

**The Men
Behind The
Curtain**

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Prologue

“Congratulations, Mr. Ames!” From behind an antique desk, the large, red cheeked man extended a pudgy hand over a surface of polished mahogany. The Congressman was forced to stand and awkwardly stretch his arm to its considerable limit in order to complete the handshake. “Thank-you very much, sir, but to what do I owe this honor?”

Roger Morden grinned, exposing a row of yellowed teeth. The smile didn’t give off the slightest feeling of either warmth or happiness; instead, the media magnate’s grin was that of a man eyeing a sought-after prize. He leaned back in a well-padded chair and carelessly brushed a piece of lint off of his pinstriped suit. “Well, Mr. Ames, my associates and I have just concluded our annual meeting, and we’ve decided; you’re going to be the next President of the United States.”

Ames laughed gently. The billionaire was known for his dramatic statements and massive political donations to

those who shared his vision. When he gave money, Morden didn't hedge his bets—he bought the whole damn casino. “I'm sorry to disappoint you, sir, but I'm not running for President. I just won my second term in Congress.” It had been a hard campaign against a well-funded challenger, but the 38-year old former car salesman from Kansas squeaked by with a barrage of last-minute advertising and endorsements.

“Look, Congressman, you've got a lot of potential. And I'm not really asking you. When people find out about your candidacy in a few months, they're going to get excited. David!” Morden gestured to the towering bodyguard just outside the door of the study. “Please escort our candidate back to his car. I've got a shareholder's meeting in five.”

Confused, Ames followed David down a lengthy corridor bedecked in scarlet and gold. “Was that real or is this some kind of practical joke?”

David did not turn around. “My employer is a serious man.”

As the Congressman descended an oversized marble staircase, he mulled over the odd exchange. It seemed almost comical, really: Morden's secretary called in the middle of the night with a ‘once in a lifetime offer’ and the location of a Gulfstream jet bound for Hawaii. Ames remembered groggily peering through the window of the motel he was staying in and seeing a limousine idling outside. Barely awake, he'd crawled into a worn suit, draped a bland tie around his neck, and climbed into the car.

Congressman Ames barely noticed the walk across the massive atrium and breezed through a set of doors, six inches thick and framed with gold. He vaulted into the back seat of a black Hummer. As David shut the door and

waved the car onward, Ames noticed a manila envelope on the leather seat next to him. Curious, he reached over and pulled out a packet. He was barely surprised to see a meticulous schedule of major campaign events, starting with an announcement in a couple of months. When he turned the page, a flood of checks fell into Ames' lap—all from Political Action Committees the young Congressman had never heard of, all for sums in the several thousand dollar range, all with random dates spread out over the next year, and all made out to the same beneficiary: "Ames for America."

The Congressman stared out the window at the passing forest, not seeing the cameras and alarms that littered the boundaries of Morden's fortress, nor aware of the anti-personal mines and tripwires blocking passage through any open space. He didn't know that beyond all of this, snipers high above the jungle floor watched his car from all angles. All he saw was the pair of golden gates that provided the only opening in a smooth wall of black marble that completely encircled the property, keeping out animals and the uninvited. Ames allowed himself a faint smile as the Hummer swung onto the road that led to the private airstrip and the luxurious flight back to Kansas. He mouthed a sentence to himself and then, starting to like the way it felt, repeated it out loud: "President Michael Ames."

Back in his office, Morden dragged a phone off of its receiver. "Nick? Good news. It looks like we have our candidate."

Chapter 1

**Geneva, Switzerland, 17 Months Later
0800 hours Local Time, July 15th**

John Donovan climbed out of a white Mercedes panel van parked on Rue Dauphin and strode purposefully towards an archway in the front of an old but well-kept building with a yellow-painted stone façade across the street. Only two hours before, he'd woken up on a Swiss Air flight into the city, groggy from the frequent time changes forced onto him by his employer. He kept his dark, brown hair short as to avoid the need to maintain it, but the stresses of his job showed in the dark stubble that had started to cover his strong jaw and in steel grey eyes far older than the face of the man who they belonged to.

The finely-tailored suit he swore screamed "business traveler" on the airplane and fit nicely with the standard attire of the Genevans who strolled past him on their way to their jobs downtown. He carried a briefcase full of documents that would show him to be an employee of a multinational bank, and he could talk for hours about

currency exchange and derivatives. He'd done so both on the plane until the person seated next to him was suitably bored and the day before in the airport at Shanghai. The appearance of being over-eager to share did more to divert attention than silence ever could.

