulfstream G550 was waiting for him on the tarmac, bronzed by the sunrise. Declan Mays and Manny Singh met him in the hangar and walked with him to the plane. Inside the oak-paneled cabin, they took seats on leather chairs near to the flat-screen television. The flight attendant, Bridget, offered them coffee or espresso. Cameron ordered a cappuccino, along with sparkling water, and then tuned the television to CNN.

The fire was again the lead story. Daylight in Bangladesh had brought with it footage of the burned-out factory and the lifeless bodies that surrounded it. But there were no new close-ups—nothing like the picture of the girl. According to reporters on the ground, the factory owner had barred the gates after the fire-fighters brought the blaze under control. With limited information, death toll estimates were ranging wildly.

“Anything new from Dhaka?” Cameron asked Manny as the plane began to taxi.

The sourcing executive gave him an impervious look. “Nothing yet.”

Cameron turned to Declan. “Do you have the supplier list?”

“Here,” Declan replied, handing him an expandable folder.

Inside was a printout showing every Bangladeshi factory that Presto had ever authorized to make clothes for its three brands—Piccola, its kids’ line; Burano, its adult and activewear line; and Porto Bari, its premium line of business and resort wear. The list contained over twelve hundred suppliers and was organized into five categories in order of preference—Gold, Silver, Green, Yellow, and Red. Only a few were Gold and Silver; the majority were Green and Yellow.

Cameron flipped to the Red List at the back. The criteria for banning a factory were stringent. The transgressions had to be egregious—either a threat to the life or health of workers or a serious infraction that remained uncorrected after a second audit. He was surprised to find more than ninety companies on the list. Almost all were small outfits, with fewer than 300 workers. Millennium was an outlier with 942.

“Prepare for takeoff, folks,” said the captain over the intercom.

Cameron sat back in his chair as the Gulfstream accelerated down the runway. It took flight gracefully and banked east toward the rising sun. As soon as they left DC airspace, the pilot slowed their ascent, allowing Bridget to prepare breakfast. Cameron returned to the supplier list, scanning the columns of data—names of managers, physical addresses, years in business, number of lines and capacities, audit history, and style specialty. Most of the factories on the Red List made “basic” clothing—T-shirts, polo shirts, shorts, and pants. And most, Cameron noticed, had been added in the past six months, likely the result of the new auditing firm.

“Mr. Alexander?” Bridget said, holding a tray of scrambled eggs, bratwurst, and croissants. “Would you like me to put this on the table?”

“That’s fine,” he said distractedly. An idea was taking shape in his head. He flipped backward in the report and found Rahmani Apparel. His suspicions were confirmed.

“Line capacity,” he said, looking at Declan, then Manny. “We know how many pieces every factory can make each month. Correct?”

“Of course,” Manny replied. “It’s critical to our decision making. We not only know their capacity, we get daily updates about how it’s being allocated.”

“And if memory serves,” Cameron went on, “our policy is to book no more than 30 to 40 percent of a factory’s capacity, even with our best suppliers.”

Manny nodded. “Sometimes we push the limit, but I’ve never gone higher than forty.”

“Then explain this to me,” Cameron said. “Rahmani has a monthly capacity of one hundred fifty thousand pieces. The Piccola order required them to make that amount in six weeks. Unless we booked two-thirds of their capacity, they *had* to get help from someone else.”

Manny answered deliberately. “With large orders, we anticipate subcontracting. But we expect our suppliers to handle it properly, with all the necessary permissions, including ours.”

“What other permissions are there?”

Manny glanced at the table where Bridget had placed their trays. “Can we continue this over breakfast? Our food is getting cold.”

Irritated, Cameron almost rejoined, *You can eat when I’m finished with you*. Instead, he nodded politely and moved the conversation to the table.

After a few bites, Manny answered his question. “There are four thousand factories registered with the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, or BGMEA. Many more are unregistered, but we don’t work with

them. When a registered factory subcontracts to another registered factory, the BGMEA issues a license, signed by both factories. We require our suppliers to provide us a copy of that license for every subcontract.”

Cameron ate a slice of bratwurst. “So if Rahmani subcontracted our order to Millennium, they had to get a license. That means there’s a record of it somewhere.”

“Not necessarily,” Declan quipped, even as Manny said, “Yes.”

Cameron pointed at Declan. “You first.”

“Manny is technically correct,” Declan said, “but this is Bangladesh. A lot of suppliers don’t have the patience for formalities. Here’s an illustration. Our supplier falls behind on an order. He doesn’t want us to know because it will reflect poorly on him, and we might not give him our next order. So he calls a friend with extra capacity and does a deal over the phone. The friend sends a truck for the materials and returns the finished garments. Or the friend might call another friend—a *third* factory—and send part of the order—say, the finishing work—to him. Our supplier doesn’t know about the third factory, and we don’t know about any of it.”

Cameron set his fork down, his stomach puckering. *What am I walking into?* “Manny,” he said quietly. “Tell me this isn’t the core of our business.”

“It isn’t,” Manny replied, a little too quickly. “Look, informal subcontracting happens. But we monitor our suppliers carefully. There isn’t room for orders to fall through the cracks.”

Declan shook his head. “I have a fifteen-year-old daughter. What she does and what she tells me afterward are often worlds apart. Our suppliers are the same. They’re in a cutthroat business. They do what they have to do to make a buck, and they tell us what we want to hear.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Manny shot back. “You get their audit reports twice a year. We get e-mails from them every morning.”

Declan smiled in a subtle way. “I have back channels. I know more than you think.”

Manny stared at his plate, his dark eyes smoldering. Cameron watched him, feeling little sympathy. The people at the pinnacle of Presto’s sourcing apparatus were paid handsomely, for they were the rainmakers, the beating heart at the profit center of the firm. As long as they did their job, Cameron had no qualm with it. But this kind of lapse was inexcusable.

And it was only the beginning. He was certain of it.

CHAPTER FOUR

SHAHJALAL INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

DHAKA, BANGLADESH

NOVEMBER 7, 2013

10:18 A.M.

The sky over Dhaka was washed out like parchment, the horizon soot-stained as if singed by flame. Cameron looked out the window as the Gulfstream made its final approach. The city was at once dense and sprawling, a vast concatenation of buildings heaped upon one another between rivers brown with silt and streets clogged with vehicles and pedestrians. They landed with barely a bump and taxied to a remote spot on the tarmac. Two SUVs were waiting for them—one marked with the name of the airport authority and the other an unmarked black Mercedes. The copilot lowered the steps and admitted a customs official who stamped their passports, issued them visas, and welcomed them to the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

Cameron stifled a yawn and collected his briefcase. They had been in transit for sixteen and a half hours. He had slept off and on and taken anti-jet lag pills, trying to adjust to the new time zone in advance. But the shock was inevitable. It was midnight in DC. Here the sun was at its zenith. He felt as if his brain had been tumbled in a washing machine.

He moved toward the exit and descended the steps into the sweltering heat, Manny and Declan at his heels. The moist tropical air surrounded him like water, and his first breath came out like a cough. A Bangladeshi man in a business suit stood beside the rear door of the Mercedes. He gave Cameron a vigorous handshake.

“Welcome, Mr. Alexander. I am Shelim Madani, director of the Dhaka office.” He opened the door and gestured to the leather interior of the vehicle. “Please, it is cooler inside.”

After they climbed in, Shelim took the wheel and tore across the tarmac at a fierce clip, rounding an aircraft hangar and merging onto a side road.

“The Radisson Blu is not far,” Shelim said, his accent blending the lilt of Bengali with something starchier—perhaps a bit of Britain. “You can check in, and then we can talk in the Business Class Lounge. It’s very private.”

Cameron shook his head. “I want to go to our office.”

“There are reporters there,” Shelim objected gently. “No one goes in or out without being questioned. Also, traffic is bad in the city. It would take us at least an hour to get there.”

As soon as he said it, they ran into congestion at the airport roundabout. Cameron gazed out the window at the deadlock of cars, trucks, buses, and rickshaws all measuring progress in inches. The honking was deafening. “How far away is the Rahmani Apparel factory?”

Shelim glanced over his shoulder in confusion. “Rahmani?”

“Our supplier for the Piccola pants.”

Shelim’s voice took on a perceptible edge. “It would be two hours by car or twenty minutes by helicopter. But I would need to make arrangements.”

Cameron watched Shelim’s face carefully. “Does the hotel have a landing pad?”

Shelim tightened his grip on the wheel. “There is a field nearby.”

“Excellent,” Cameron said. “Summon the chopper. We’ll eat while we wait.”

They ordered room service in Cameron’s suite and took seats in the living area. Apart from the bleating of horns on the street and the faint odor of something burning seeping through the seal around the window, they could have been in any city in the world. The “business bubble,” Cameron called it whenever he found himself wishing for a more authentic cultural experience. Today, however, he didn’t care. He was here for answers, nothing more.

“Tell me how the Millennium order came about,” he said to Shelim.

The office director glanced at Manny Singh. “We placed it in late August, but there was a modification at the last minute. Our designers in Hong Kong were not satisfied with Rahmani’s sample. The factory asked for an extension,

but we could not grant it. The pants are part of our holiday collection. Rahmani agreed and made adjustments to its line schedule.”

Cameron scribbled on his notepad. “You cut the turnaround time by half. That’s a lot of pressure to put on a supplier.”

“They are used to it,” Shelim said with a shrug. “Changes happen regularly.”

“I looked at the data. Rahmani didn’t have capacity to fulfill the order themselves. They had to subcontract part of it.”

Shelim nodded. “They sent sixty thousand pieces to Freedom 71. I authorized it.”

“Was that by e-mail?”

Shelim shook his head. “We do business on the phone.”