The same briefcase also held a lock picking kit, a syringe full of a paralytic, and a silenced Walther P99. Donovan's ear held an invisible earpiece, and his expensive watch was wired with a microphone. He raised it to his mouth, speaking quietly and deliberately. "Arrow, moving into position."

"Grenade, in position. I almost have the door." Inside the archway, Donovan's partner, a younger man named Ryan Hale, was dressed as a postman. Instead of opening any of the steel boxes in their row next to the door, however, he fiddled with the door's lock.

A female voice echoed in their ears. "Sentinel to field teams: remember, your target is a Caucasian male, age 28. He's five-foot eight with blond hair and blue eyes. Exercise a high degree of caution. Local police will be very upset if they find out about this." The agents all remembered a similar incident in Italy, where a 'routine' snatch-and-grab resulted in the indictments of nearly twenty agents by the Italian courts. Such fiascos were bad for business. "Do not use lethal force under any circumstances. If the subject dies, his employer can find another nut for the job—one who we haven't found out about."

"I copy," Donovan replied. The pair had been briefed in the van from the airport: their target was a small-time European reactionary named Helmut Baum. Yesterday the NSA network responsible for interception phone conversations, emails, faxes, text messages, and other electronic forms of communication—what they liked to call

‘signals intelligence’ —had deciphered a phone conversation between Baum and a sleeper agent living in the United States. The sleeper agent said he had been hired for an important job aimed at disrupting the upcoming elections and requested an urgent meeting. While the FBI had agents watching the sleeper agent’s every move, Donovan’s employers couldn’t leave anything to chance. Their resources in Switzerland were, to put it charitably, quite limited. In many ways, operating in a ‘neutral’ country created more challenges than operating behind enemy lines. At least in Afghanistan, they could call in a drone when things went bad, as they so often seemed to. *No such luck here.* Despite a sudden surge in chatter intercepted by the NSA, the election had to proceed smoothly.

No American Presidential election had ever been postponed—for any reason. At the height of the civil war, many of President Lincoln’s advisors urged him to consider changing the election date for security purposes. He responded that, if the United States were forced to give up on democratic elections, they might as well give up on the war as well. In 2004, the Bush Administration briefly considered plans to change the election date in the event of the terrorist attack that the Vice President seemed certain would come. Fortunately, they never had to put such a plan into effect.

Just as Donovan approached the door, Hale finished picking the lock and swung it open. The pair strode through the door into the dark, yellow interior of the stairwell and started up the stairs, two at a time. “Grenade und Arrow, hold on a second.” It was Hans, the van driver; he’d walked up the street to a small bakery on the corner.

The two agents froze. “Did we trip an alarm?”

"I don't think so. Just hold on." His breath sounded heavy in their earpieces; Hans was moving faster than his considerable girth usually allowed.

Donovan and Hale shot each other a worried glance.

"I think I've been made. There's a guy on a bike staring at me. Returning to the van."

Suddenly, the sound of squealing tires and roaring motorcycle engines filled the entryway. Behind them, two bikes carrying pairs of leather-clad men stopped; their passengers disembarked and ran into the entryway. For a moment they didn't see the duo at the top of the first flight, but once they did they wasted no time. Caught off guard by the sudden assault. Donovan and Hale barely had time to duck behind the upward flight of stairs before all four men drew Uzis and started shooting in their direction. "Hans?" Donovan yelled into his radio. *Nothing.*

"This just got complicated," Hale observed calmly, drawing his P99 from a messenger bag. His cool tone hid the rush of adrenaline surging through his veins. The junior agent stuck his head around the corner and emptied his first magazine at the figures at the base of the stairs. One crumpled as Donovan took the next set three at a time. Hale came close behind.

"I thought you were told not to use lethal force!" The voice in their ear sounded pissed. In the distance, sirens started blaring. "The police are on their way. You need to get out of there fast!"