“I assume you have a record of the license from the BGMEA?”

“The license is on file.”

Cameron took a moment to think of his next question. Internal interviews were a delicate dance—neither adversarial nor friendly. His instinct as a lawyer was to treat them like a deposition, but unless an employee was accused of wrongdoing, that was a mistake. He had to massage the truth out of Shelim, convince him that it was in his interest to be transparent.

“When was the last time you spoke with Rahmani? Before the fire, I mean.”

Shelim glanced up at the ceiling. “I called the general manager on Sunday. He confirmed with his production manager that the order was on schedule.”

“Did you have a conversation like that with the other factory—Freedom 71?”

Shelim shook his head. “Rahmani is our contractor. I deal only with them.”

“What about quality control?”

As soon as Cameron spoke the words, he knew he had touched a nerve. Shelim blinked and looked down at the floor, then turned to Manny as if searching for cover. The sequence happened in less than a second, but Cameron missed none of it. Years ago, when he was a junior partner at Slade & Barrett looking for a way to distinguish himself, he had taken lessons from a deception expert. In time, most people had become an open book to him.

When Shelim replied, his words were measured. “There is an inspection before the order ships to the port. My quality-control people handle that.”

There’s something you’re not telling me, Cameron thought. “What happens if the order fails the inspection?”

“We open random boxes,” Shelim explained. “If we find too many issues, we can reject the whole lot. But Rahmani is a Gold supplier. We’ve never had problems with them.”

"I take it you do the same with subcontracting factories?"

Again, Shelim's eyes shifted ever so briefly to Manny. "We inspect everything. Our suppliers ship only the highest-quality merchandise."

Another deflection, Cameron thought. He considered asking a follow-up question but decided to reserve it until he spoke with Rahmani. "Let's talk about Millennium. They're banned from our supplier list, but somehow they received a portion of our order. Who sent it to them?"

Shelim tensed visibly. "I don't know. Rahmani doesn't know. It is a mystery."

That much was clearly a lie. "Have you spoken to Freedom 71 since the fire?"

"No," Shelim said, rubbing his hands together. "Only Rahmani."

Cameron gave the office director an incredulous look. "You didn't think it would be valuable to find out if they subcontracted the order to Millennium?"

"Rahmani is our contractor," Shelim repeated. "They spoke to Freedom 71. No one knows how the order found its way to Millennium."

In his younger days, Cameron might have allowed his rage to slip, but he held his feelings in check. "What about the apparel association? Did you ask them whether Rahmani or Freedom 71 had obtained a license to subcontract to Millennium?"

Shelim's eyes widened a fraction. "I did not. I trust Rahmani."

Or you want them to cover for you, Cameron thought. Just then, he heard a knock at the door. Declan opened it, and a male attendant wheeled in lunch on silver trays.

"Is the helicopter on its way?" Cameron asked Shelim.

The office director glanced at his wristwatch. "It will be here in twenty minutes."

"Good," Cameron said. "We'll see if your faith in Rahmani is merited."

CHAPTER FIVE

RAHMANI APPAREL, LTD.

NARAYANGANJ DISTRICT, DHAKA, BANGLADESH

NOVEMBER 7, 2013

2:01 P.M.

Even from the height of five hundred feet, the Rahmani factory was immense. There were at least a dozen buildings scattered around the grounds, three of which were as cavernous as airport hangars. The roads were all paved and marked with centerlines. There were trees in abundance and park-like spaces with lush grass, footpaths, and benches. The largest building, connected by skybridges to its two smaller cousins, had a tower encased in blue glass with a helipad on the roof. And off to the side was an indigo-colored pool, churning like a vat of butter.

“Is that a water treatment facility?” Cameron asked Shelim over the whirl of the blades. It was widely acknowledged in the industry—but not so widely publicized—that the production of textiles was one of the most prolific sources of water pollution in the world.

Shelim nodded. “It’s state of the art. After they wash their jeans, the water is scrubbed and then recycled. Only a quarter of it goes back into the river.”

When the helicopter settled onto the landing area, an aircrewman escorted Cameron and his entourage across the sunbaked helipad to a stairwell that led to a conference room lined with windows. Two Bangladeshi men dressed in European suits were waiting for them.

“Mr. Alexander,” said the older one, a heavysset man with graying hair and

penetrating eyes. "I am Habib Khan, owner of Rahmani Apparel. This is Khaled Chowdhury, my GM. I hope your flight was comfortable."

After the obligatory pleasantries, they sat down at a round table. A young woman entered the room with a tray with teacups and sugar cookies.

"*Cha*," Habib explained as the woman distributed the snacks. "In India, it is chai."

Cameron took a sip of the tea, and it nearly scalded his tongue.

"Ah," Habib said with a smile, "you must allow it to cool a bit." Then in an instant, his mercurial eyes grew sad. "We are all deeply troubled by the tragedy unfolding at the Millennium Fashions factory. We are especially troubled because it appears that part of the order you entrusted to us was diverted there without our knowledge. We have spoken to our subcontractor, Freedom 71, and they have yet to provide us with a satisfactory explanation. I can assure you that if we do not receive one, we will cease doing business with them."

Cameron folded his hands on the table and returned Habib's gaze. In only a handful of minutes, he had already made a number of critical observations about the owner. He was a man in control of his emotions, which made him a formidable adversary. But he wasn't immune to the involuntary movements of face and body that revealed hidden wells of deception. Cameron had caught one of them when he spoke the word *Millennium*. It was a small thing, but it was there—a shrug of the shoulder. And it gave Cameron all the confidence he needed.

"You're lying to me," he said simply and watched Habib's facade crumble. The owner broke eye contact with Cameron and glanced at Khaled, struggling to recover his poise.

"Mr. Alexander," he said, "our relationship with Presto goes back two decades. We have never missed an order. We have invested millions in updating our facilities to keep your business. Your accusation is . . . *unprecedented*."

In a glance, Cameron saw Declan's intensity, Shelim's discomfort, and Manny's bewilderment. "That may be," he replied, keeping his face impassive. "But the only thing that matters right now is the truth. The clock is ticking."

Habib stared back at him, and his mouth began to twitch.

Cameron counted to ten, then stood abruptly. "That's fine. I'll go to the apparel association and pull all the licenses they've issued to you in the past six months. Then I'll find someone from Millennium—someone who's still alive—to talk to me about our order history. When all is said and done, I doubt Presto will order from you again."

“No.” Habib’s objection came out almost like a bark. He found his footing quickly. “That will not be necessary. Perhaps—if you are not in a hurry—I could give you a tour of the factory. I know Khaled and Shelim have business to discuss. The others can stay with them.”

Cameron made a show of pondering this, but he had already made his decision. He glanced at Shelim again and saw the lines of apprehension on his forehead. “I’d like that,” he said and followed Habib out the door.



The Rahmani factory was a paragon of efficiency, as intelligently managed as it was maintained. The sewing floors were spotless, brightly lit, and well ventilated. The stations were neither cramped nor cluttered with stray fabric. The workers—mostly young women—were focused on their tasks, their supervisors strolling among them, doling out instructions. A few sewing operators looked up when Cameron and Habib walked past, but only briefly.

“The last pieces of your order,” Habib said, holding up a pair of nearly finished Piccola pants. “They will be packaged tonight and shipped tomorrow to the port.”

Cameron took the pants in his hands and rubbed the spandex fabric between his thumb and forefinger, imagining mothers across America dressing their six-year-olds in them for Christmas. *Of all the things to die for*, he thought.

After the sewing areas, Habib led him across the cutting floor, a vast open space with tables piled high with bolts of fabric. Around the perimeter of each table, eight workers—all young men—smoothed out wrinkles in the fabric with combs while cutters guided saws along cardboard patterns, creating one hundred pieces at a time.

“As you can see, safety is a top priority,” Habib explained, pointing out a shiny fire extinguisher beside a marked exit door. “This building was built in accordance with the highest international standards. What happened at Millennium and Rana Plaza will never happen here.”

Next, Habib showed Cameron the printing floor, where an array of machines deposited ink on T-shirts—three primary colors blended together into images and words. Then came the embroidery floor, where workers were stitching floral patterns onto children’s dresses using machines that resembled the control panels on the starship *Enterprise*.

Eventually they entered a glass-enclosed room with a table and chairs and

a large display of finished garments on hangers, illuminated by halogen bulbs. A sign on the door read PRESTO.

"This is where your quality-control people conduct inspections," Habib said. "They will be here tonight and tomorrow to check the Piccola shipment." He gestured to a chair. "Please, sit down. I will tell you what you want to know."

Cameron took a seat and calmly folded his hands on the table, waiting for Habib to make the next move. The owner sat down too, shifting his weight to get comfortable. Beneath the dazzling lights, Habib's eyes were limpid, his forehead dotted with perspiration.

"I have no wish to deceive you," Habib began. "But your question presents me with a dilemma. We used to be a profitable company. Now we are struggling. The water treatment facility you saw on the flight in? That was funded by my real estate ventures. Our competitors abroad are undercutting us. Many factories in China are vertically integrated, their lead times down to thirty days. Vietnam has better technology. Indonesia and Cambodia have cheaper labor. Buyers—including your people at Presto—are demanding lower prices and faster turnarounds, or they will go elsewhere. We have no choice but to agree and then find a way to deliver."

Habib adjusted himself again. "When I received your last-minute changes, I got help from Freedom 71. But they ran into problems and had to cancel half the shipment. I had two weeks to make thirty thousand pieces and no capacity in my lines. So I did what I have done for years. I called Millennium. They told me they could do it for a very reasonable price. I did not ask how. I have never asked how. Now I am beginning to see. Before I sent the materials along, I made another call—to Shelim. I explained the situation and told him Millennium could finish the order. He made only one request—that I deliver the pants to the port on time."

Cameron sat perfectly still, listening to the sounds of the factory filtering through the glass. He thought of Vance at his desk fielding frantic calls from investors, Kristin Raymond in the war room fending off press inquiries, and traders at the New York Stock Exchange taking sell orders for Presto stock. The company's share price had tumbled 12 percent in two days. It was not in free fall, but it would be if the media ever learned what Habib had just said.

"Millennium is no longer on our authorized list of suppliers," Cameron said slowly.

"That is why I called Shelim," Habib replied, his breathing laborious now. "Otherwise I would have gone straight to the BGMEA for the license."

“Has our office ever given you permission to ignore the Red List before?”

Habib blinked, his face awash with guilt. “Shelim is a good man. He has a family. I do not wish to make trouble for him.”

“Shelim is not your concern. I need an answer.”

At last Habib nodded. “The Red List does not matter. Only 98 percent on-time delivery.”

Cameron touched his wedding ring, drawing strength from the cool metal on his skin, the band without beginning or end, unbroken despite Olivia’s death. His eyes bored into Habib. “In the past six months, how many of our orders have you subcontracted to Millennium?”

Habib swallowed visibly. “I don’t know the dates. But there have been others.”

When Cameron heard the owner’s words, he came within a hairsbreadth of revealing the shock that twisted his gut. Presto had eleven hundred authorized apparel suppliers in Bangladesh. If Shelim had given Habib carte blanche to keep the orders flowing, he had almost certainly done the same for other suppliers. It was a compliance breach of staggering proportions. Yet the fire and the media spotlight bound Cameron’s hands. He could neither terminate Rahmani Apparel nor relieve Shelim of his duties. For the time being, at least, he needed to keep them close and quiet.

“This practice ends today,” he said. “I hope that goes without saying.”

The owner nodded again, this time vigorously.

Cameron stood up and walked to the display case, running his hand along the rack. Rahmani’s wares ranged from Burano T-shirts and athletic shorts to Porto Bari winter dresses and tops. The designs were unexceptional, but the workmanship and fabrics were two or three cuts above what other discounters offered.

He turned around and saw Habib watching him intently. “I have another question. When you subcontract part of an order, how is quality control handled?”

“That depends,” Habib replied. “When we have time, we bring all the pieces from the order together so your people can do an inspection here. When time is short, they inspect the pieces at the subcontracting factory.”

Cameron felt suddenly queasy. The executive in him did not want to know the answer to the next question, but the lawyer had to ask. “With the pants you sent to Millennium, did any of our people ever visit that factory?”

Habib held out his hands as if the truth were self-evident. “I spoke to Millennium the afternoon before the fire. Your people were there.”

CHAPTER SIX

IZUMI RESTAURANT
DHAKA, BANGLADESH
NOVEMBER 7, 2013
8:15 P.M.

The sushi was a knockout, as elegant in form and delicate in flavor as anything Cameron had tasted in the United States. Shelim had suggested the place. It was called Izumi, in the Gulshan neighborhood of Dhaka, within sight of Presto's office but far enough away to avoid the media blitzkrieg. Cameron had witnessed the circus from behind the tinted windows of the Mercedes SUV. Television vans were still encamped outside the entrance, reporters congregating on sidewalks, skulking in vehicles, and swarming like pack wolves when anyone appeared at the front door. Their questions and accusations had so rattled the staff that Shelim had shuttered the building until further notice, ordering everyone to work from home.

The office director was the only other person dining with Cameron. They were seated in a quiet corner of the restaurant, where no one could eavesdrop on their conversation. Between them stood a wooden table, an accent candle, glasses of water—not wine, as it was against Bangladeshi law—and plates decorated by the chef with rainbow-colored works of gastronomic art. It felt strange, almost profane, to ambush a man at such an establishment. But that was exactly what Cameron intended to do.

After his visit to the Rahmani factory, he had dispatched Manny Singh and Declan Mays to an evening of personal revelry—whatever it was that they did

with an expense account in a foreign country—and invited Shelim to a meal, pretending to be interested in developing a deeper understanding of the local sourcing process. In truth, he had lied to everyone. Manny and Declan thought that Habib had confessed to subcontracting to Millennium without permission and that Cameron had granted him forbearance, reasoning that the damage was done and the shipment was too important to delay. Cameron had spun the deception deftly, leaving Declan stewing in indignation and giving Manny cause for secret relief that the inquiry would go no further. Declan would forgive him as soon as he learned the truth, but Manny needed to remain in the dark. Cameron had a hunch that the rot in the sourcing system went deeper than Shelim.

“Habib is running an impressive operation,” Cameron said, squeezing a piece of maguro tuna between his chopsticks. “It’s no wonder Rahmani is a Gold supplier.”

“He is one of our most trusted allies in Bangladesh,” Shelim replied. “But I am concerned about the way he handled this order. It is not like him to ignore protocol.”

Cameron regarded Shelim in the soft light, weighing whether to name his prevarication openly or lure him into a trap. “I found that peculiar too. He told me that you are the sort of buyer who understands the pressures he faces. He said you’ve always been accommodating.”

Shelim’s eyes darted to the table, then refocused on Cameron. He crafted his response with care. “Our interests are aligned. If our suppliers do not produce in the time frame and at the price points we require, we miss our targets, and our customers suffer.”

You don’t give a damn about our customers, Cameron mused. *But I bet the targets keep you awake at night.* “It must be difficult to keep everyone happy. I imagine many of your suppliers are not accustomed to Western production standards. The cultural gap is wide.”

Shelim laughed and relaxed a bit. “That is an understatement. We are required to—how do you say?—play both sides of the fence. But in the end, we hold all the cards. Without our orders, our suppliers cannot stay in business.”

Cameron took a moment to savor his sashimi. Then he said, “Is it true that your sourcing benchmark is 98 percent on-time delivery? That is an extraordinarily thin margin.”

“Yes,” Shelim affirmed, dropping his guard further. “It is the same for all Presto suppliers across the world.”

Cameron smiled thinly. “But it isn’t just our suppliers that have to meet that standard. It is my understanding that your office’s performance is judged on that basis. That must be a great burden for you to carry.”

Shelim looked nonplussed, his chopsticks hovering in midair. “It is not a burden. It is our job. If we fail to deliver, our customers have nothing to buy.”

Cameron tilted his head inquisitively. “Have you ever been to one of our stores?”

Shelim’s eyes narrowed a touch. He clearly had no idea where Cameron was taking the conversation. “I have not. But I have always wanted to visit one.”

Cameron nodded, his expression nonchalant. “The biggest is two hundred thousand square feet. More than a hundred thousand items on the shelves. A bonanza of consumerism.”

Shelim stared back at him, his brow furrowed.

“If Rahmani had missed its delivery deadline,” Cameron went on, “our customers never would have noticed. They have more choices than they know what to do with.”

Shelim set his chopsticks down. “I’m not sure what you are saying.”

Cameron took another casual bite. “What I’m saying is this: The 98 percent target is not for our customers. It is for our *investors*. It is about earnings, profits, market share, stock price—all of the things that we executives worry about. And our worry at headquarters becomes your worry here, and your worry becomes our suppliers’ worry. So all of us do what we have to do to keep everyone happy.”

Shelim’s gaze fell to the table. He was smart enough to know that a blow was coming, but he couldn’t see it to defend himself.

“The thing is,” Cameron continued, “no one is happy right now. Our investors are unhappy. Our customers are unhappy. My senior executive team is unhappy. Because people died making our clothes. Because our pants are being plastered all over the world—on televisions, computers, mobile devices—in a photograph that will live in infamy.”

Cameron took a breath, and Shelim began to squirm. “So now the discussion has turned from profits to losses, from trading on our positive brand image and generating historic fourth-quarter sales, to piecing together the shards of our corporate dignity and shoring up investor confidence before our market cap falls off a cliff. I have to tell you, it’s not pretty.”

“It is a disaster for all of us,” Shelim said, his voice starting to crack. “What Habib did is inexcusable. If you would like, I will cancel all Rahmani orders, terminate the relationship.”

Cameron shook his head slowly. "That would do no good. As I said, the damage is done. What we need now is not recrimination but reform." He paused, the boom in his hands. "I need to know why you authorized Habib to subcontract to Millennium in contravention of the Red List, not just this time, but multiple times. Before you answer, beware. Your job is on the line."

In an instant, Shelim's fear became a palpable thing. He sat totally still, eyes locked with Cameron, as if his body were imprisoned in a block of ice. "I didn't do it on my own authority," he said in a voice just above a whisper.

And there it was, a morsel of the purest truth. "Go on," Cameron said gently.

Shelim hesitated at the water's edge, the Rubicon lapping against his toes. Cameron watched as he struggled, weighing the compromise and the consequences that would follow. But he really had no choice. Survival required betrayal.

"Manny," he rasped at last.

For a moment, Cameron felt the thrill of vindication. Then the moment passed, and vindication turned into anger. "What did he tell you?"

Shelim fingered his napkin. "He told me not to worry, to do whatever it took to ensure the orders reached the port on time."

"When?" Cameron pressed.

"When the new Red List was published, after the last round of audits," Shelim said. "We were in Bangkok at a sourcing meeting. I expressed concern that some of the banned factories were critical subcontracting partners. He told me the people in compliance didn't understand our business. He said they were no better than the regulators."

Cameron folded his hands in his lap, his expression unflappable despite his fury. He was well acquainted with the enmity between sourcing and compliance. But in his experience, the contest had always remained a gentleman's game, a cold war of wits and politesse, not open defiance of company policy.

"How many red-listed factories have you used in the past six months?" he inquired.