"Four hostiles just blocked our exit. We're proceeding to the objective," Donovan replied. He raced up the next three flights of stairs with his partner close behind. At the end of the hall was a large black door. Donovan put three bullets into the lock and kicked it open. The apartment through the door was both spacious and seemingly deserted. In the den

on the right, where two leather chairs faced a small TV. On the left was a tiny kitchen. Donovan moved forward and up a step into a hallway. Two empty bedrooms branched off on the right and left. Straight ahead was a well-lit, wide-open living room with a pair of large, l-shaped couches facing each other. On the left side, windows faced the school across the street while on the opposite wall, glass doors led to balconies that overlooked the courtyard. A slightly aged computer sat on an otherwise pristine desk at the back of the room. Donovan looked up to where Hale had swept through a pair of bedrooms, the second of which was open to the top of the living room. "Clear! There is no one in here."

"Here either," Hale yelled back. "It was a goddamned setup!"

"Someone tipped him off." Donovan went over to the computer, quickly pried the hard drive from its slot, and placed it into his pocket. "It's warm. Maybe he just left."

To reinforce Hale's point, a burst of sudden gunfire sent bullets ripping into the wall and the fabric of the couches. The three remaining men from downstairs stood in the doorway of the apartment. Donovan took shelter behind the desk and returned fire. One of the gunmen jerked backward like a puppet on strings as bullet bore into his skull. "Ryan, I need some help here!"

Hale vaulted over a wooden railing and into the living room, firing blindly toward the door as he fell. His gunfire forced the two remaining assailants to duck along back into the hallway. Donovan rolled out from behind the desk and pulled open a door that led out onto a balcony.

Hale fired another shot and then sprinted to join Donovan. "I think I wounded one of them. He's still

operational though, and he doesn't need to walk to fire an Uzi. So what's the plan?"

Donovan reached inside and pulled a curtain off the wall. He draped it over the iron railing, and slid down to the next level. Hale followed, and the pair smashed their way through a set of glass doors into another apartment. Six people sat around an antique wooden dining table. One stood up, pale, as the blood from his face drained down into his feet "Qu'est-ce que tu fait?"

"Pardonnez-moi," Donovan shouted as he sprinted by. He yanked open the door and ran down the stairs into the courtyard. It was deserted except for two BMW motorcycles that lay on the ground by the door. "Sentinel, this is Arrow. We have two hostiles down, one wounded, and one very much alive in the building behind us." He slowly swiveled around, looking for danger. The sirens were growing louder. "Our target was not in the building. I need instructions. Over."

The same voice as before answered, soundly slightly superior and very much annoyed. "I told you to get out of there, not to start a bloody shoot out!"

"It's too late for that!" Donovan snarled. "Now get us out of here before we have to start another firefight with the police! I don't think that would go over very well on either side of the Atlantic."

The voice turned frosty. "I'm pulling up Keyhole coverage right now. Please hold on for a second." John peeked around the corner out onto the street. Five police cars with flashing lights had pulled up to the café up the street. And then he saw the van and remembered Hans. Donovan ran across the street and stopped at the door. Inside, the driver had stiffened in his seat, blood draining through a gaping hole from the windshield into his temple.

The van was unopened, but Donovan knew that it contained important files and equipment. He yanked on the door handle. *Locked.*

Across the street, Hale heard footsteps coming down the stairs. A tall man with greying hair and a moustache rounded the corner, an Uzi dangling from his hand. Hale ducked away from the door and waited until the man walked by before grabbing him. The assassin spun instantly out of the hold, throwing Hale off of him and into a wall. Ryan launched off the wall, knocked the killer over, and gave him a swift punch to the face. *Out cold; that sure made it harder to interrogate the bastard.* Realizing that his own weapon was low on ammo, Hale took the Uzi that had fallen to the ground and stuffed it into his coat, where it bulged conspicuously.

“Sentinel to Arrow: we found your target.” The voice had changed to slightly smug. “We picked him up on one of the school’s security cameras, and then hacked into the city’s camera network and tracked him to the tram stop about 200 yards north of your position, where he got on the number 13 tram six minutes later. There is a security camera in the tram and we are monitoring him as we speak.”

“Good. Where is he?”

“The tram just went through the “Plainpalais” stop, a little more than a mile away. We just snagged his credit card information; looks like he purchased a train ticket from the Geneva train station for a train leaving in ten minutes.”

“Are there any other assets in the area?”

“Negative. You and your partner are our only team in range. Is there any way you can get to the train station in ten minutes?”

Will you look behind the curtain?

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