Shelim hung his head. "I don't know."

"Take a guess."

"A dozen, maybe. Habib is unusual. Most owners ask only once, if at all."

Cameron looked down at his plate, saw the tender flesh of the maguro shimmering in the light of the dining room. *Olivia would have loved this place*, he thought, allowing a moment for his emotions to find expression. His wife had been a connoisseur of sushi, as much for the artistry as the delicacy. *If only she could see me now, the way I'm about to defile it.*

“Habib tells me you have a wife and three children,” he said to Shelim.

The office manager nodded, afraid.

“You are fortunate. Tonight many husbands in this city will go to sleep without their wives, many fathers without their daughters. They are the reason we have compliance, the reason we have regulators. Death is a one-way street. Once someone is gone, we don’t get them back.”

Shelim continued to nod, like a bobbing head ornament on a dashboard.

“Do you know who sent me here?” Cameron asked, and Shelim’s nodding turned to head wagging. “Vance Lawson. On his authority, I could fire you right now. But I’m not going to do that. I’m going to give you a second chance.”

Shelim’s back straightened, his eyebrows arching in astonishment.

“When we leave here tonight, you are going to contact every owner who asked you for permission to use a red-listed factory and order them to desist. Then you are going to write a letter to all of our suppliers in Bangladesh, reiterating the standards in the Code of Conduct and the penalties for infraction. Lastly, you are going to say nothing about any of this to Manny or anyone in the sourcing department who might inquire about my visit. What we have discussed tonight stays between us. Or I *will* fire you. Is that clear?”

“Abundantly,” Shelim said, letting out the breath he was holding. “Thank you so much, Mr. Alexander. I’m so sorry—”

“Save it,” Cameron interjected. “No one cares.”

Shelim gulped, chastened.

“I’m only interested in two things. That you do exactly as I said. And that you go home tonight, look your family in the eye, and make them feel as lucky as you are right now.”

With that, Cameron raised his hand and asked for the check.



PART TWO

Joshua

February 2015



CHAPTER ONE

OLD EBBITT GRILL

WASHINGTON, DC

FEBRUARY 11, 2015

9:12 P.M.

Even at nine o'clock on a Wednesday evening, the restaurant was bustling. Waiters scurrying. Glasses clinking. Bartenders pouring. Gaiety erupting. And conversations—the central currency of this supremely political town—drawing heads down and faces together, translating ideas into speech, aspirations into asks, in an endless quest for an angle, a vote, a promotion, or that most liquid of Washington assets—a favor. Josh loved it, the multidimensional poker game of personality and power. For fifteen years, he had been a regular at the table, here at Old Ebbitt, a century-old, mahogany-and-brass eatery steps away from the White House, and at places like it in Tokyo, Rio de Janeiro, and London. He had mastered its nuances, cultivated quid pro quos, and built an enviable reputation as an international journalist, netting him two Pulitzer Prizes and a book that hit number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list. But all of that was gone now. A single error in judgment had laid waste a lifetime of achievement. His colleagues at the *Washington Post* were colleagues no longer.

“Joshua Griswold,” said Tony Sharif, slipping into the green velvet booth across from Josh and draping his arm across the top. “It’s been too long.”

Josh shook his head. “I know it. Half the people in here are strangers.”

Tony’s face—a mélange of his Indian father and Anglo-American mother—remained impassive, but his eyes were alive with humor. “You’re getting old. I see gray in your beard.”

Josh gave a sarcastic laugh. "That's purgatory for you. I feel like the Old Man of the Mountain. One day you're a fixture. Everybody wants a picture. Then the earth moves, you disappear, and no one remembers what you looked like."

Tony grinned ironically. "Could be worse. Nobody ever wanted a picture with me."

"You should ditch the news and try Bollywood," Josh jested. "With a mug like that, you could be the next Shah Rukh Khan."

Tony put out his hand, and Josh clasped it. "It's good to see you again, my friend."

"That makes two of you," Josh said.

Tony raised an eyebrow. "Who's the competition?"

"Reggie, the homeless guy at my old apartment building."

Tony shook his head, and his eyes grew thoughtful. "It's a shame what they did to you. The stories you wrote are some of the best in American journalism. The thing with Maria, it could have been any of us. She deceived a lot of people. It doesn't change your reporting."

She didn't mean to deceive anyone, Josh thought. *She did what she had to do*. But he couldn't say that. Not even to Tony Sharif, the man who had been at his side when shrapnel from an exploding IED sliced through their Humvee in Sadr City and buried itself in Josh's thigh. Tony was the closest thing he had to a brother. But Tony would never understand Maria. She was a riddle in the flesh. Even Josh didn't understand her, and he had spent years trying.

"Don't sweat it," Josh said. "Shit happens. It's what makes our world go round."

"I'll drink to that," Tony replied, raising his bottle of Sam Adams. "To shit. May it survive long enough for me to earn a pension and for you to get back on your feet."

"Cheers," Josh said, taking a sip of Heineken, his beer of choice not so much for its flavor as for its ubiquity across the globe.

"So you're in town again," Tony said. "That means you're working. What's the story?"

"Corporate malfeasance," Josh replied. "Apparel supply chains. A body count. The underside of American business."

Tony's face lit up. "Sexy. Who's the target?"

Josh lowered his voice. "Presto."

Tony leaned back against the booth, clearly intrigued. "The Millennium fire. We reported on that, you know. A lot of people did. That photo was like

Napalm Girl in Vietnam. But this time the girl in the picture disappeared. We couldn't track her down."

Josh nodded but didn't reply, allowing Tony to interpret his silence.

"Wait a minute," Tony said. "You have a source." He let out a grunt, then began to grumble. "You've got to be kidding me. You found someone willing to talk."

It was the response Josh had expected. For five years, Tony had been the *Post's* bureau chief in India. Last year he had taken a senior editorial position in Washington, but his network in South Asia remained as far-reaching as the Ganges. Josh was intruding upon his territory.

"I've got to hand it to you," Tony went on, struggling to be generous. "My guys would have given anything to keep that story alive." For a moment, he looked like he was going to probe, but then he didn't. "So what can I do for you? You obviously got further than we did."

The corners of Josh's mouth turned upward. He still found it hard to believe. The e-mail had arrived in his in-box two days ago, its provenance untraceable. *I have information about the Millennium fire, it read. It relates to Presto Omnishops Corporation.* Hours later, when the rest of DC was asleep, Josh had met a man at the Lincoln Memorial who gave him the names of workers and factories in three countries, including the name of the girl in the photograph. The man had divulged nothing of his motives, but his seniority inside Presto was beyond question, as was his charge: he wanted Josh to make Presto pay.

"This thing dropped into my lap," Josh said. "That's all I can say. But I need your help. I need to find a fixer in Dhaka with high-level contacts in the apparel industry."

Tony spoke without hesitation. "Rana Jalil. Except he's in Los Angeles these days."

Josh gave him a confused look, and Tony clarified, "Rana's a mutt like me. His father owns one of the oldest garment companies in Bangladesh. His mother is Bangladeshi, but she was born in California. He has a law degree from UCLA. Dhaka's his backyard. He helped us cover the Rana Plaza disaster. He's an ace, and 100 percent trustworthy."

Josh took another swig of beer. "What's he doing in LA?"

Tony chuckled. "Shining a light into the dark hole of American fast fashion."

Josh made no attempt to disguise his ignorance. "Explain."

"You know those teenybopper stores in the mall, the ones that dress their mannequins like hookers and make you want to keep Lily under lock and key?"

Josh nodded. Lily was his eight-year-old daughter and the light of his life. He was an absentee father, but not completely derelict.

“A lot of the clothes they peddle are made in sweatshops in LA. The fashion companies know about it, but they don’t give a rat’s ass. So long as they keep feeding American teens a fad a week, they see it as the cost of doing business. Rana freelances with a public interest group called La Alternativa Legal, or ‘LA Legal.’ They represent the workers in court. California has a labor law that gives them firepower against the brands. I don’t really understand it. But I know he’s nailing them to the wall.”

“I’ll take him,” Josh said. “Can you make the introduction?”

Tony whipped a smartphone out of his jeans and started typing. “He’ll be tickled. The great Joshua Griswold. He might even give you a discount since you’re out of work at the moment.” After he transmitted the message, he got the waiter’s attention and ordered another round of drinks. Then he stared at his watch intently. “I’ll give him one minute, then I call.”

“What?” Josh didn’t know anyone that quick on the draw.

“Wait. Ha! There he is.” Tony held out his wrist and showed Josh his smart-watch. On the screen was a text from Rana. “He’s thrilled, as promised.”

Josh shook his head, marveling at the speed of new media. “I owe you one.”

Tony’s eyes sparkled, his lips askew in a beer-tinged smile. “You owe me nothing. I want this as much as you do. You break this story, I mean really break it, and I’ll see what I can do about getting your job back.”

CHAPTER TWO

THE DOWNTOWN MALL

CHARLOTTESVILLE, VIRGINIA

FEBRUARY 13, 2015

11:40 A.M.

The place was too empty to call home. It wasn't the fault of the condominium. Located in a steel-and-brick hipster retreat steps away from the urban oasis of Charlottesville's pedestrian mall, it had hardwood floors, fashionable details, and a walkout terrace with a striking view of Brown's Mountain in the direction of the Blue Ridge. The vacancy was the vice of the occupant. Josh had never really moved in—and never wanted to.

He had lived there six months, since the previous August when Madison, his wife of sixteen years, had evicted him from his real home, a renovated farmhouse in the horse country of Keswick. He had taken almost nothing with him, except some books from the library, half of his closet, his computer equipment, and a framed map of the world festooned with red pins, one for every place he'd been. The mattress on the floor and the desk by the window he had bought from a student on Craigslist. The clothes that didn't need to be hung he kept in a suitcase.

It was the rootlessness that bothered him, not the address on his letter box. He had been a nomad his entire professional life, gallivanting from story to story, hot spot to hot spot. But he'd always had a port of call, and his wife waiting for him when the plane landed. Madison had grounded him, kept the lights on and the sheets warm. Then Lily had come along—dear, sweet, precious Lily—and given

home a whole new meaning. The apartment was provisional. It had to be. He couldn't stand the thought that the separation might become permanent.

It was twenty minutes before noon on Friday, two days after his meeting with Tony at Old Ebbitt Grill, and he was up to his neck in research, reading every legal case he could find in which foreign workers had sued a multinational corporation for abuses suffered outside the United States. It was heady stuff, and outside his wheelhouse. He hadn't given thought to the nuances of the law since his days at Harvard Law School, before he took a reporting job at the *Post*. But his training was coming back to him, as his source had promised him it would.

His iPhone vibrated—a text from Madison. “Don't forget Lily.”

“I'm on it,” he replied. “Leaving in a few.”

He put the phone down and returned to *Doe v. Wal-Mart Stores*—a far-reaching but ultimately unsuccessful lawsuit brought by workers in five countries to hold the world's largest retailer accountable for labor abuses committed by its foreign suppliers.

A minute later, his iPhone vibrated again. *What now?* he wondered. Madison's obsession with punctuality—a consequence of her type A personality and work as a lawyer—rankled him to no end. He preferred to live on the edge, squeezing every last drop from the clock. He glanced at the phone and inhaled sharply. The text wasn't from his wife. It was from Maria.

“I send you e-mail. Please read. *Beijinhos*. M”

He shook his head almost unconsciously. A thousand times he had considered blocking her number and changing his e-mail, but his heart had never permitted it. It wasn't Maria he was worried about. It was her girls—by last count thirty-two of them, all teenagers rescued from penury and prostitution in Vidigal, a drug-infested *favela* in Rio de Janeiro just down the beach from the glittering wealth of Ipanema. *I can't deal with her now*, he decided. *Lily is waiting*.

He collected his keys and leather jacket from the kitchen counter and left his apartment. In the parking garage, he slid behind the wheel of his white BMW convertible—his single concession to vanity after his book, *The End of Childhood*, topped the *Times* list—and sped out of the lot. Traffic was heavier with the approach of the lunch hour, but he had grown up driving in DC and had a cabbie's sense for shortcuts.

He made it to St. Anne's a minute shy of noon. Perched atop a grassy knoll outside the city, the prep school was one of the crown jewels of Charlottesville's educational establishment. Lily met him at the entrance, hands buried in the

pockets of her pink puffer coat. He reached across the console and opened the door for her.

"Hey, sweetie," he said with a grin as big as hers. "Hop in. It's cold out there."

When she was seated, backpack between her legs, he kissed her on the forehead and took a long look at her. She was a willowy girl of eight years, with Madison's chestnut-brown hair and chocolate eyes and Josh's upturned nose and infectious smile. Her face was a bit fleshy around the edges—a consequence of the steroid dexamethasone, or Dex, as they called it, that she had taken since her diagnosis—but she was beautiful, radiantly so, and he was smitten.

"How was school?" he asked, accelerating down the road beneath the gun-metal sky.

"I made something for you in art class," she said, her fairylike voice as articulate as a young adult. She rummaged in her backpack and removed a painting of green mountains and a black horse with a man at the reins wearing breeches, boots, and a riding helmet.

"Is that me?" he asked mirthfully as he merged onto the bypass again. "I still haven't had a chance to wear the outfit you got me at Christmas."

"Mommy says it's supposed to be pretty tomorrow," Lily replied, always the optimist. "We could go riding. Tommy misses you."

"And I miss Tommy," Josh lied, picturing the quarter horse and barely suppressing a laugh. *I doubt Tommy would shed a tear if I got run over by a bus.*

It was one of the great ironies of his life—his daughter's love affair with horses. He was a city boy through and through, a denizen of skyscrapers and sidewalks and sounding horns, more alive in a crowded bar than in the sunshine of a Virginia meadow. Madison, on the other hand, had been born in the saddle on Painted Hill Farm, a two-hundred-acre homestead that had been in her family since Reconstruction. It was impossible not to admire the place. It was as idyllic as a storybook. But the horses were a scourge. Tommy, an otherwise placid gelding, had once tried to buck him. In Lily's mind, however, they were made for each other.

Fifteen minutes later, they pulled into the parking lot at the University of Virginia Medical Center. As always when they reached the hospital, Lily fell silent. She was in the long-term maintenance phase of treatment for acute lymphoblastic leukemia—a curable form of the illness, but still a grave threat. Gone were the early days of blood transfusions, PICC lines, and intensive chemotherapy. Her hair had grown back to the length it had been before falling out in clumps. But her monthly clinic visit meant another round of Dex,

another round of moodiness, hunger, and suppressed creativity. She hated the steroid—they all did. But there was no getting around it.

They walked together hand in hand into the Children's Hospital and took the elevator up to the pediatric oncology department. The outpatient facility had the bright, airy feel of a candy store, with walls the color of lollipops, waiting rooms suffused with natural light, and play areas with toys for the patients and their siblings.

"Hi, Lily," said an African American nurse, standing with her clipboard beside the check-in desk. "Hi, Josh. You can come on back."

"Cherise!" Lily cried, skipping across the floor and giving the nurse a hug.

Cherise led them to an intake room and checked Lily's vitals. Then she took them to an infusion room with a window overlooking the city. There, she conducted a physical exam, drew Lily's blood, and administered an injection of the chemotherapy drug Vincristine.

As Cherise and Lily went through the motions, Josh examined the artwork beside Lily's chair. It was a painted glass mosaic of a girl and a tree with a bird hovering above them. He squinted his eyes and tried to identify the tiny shapes that formed the girl's body—a rain cloud, a telescope, a shark, a cowboy boot, the planet Saturn. For ten minutes, he managed to ignore the e-mail waiting in his in-box. Eventually, however, his restless mind returned to it.

He knew what Maria wanted. It was a devil's bargain, the only way out to deny his conscience. He could recriminate all day about the choices he had made—the way he'd gotten too close, asked her too many personal questions, and allowed the answers to affect him, to turn his attraction into affection and affection into a centaur of love and lust; the way he'd extended his research trips to Rio to spend time with her, not just at Casa da Amizade, where her girls lived, but over dinner and on walks along the sand; the way he'd escorted her to her flat after a meal at Zuka, ostensibly for her safety but knowing full well it was more than that; and the way, once they were intimate, that he had carried on the deception, his heart a divided thing, loving Maria in São Paulo and Madison almost five thousand miles away. But the past was gone. The present was the problem. Maria's girls had nowhere else to go.

He took out his iPhone and saw her name in the message header: Maria Teresa de Santiago. "A Brazilian Mother Teresa" he had called her in his first dispatch for the *Post* about Casa da Amizade, or Friendship House. A child of Vidigal, Maria had escaped the slum only to return in adulthood and adopt a houseful of children as her own.

He opened the message. “Joshua,” she had written, “please, we must talk. Your gift at Christmas is gone. We cannot pay the bills. No one helps us. All donors are gone, even the church. You only can understand. You promise me to help. Please help my girls.”

Josh put the phone away and massaged his face. Suddenly he had a splitting headache.

“Daddy,” he heard Lily say, as if from a distance. “Are you okay?”

He looked up and nodded, watched Cherise pump the last of the Vincristine into Lily’s vein. *How unfair is this world*, he thought, mustering a smile despite the ache.

The rest of the appointment was a blur. He greeted Dr. Holiday when she appeared, even interacted with her, but his focus was shot, his thoughts in another place, wandering the haunted lanes of Vidigal, smelling the stink of rubbish, staring into the hollow eyes of drug addicts and street kids advertising their bodies for sale. He was there as he was before the celebrity and scandal, as an orphan abandoned on the steps of the National Cathedral, as the protégé of an adoptive father destined for the Carter White House and a mother who served the homeless, as a scribbler whose power was in his pen. It was in Vidigal where he had first conceived of *Rio Real*, the feature that had won him his first Pulitzer. And it was Vidigal to which he had returned with *The End of Childhood*. How could he forsake it now?

When the visit was over, Josh took Lily’s hand and led her back to the car. On the drive downtown, she was quiet, pensive.

“You’re somewhere else,” she said perceptively. “Like Mommy always says.”

“I’m sorry,” he replied, his guilt increasing. “I’m just thinking.”

“About what?”

He shook his head. “Nothing.”

She crossed her small arms in protest. “You mean I wouldn’t understand.”

He tried to think of something to say. “I have some decisions to make. I want to do the right thing, but I’m not always sure what that is.”

“Like when you’re going to make up with Mommy and come home?”

Her words ran him through. “Yes.”

“You should hurry,” Lily went on. “She isn’t happy.”

Josh winced. “How do you know?”

“I just do,” she said and looked out the window again.

Before long, Josh drove through Court Square, past the Albemarle County Courthouse where Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe had

once practiced law, and pulled to the curb in front of the stately brick building that housed the Center for Justice in Action, or CJA. Founded in 1986 by Madison's father, Lewis Ames, CJA was one of the most prominent nonprofit legal organizations in the South. A scion of the Virginia bar, Lewis was a lawyer-statesman with a professor's intellect and the courtly manner of a squire. He had argued five cases before the US Supreme Court and won all of them. For years, he had enticed Madison to leave the global law firm that allowed her to play hopscotch with Josh around the world in order to do "the real business of justice," as he put it. When the *Post* transferred Josh back to DC, she acceded. Six years on, she was CJA's chief litigation counsel.

Madison was waiting for them on the sidewalk, her lithe equestrian's body swaddled in a gray day coat and blue scarf that complemented her long brown hair.

"Come riding tomorrow," Lily said, giving Josh a hug. "Mommy won't mind."

Josh glanced at his wife and saw her indecision. "I wish I could," he replied, kissing Lily on the cheek. "But I have to go on a trip. I'll be back soon. We'll do it then."

Lily stepped back and sighed, and Josh felt the lash of her dejection. He took the whip from her silent eyes and turned it upon himself. How many times would he walk away? It was a question that had no answer until Madison decided to forgive him—if she decided to forgive him. He thought of Maria's e-mail and flogged himself harder.

"Run inside," Madison told Lily. "Grandpa's got something for you."

"Bye, Daddy," Lily said with a wave.

"Bye, sweetie," he replied, watching her go. Then he stood up and faced his wife.

She was a strong woman, even imperious when she wanted to be, but she bore in her heart all the self-doubt of a perfectionist and had never quite reconciled the conflict. As soon as Lily disappeared, the strain began to show around her eyes.

"So you're going away," she said, burrowing her hands into her coat. "How long?"

He scuffed his toe on the ground. "I don't know. Could be a couple weeks. Maybe more."

"Is it a story?"

"Not exactly. It's hard to explain. I'll tell you about it later." He paused, feeling the sting of the winter wind. "I'm sorry to do this to you—to Lily."

“It’s already done,” she said matter-of-factly. “This is the fallout.”

He bit his lip hard enough to notice. *I miss you*, he thought, but he couldn’t bring himself to say it. “I’ll keep in touch.”

She turned away as if to leave, but a thought brought her up short. “Bring something home for her,” she said, looking at him again. “You owe her that much.”

“No,” he said, “I owe her more.”

CHAPTER THREE

PACIFIC COAST HIGHWAY

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

FEBRUARY 17, 2015

4:21 P.M.

There was something about the light in Southern California, the way it embraced the world, as if the sun and sky were lovers, and the earth the bed beneath them. It was February in Los Angeles, but there were no coats in sight. There were cyclists on the highway, runners working up a sweat, even a few sun worshippers soaking up rays on the beach. It was a photographer's paradise—the bronze hills graced with the green of rain-fed grass, the indigo ocean cradled by golden sand, the sky a patchless quilt of cornflowers.

Josh had the top down on his rental convertible—a muscle-bound Mustang that made him feel like a kid again. He was on the Pacific Coast Highway, following its serpentine arcs through Santa Monica and Pacific Palisades, the drizzling damp of the DC winter barely a memory in the mirror. His lips curled upward beneath his aviator shades, the warm wind tousling his curly hair. It was almost enough to make him forget the sorrow he had left behind. But not quite.

He pulled into the lot at Gladstones restaurant, locked his luggage in the trunk, and left his keys with the valet. The place was a shrine to the sea, its umbrella-covered tables separated from the shore by a thin pane of glass. Rana Jalil was already there, having claimed a table at the edge of the deck that afforded a little privacy. He was dressed like a man on holiday—linen pants,

calfskin flip-flops, and an untucked shirt that revealed a wedge of ebony chest hair. He greeted Josh with an easy grin and a loose handshake.

"You picked a fine day," he said, the trace of a Bengali accent beneath his words. "It rained all last week. It's good for the drought, but I much prefer sunshine."

A waiter appeared at their side as soon as Josh sat down.

"What are you drinking?" Josh asked, glancing at the menu.

"Perrier," Rana replied. When Josh gave him an odd look, he explained, "I'm Muslim even in LA, but you get what you want. I hear they serve a mean vodka martini."

"I'll try it," he told the waiter.

When they were alone, Josh sat back and watched the waves roll in off the ocean. He was weary from travel. He had been in transit for eleven hours. But he rested only a moment before reaching for something germane. "So you sue the clothing brands," he began. "Tell me how you do it."

"California makes it easy," Rana replied. "Under the law, the brands are guarantors of a worker's wages. If the factory doesn't pay—which they often don't—the workers come to us, and we go to the labor commissioner. The brands usually settle. The factories are harder to nail. They just close up shop, create a new corporation, and reopen down the street."

"Do you ever take the brands to court?" Josh asked.

"We'd love nothing more," Rana said, "but we've never been able to find plaintiffs. Think about it. You're an immigrant without a green card working the only job you can find to feed your kids—in a sweatshop, sewing clothes, being ripped off, probably abused. We offer you compensation now or the possibility of systemic impact in three years, with the real possibility your case will get kicked out of court and you'll end up with nothing."

The waiter delivered their drinks, and Josh took a sip of his martini. "What if I told you I could find you plaintiffs? But you'll have to work with another organization."

Rana pushed his sunglasses onto his forehead, giving Josh a glimpse into his eyes. They were fairer than Josh expected—somewhere between hazel and topaz. "You want to bring a lawsuit?" he inquired, openly intrigued. "I figured you were after a story."

Josh nodded, recalling his own surprise when his source told him what to do with the names. "I have my reasons," he said.

"Who's the collaborator?" Rana asked.

“CJA. Lewis Ames.” Josh spoke the words with confidence, though neither Madison nor her father knew anything about it—yet.

A smile spread across Rana’s face. “A family connection.” When Josh didn’t reply, he began to nod. “Where are the plaintiffs?”

“Bangladesh. Malaysia. Jordan.”

Rana’s intrigue turned into fascination. “An *international* case.”

“Against a global retailer. One of America’s favorite companies.” Josh took a breath, then spoke the word in sotto voce. “Presto.”

“I’m riveted,” Rana admitted. “But I’m also dubious. Now that the Supreme Court has gutted the Alien Tort Statute, all we have left is the federal trafficking act and a quagmire of foreign and state law claims. The trafficking act is good, but to prove liability, we’d not only have to show forced labor in the factories, we’d have to show that Presto knew or should have known that they were benefiting from it. That’s a hell of a high bar, especially with a defendant as powerful as Presto. Global corporations don’t just play to win. They play for keeps.”

Josh shrugged. “Does that mean you’re out? Or are you willing to roll the dice?”

Rana grinned and picked up a menu. “I bet you’re famished. Everything’s good here.”

“So you’re in then.”

“I’m in,” Rana said. “Tell me your plan.”

CHAPTER FOUR

THE WESTIN

DHAKA, BANGLADESH

FEBRUARY 20, 2015

10:22 A.M.

Even in his glory days as a reporter, Josh hadn't traveled like this. It was ironic that he could afford it now, after everything that had happened. When his father had been at the *Post*, in the heyday of newsprint, foreign correspondents lived like ambassadors, flying first class, dining at the best restaurants, and leasing flats in expat neighborhoods. Then the Internet arrived, shattering the old ad-and-subscription business model and sending newspaper executives into a frenzy of budget cutting and buyouts. By the time Josh took an overseas post in Tokyo, his expense account looked more like a piggy bank. He'd thought his per diem might get an epinephrine shot after he won his first Pulitzer, but he was wrong. Even in London, when he was deputy bureau chief, his travel budget was so lean that he had usually skipped lunch.

All that had changed, virtually overnight, when he hit the speaking circuit with *The End of Childhood*. His hosts—mostly foundations and universities—treated him like a dignitary, reimbursing his expenses without a glance. At first the red-carpet treatment came as a shock, but over time he grew accustomed to it, as if the music would never stop. And it might not have, had it not been for the Brazilian paper *O Globo* and the story it broke about Maria and Catarina, one of her girls. These days Josh couldn't afford to fly business class, especially not with Rana in tow. But old habits died hard. He had booked them at the Westin, Dhaka's flagship hotel.

He stood at the window and looked out at the city fifteen floors down. Nestled between finger lakes, the neighborhood of Gulshan was a concrete jungle of glittering high-rises, decrepit warehouses, and half-built buildings filigreed with rebar. A chorus of horns drifted up from below. Even at ten in the morning, the traffic was nearly impassable.

Josh's iPhone vibrated. It was a text from Rana—"Anis is here. The meeting is set."

"Coming," Josh typed back and grabbed his backpack off the bed.

After an elevator ride to the lobby—an exotic mélange of marble, wood, and club lighting—he met Rana outside the revolving door. His driver, Anis, was waiting for them on the street beside a vintage burgundy Toyota Corolla. Before they could reach him, however, a swarm of beggars descended on Josh. Barely clothed children, skin caked with dirt, made hunger signs with their hands. Careworn women in saris and headscarves clucked at him. And men, old and young, jostled him, touching his forearms and shoulders.

"English," said an elderly man in a skullcap. "You English. Need help. No job."

"I'm sorry," Josh replied, gently making a path with his arms. "I can't help you."

He hated saying it, hated the pretense, the lie. He could buy the man food. He could buy all of them food. But it wouldn't change their circumstances. He'd seen it a thousand times. Poverty like this was crushing and sometimes criminal, orchestrated by begging rings.

He followed Rana into the Corolla. "How far to the Millennium factory?" he asked Anis, trying not to think about the palms on his window, hands pawing at the door.

"Two hours," the driver said, then grinned widely. "I will make it less."

In most places in the world, the rules of the road left margins for error—the space between lanes, the delay between red and green lights, speed limits that encouraged caution and care. On the streets of Dhaka, there were neither rules nor restraint. Anis used his horn more frequently than his brake pedal, and slowed only to avoid an imminent collision—an occasion that repeated itself with stomach-churning regularity. Judging by the scars on every vehicle in sight, collisions were inevitable. Indeed, on the drive to Ashulia, an industrial district

north of the city, Josh witnessed a truck burning on the side of the road, a bus sideswiping a car in the quest to turn a corner, and a motorcyclist ditching his bike to avoid a street vendor. Anis, however, didn't seem to notice.

After an hour of demolition derby, they left the teeming city and crossed the floodplain of the Turag River, its banks littered with brick factories. Before long, Anis turned off the road and took them into a warren of dirt lanes thronged with shops and stalls. Here the traffic was mostly pedestrian—women buying vegetables and cloth, men browsing for cell phones, young children scampering about. A few paused to stare at Josh. Most paid them no heed.

"Millennium is there," Anis grunted, pointing out the windshield.

The factory rose up before them like an elephant resting on his haunches, its mottled concrete walls draining light from the sky. Josh had watched footage of the fire, seen columns of flames shooting out the windows, the building's innards completely ablaze. Fifteen months later, the only visible remnants of the holocaust were halos of soot around broken glass and twisted iron bars. The place had the forlorn look of abandonment.

Anis pulled the Corolla to the side of the road, allowing a middle-aged man to join them in the front seat. He shook Rana's hand over his shoulder and gave Josh a thin smile. He and Rana exchanged a few words in Bengali. Then Rana translated for Josh.

"This is Mohammad," Rana explained. "He is a labor activist. He was able to arrange interviews with some of the survivors."

Josh was immediately curious. "Tony Sharif said his people couldn't get them to talk."

Again, Rana and Mohammad chatted in Bengali. Then Rana said, "That was the owner's doing. He promised to pay the workers' medical expenses if they kept quiet. By the time they figured out he was lying, the media was gone."

"What happened to him?" Josh asked.

"He went to jail for a little while," Rana said. "But his friends in the government bailed him out. Now he's asking them for a loan to reopen the factory."

Josh grimaced. "Did the survivors get any compensation?"

Rana shook his head. "The BGMEA—that's the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association—gave them a little money, but not nearly enough to cover their hospital bills. The brands ran for the hills. All of them said the same thing: 'Our clothes weren't supposed to be there.' Even Presto didn't pay a dime."

Anis parked in an alleyway beside a medicine stand, and Mohammad led

them to the factory gates on foot. The lanes here were narrow and badly rutted. A cluster of young men sauntered by, their eyes fixed on Josh. Mohammad spoke a string of sharp words in Bengali, but the posse didn't disperse. Instead, the men lit cigarettes and lingered in the shadows nearby.

"We should go," Rana said, looking unsettled. "The owner doesn't like attention."

He took Josh by the arm and guided him quickly down a footpath between cinderblock dwellings, Mohammad in the lead and Anis behind them. At six foot three, Josh had to duck his head to avoid clothes drying on lines and shuffle his feet to avoid sandals scattered around doorways. A few heads peeked out of windows, but no one spoke. The footpath led to another, and that one intersected with a third. Soon, Josh lost all sense of direction in the maze, his only landmarks sky and earth and Mohammad's red shirt.

At last, the labor activist slowed and knocked on a doorframe. The curtain parted and a young woman invited them in, covering her head with a scarf. Her home was a single room with a bed, a dresser, a kitchenette, and an old-fashioned Singer sewing machine. The unfinished concrete walls were decorated with newspaper clippings. On the bed sat three other women and a man, all in their twenties, and two children, a girl and a boy about six or seven.

"This is Ishana," Rana said, translating for Mohammad and gesturing toward their host. "She worked at Millennium. They all did, except for the children."

Ishana placed a plastic chair on the floor in front of the bed and pointed at Josh.

"She wants you to sit down," Rana explained.

Josh glanced around the cramped space. "Where will she sit?"

Before Rana could answer, Ishana wedged herself between the women on the mattress.

"Please," Rana said, gesturing with his hand. "You are her guest."

To Josh, the honor felt wrong in every way, but he accepted it out of respect. He took a seat and retrieved his notebook from his backpack. Rana squatted beside him, and Anis and Mohammad stood outside the door. Rana made introductions in Bengali, and then Ishana began to speak. While Josh waited for the translation, he studied the woman. Her face was a kind of contradiction—round and cherubic, yet fraught with sorrow. Her hands were small, her fingers and wrists free of jewelry. Beyond her dress and headscarf, her only adornment was a nose stud.

"She's twenty-eight years old," Rana began. "She worked on the fourth floor. The day of the fire was her daughter's birthday, but she couldn't leave because of the last-minute order. Around nine o'clock they heard shouting, then two explosions. The lights went out. The stairwell was blocked. The fire came quickly."

Rana listened awhile longer, then went on. "Some men broke a window and made space between the bars. The woman beside her tried to jump, but the bars stopped her. Ishana felt something dripping on her. She thought it was water, but it was blood. She was terrified, but she knew she had to jump. When she was on the sill, someone bumped into her and she fell sideways. She would have died if she had hit the ground directly. Instead, she fell through a roof, and it cushioned the impact. It was hours before her uncle found her."

Josh closed his eyes, the horror of it washing over him. He saw her standing on the ledge, the growl of flames behind her, saw her shadow falling through the air, heard the shriek of metal as the roof gave way, then the thump of her body landing on the cold floor of someone's home.

Before long, Rana spoke again. "She woke up twelve days later in a trauma center. Her back was broken. The pain was unbearable. Eventually she was discharged, but her back never healed. She doesn't have money for treatment. She is in pain and exhausted. Her husband—who is the man on the bed behind her—worked in the cutting room. When he jumped, a piece of metal pierced his skull. He has terrible headaches now, two or three a day. Neither of them can work. They asked a charity for money to help with treatment. But the charity only gave them a sewing machine." Rana pointed at the Singer. "Unfortunately, she is in too much pain to use it. They have no money for rent. The landlord is about to evict them. They don't know what to do."

Josh stared at the floor, his eyes welling with tears. His first instinct—as always in moments like this—was to drive his fist through a wall and then shake it at the heavens. But he didn't do that. He absorbed the anger, buried it down deep with all the stories that had shattered his heart. He had a library of them now, tales of war and rape, beatings and stonings, even a crucifixion. But Ishana's story was among the worst. His second instinct was to embrace her, but he suppressed that too. She was Muslim; he was a man. It would only aggravate her pain.

He looked back at her and wiped his eyes. "Please tell her . . .," he began, searching for words that would matter. "Please tell her I'm sorry. It's an awful thing they suffered."

Rana interpreted, his voice almost a whisper now, and Ishana nodded.

Josh waited a moment, then spoke the first two names his source had given him. "I'm looking for a man, Ashik Hassan. He has a daughter named Sonia." Josh took out his iPhone and showed Ishana the photo of Sonia from the night of the fire.

Ishana glanced at the screen, and her eyes fell to the floor. When she spoke, her tone was laced with pain. "She knew them," Rana translated. "Ashik and his wife, Joya, lived close by. They had six children—four boys and two girls. Joya died in the fire, as did their other daughter, Nasima. Sonia was badly injured. The hospital bills were too much. Ashik couldn't afford to stay in Dhaka. He took Sonia and his sons back to his village."

"Does she know where they went?" Josh asked gently.

"Kalma," Rana said. "It's on the Padma River south of here."

Josh nodded and thought back to the stories he had read from the media's coverage of the fire. "The last order Millennium handled was the Piccola pants. Does she remember making any other clothes for Presto around that time?"

When Ishana heard the question, her eyes brightened and she spoke with surprising animation. Josh watched Rana's face as he listened, saw his brows arch, his eyelids expand, and knew that they had stumbled upon something significant.

"You're not going to believe this, but Presto was one of their biggest buyers," Rana said. "Millennium was making clothes for them up to the time of the fire."

"*What?*" Josh was thunderstruck. "She's certain of this?"

"She saw the labels. Piccola, Burano, Porto Bari, all of the company's lines."

Suddenly Ishana spoke again. "There's more," Rana continued. "On the day of the fire, Presto's quality-control people were in the factory."

A shiver coursed down Josh's spine. He remembered something then, from the night he met his source at the Lincoln Memorial. There had been a moment when the man let down his guard, and Josh saw a trace of grief in his eyes. Now Josh was beginning to understand. The story Presto had delivered to the world, a story about authorized suppliers and color-coded lists and the company's unwavering commitment to worker safety, was not merely a half-truth packaged for public consumption.

It was a bald-faced lie.

CHAPTER FIVE

MAWA-MUNSHIGANJ HIGHWAY
SOUTH OF DHAKA, BANGLADESH

FEBRUARY 21, 2015

11:35 A.M.

The road to the village of Kalma, fifty kilometers south of Dhaka, was less a highway than a dirt track worn down by thousands of vehicles and runoff from the monsoon rains that fell in the summertime, replenishing the Himalayan snowpack and making the rivers of Bangladesh run swollen into the sea. The land between the rivers was flat and verdant, with wild grass, leafy trees, and cultivated fields. Josh was in the backseat of Anis's battered Corolla, struggling to tap out an e-mail to Lily on his iPhone between bumps in the road. She had sent him a message the night before, updating him about school and her friends and, of course, the horses. Priscilla, one of the mares, had equine distemper, which meant she had to be quarantined and treated with penicillin. Josh found the dramas of stable management about as interesting as the *Internal Revenue Code*, but for Lily's sake, he forced himself to care.

"How much longer?" he asked Rana, who was in the front passenger seat.

Rana chatted with Anis. "Ten minutes," he replied. "We're close."

"Thank God," Josh said, putting the finishing touches on his message.

On the Internet, the trip to Kalma had looked like a pleasant jaunt—ninety minutes at most. But the wizards at Google seemed blithely unaware of Dhaka's insane congestion. The traffic anaconda had snared them at the hotel, throttled them for two hours, and only released them south of the bridge at the Buriganga River. They had been in transit since eight a.m.

After sending the e-mail, Josh looked out the window and watched as they approached the village. He saw low-slung buildings in the distance shaded by trees and surrounded by fields of waist-high jute. There were pedestrians on the roadway, men riding bicycles and women carrying babies in slings. Anis slowed behind two hand-pulled carts piled high with sacks of rice. He honked twice, and the carts made space for him to pass on the shoulder.

Soon they drove into a square with thatched-roof stalls and squat houses with stick fences. Some of the dwellings were constructed of mud bricks. Others were made of logs lashed together and enclosed by sheet metal.

"Wait here," Rana said. "I'll get directions."

He climbed out of the car and struck up a conversation with an old man resting languidly outside a fruit stall. "They live down by the river," he said when he returned. "Ashik has a new wife. The oldest boy has a job in Dhaka. The others live here."

On the far side of the square, they followed a cart path through groves of trees and planted fields. Everywhere, children were at play—swinging from limbs, splashing in a pond, chasing each other in a game of tag. It was a Saturday, and school was not in session.

At the end of the road, they came upon a trio of mud huts standing beneath a date palm tree. A scrawny goat and three lean chickens were wandering about, nibbling at clumps of grass. Behind the huts, Josh saw the sparkle of water. A wispy girl was seated on a plastic chair outside the doorway of the center hut. Her eyes were open, but her body was motionless, as if frozen in time. *Is that Sonia?* Josh thought. In the photo, the girl's features had been obscured. But she was the right age, and her face had a similar shape.

Rana left the vehicle and approached the girl, greeting her in Bengali. The girl didn't reply. A woman in her thirties appeared in the doorway, clad in a sari and headscarf. After listening to Rana, she spoke a few words and set out on foot toward the river.

"Ashik and his sons are fishing," Rana said. "She will fetch them."

Josh climbed out and waited with Rana beneath the date palm. A few minutes later, the woman returned with a wiry man and three teenage boys, all reed-thin with clothes that hung like drapes from skeletal limbs. The man approached them warily, looking at them through eyes stained pink by the tropical sun. While Rana made the introductions, the man sized them up. His face was gaunt, his skin stretched taut over bone. At last, he welcomed them with handshakes.

"*Salaam*," he said. "My name, Ashik." He pointed at the boys. "These, my son."

Ashik spoke to the woman in Bengali and led them into the center hut. They took seats on a rug between the rough-hewed frames of two beds while the woman busied herself preparing the midday meal on a mud stove. The hut had no electricity. Its interior was illuminated only by daylight filtering through the doorway and a window on the opposite wall.

"He's invited us to lunch," Rana told Josh. "It will be ready soon."

"*Dhonnobad*," Josh said, putting his hands together, palms flat, and bowing his head slightly in a sign of respect. "That is kind of you."

Ashik returned the gesture, then said something to his youngest son who was standing just outside the door. The boy disappeared for a moment, then returned with the girl, guiding her to the rug and speaking gently into her left ear. She sat down cross-legged, hands in her lap, and stared blankly at the wall. The boy sat next to her, regarding Josh with open curiosity.

"This is Sonia," Rana said, translating for Ashik. "Her head was injured in the fall. She is mostly blind, and she can hear out of only one ear. She can still speak, but not well. Conversation is exhausting to her. She will need to lie down soon."

Josh looked into the girl's vacant eyes. She was a beautiful child with a graceful ovate face, a pixie nose, caramel-colored skin, and bone-straight hair. In a different world, she would have had her pick of suitors. Now her body was a prison, her mind bound in chains.

"How old is she?" he asked.

Rana spoke to Ashik, then shook his head. "She's fifteen now, but she started working at Millennium when she was thirteen. The manager falsified her papers."

Josh made a note in his notepad. "I'll try to keep my questions brief. I'd like to know what she was working on when the fire broke out."

Rana translated for Ashik, and Ashik spoke to his son. The boy leaned close to Sonia and murmured the question in her good ear. The girl didn't seem to register that he had spoken. For a poignant moment, Josh worried that the impact from the fall had wiped her memory clean. But then her lips parted and a word escaped.

"Piccola."

Josh struggled to suppress a smile. If she could remember, she could testify. The conditions would have to be right. They would need experts to convince

the court that she retained capacity despite her injuries. But once the procedural hurdles were cleared, she would make a spectacular witness—the kind that would haunt a juror’s dreams.

“Where was she located on the sewing line?”

This time Sonia’s response came quicker. “She and her sister, Nasima, were in the finishing section,” Rana translated. “They sewed on the labels.”

“What does she remember about the fire?” Josh asked.

After listening to her brother, the girl spoke for at least a minute, possibly two. The effort left her winded. She leaned her head on her brother’s shoulder as Rana interpreted.

“She remembers loud noises and shouting. The lights flickered and then went dark. They found a window and lay down on the floor. The smoke was thick. Nasima made a mask out of pants to help her breathe. She remembers the heat, and the screams of workers jumping from windows. Nasima tied pants together into a rope and told her to climb down. She was terrified, but she went. She remembers falling. Then nothing.”

Josh nodded and scribbled on his pad for a while, allowing Sonia to bear up under her pain. It was a lesson he had learned from Maria after his first interview at Casa da Amizade. *The hardest stories are like the people who tell them*, she had said when his questions made one of her girls cry. *You have to give them room to breathe*. He had lived by that creed ever since, training himself to be patient and putting the human before the headline. It had won him the trust of people the rest of the media couldn’t reach.

At last, when Sonia’s eyelids grew heavy and he was afraid he was about to lose her, Josh leaned forward again. “Can she tell me anything else about Nasima?”

When she heard her sister’s name, Sonia lifted her head and blinked away sleep. Her reply came out in a whisper.

“Nasima called her *Khamjana*—hummingbird,” Rana said. “She misses her very much.”

Josh took a breath, sensing he had pushed the girl as far as he could. “Please tell her she is very courageous. She can rest now.”

Rana passed along the message, and the boy helped Sonia to one of the beds. She curled up on the mattress and closed her eyes. As soon as she was situated, Ashik gathered the older boys on the rug. After a moment, his wife placed a tray in their midst and knelt beside it, serving steaming *cha* in mugs. While they sipped their tea, she brought them plates piled high with rice, curried potatoes, and boiled fish. Finally, she passed around a basket of flatbread.

“River fish,” Ashik said proudly. “Fresh.”

They ate until they were satisfied. Afterward, Ashik’s wife fixed a plate for herself and took it outside. The boys sat quietly, watching Josh, until Ashik sent them away.

Josh collected his notepad and spoke to Rana. “I’d like to know what he saw that night.”

Ashik listened to the translation, then turned toward the doorway and stared out at the yard. In time, his gaze shifted and his memories began to emerge. Josh examined his face and saw the strain in the wrinkles around his eyes, heard the tremor of anguish in his tone, and beneath it the darker notes of shame and guilt. He understood Ashik’s burden better than most. He was a man damned to live every day in the presence of his own powerlessness, a father who saw his child suffering but could do nothing to save her.

Rana gave voice to Ashik’s story. “He was home with his sons when he heard the first explosion. They went outside and looked at the factory. The power was out in the area, and it was the only building that still had electricity. After the second explosion, he saw the flames. He called the fire department and went to the factory gates. But the guards were only letting workers out. No one could get in. He heard screams and saw shadows falling. He didn’t realize until later that his daughters were among them.”

Rana looked at the floor, and Josh saw tears in his eyes. “The fire trucks took a long time to get there. By then it was too late. They forced the gates open, and a few people managed to get in. They found Sonia near the entrance. Nasima was beside her. The people took pictures, but then the firefighters closed the gates. Later that night, ambulances came. One of them took Sonia away. Ashik went with her. She was at the trauma center for two weeks. Then she was moved to a hospital. A month after the fire, they sent her home. But Ashik had no one to take care of her. He couldn’t support the family driving a rickshaw. He had to move back to the village. His new wife is a distant cousin. His uncle arranged it. This is his uncle’s land. Ashik helps him fish.”

Josh met Ashik’s eyes and nodded compassionately. “I have a few more questions. Did any of the brands that made clothing at Millennium ever contact him after the fire?”

“Some people came a few months later,” Rana said eventually. “They said they were from the US. He told them everything. He thought they were with the media, but he never heard from them again. Now he doesn’t know. That’s why he was suspicious when we showed up.”

Josh was immediately curious. "Does he remember anything else about them?"

"There were two men and a woman," Rana explained. "One of them was a translator."

Josh pictured his source at the Lincoln Memorial and wondered if he'd sent them.

"Go ahead and tell him about the lawsuit," Josh said, "but downplay the money part. I don't want him thinking about dollar signs. Just the possibility of justice."

Rana nodded and began to elucidate their proposition. Meanwhile, Josh watched Ashik's wife sweeping the dirt outside the hut. He imagined the man's sons casting their nets into the river, hoping to snare a catch to sell at the market. It was a hardscrabble existence. Whatever chance the family had to escape poverty had burned in the Millennium inferno. Yet the three-trillion-dollar global apparel machine continued to hum, minting money for the brands.

Rana interrupted his thoughts. "He wants to know if Presto can make trouble for him, and for his eldest son in Dhaka. I told him no, but he wants to hear it from you."

Josh spoke candidly, holding nothing back. "They've already made all the trouble they can. It's you who can make trouble for them."

When the man understood, he spoke a burst of words, staring at Rana.

"He's willing to fight," Rana said, excitement buoying his voice. "He doesn't care if they give him money. He wants the world to know his family's story."

Josh bowed his head, honored by the man's courage. He smiled grimly. "I can promise him that. The world will hear."