

Chapter One

It was an ordinary flight, on an ordinary day, full of ordinary people. Until it wasn't.

"Eww, gross." Nine-year-old Elijah Samuels jabbed an elbow into the ribs of his thirteen-year-old sister, Abigail, and pointed at the couple kissing in front of them. Blue-eyed, blond-haired Lije, as he was called, was sturdy and tan from three weeks spent hitting the beach with his accountant father, who'd moved to Burbank after his divorce from the children's mother the previous summer. Abby was sturdy and tan, too, with sunny streaks in her long, brown braid and a pair of gold studs in her newly pierced ears, a dad-authorized act that she was afraid her mom was going to freak out over. The siblings were near the end of what had been a long line of passengers waiting to hand over their boarding passes and walk down the ramp to take their seats on the Airbus #A320. Flight 155 was scheduled to carry them from LAX to Washington Dulles, where their mother would

meet them. It was a Saturday, and a new school year would begin on Monday.

"Don't point," Abby hissed under her breath, smacking her brother on the shoulder.

"Don't hit," Lije retorted, jerking away and making a face at her.

The kissing couple, Mia and Nate Smolski, broke apart as they reached the turnstile. Nate handed over his boarding pass as Mia looked around to smile at Abby and Lije, having clearly overheard their exchange. A radiant smile lit up her thin face and made the slim brunette brie y beautiful. A long-distance runner who had attended UCLA on a scholarship, she was twenty-three years old and a newly minted nurse. Nate was twenty-six, a salesman for his uncle's car dealership. They'd gotten married the previous afternoon, and this flight was the first leg of their honeymoon. Mia followed her new husband on board, and Lije and Abby, still exchanging evil looks, followed them. In line behind Lije and Abby were two businessmen, Don Miller and Gary Henderson. Both worked in the marketing department of a research and development company. They'd spent the week in Southern California pitching their company's services to various clients, and were glad to be going home. Both were in their forties, both married with children.

The Garcia family of Alexandria, Virginia, boarded next: grandmother Rita, mom Haylie, dad Jason, and their two-year-old twin daughters, Gracie and Helen. Grandmother and Mom were each lugging a child, and Dad was carrying two car seats and what looked like four or ve backpacks. All looked tired and harassed, except the children, who were asleep on the women's respective shoulders.

Edward Thomas Jorgensen was behind the Garcias. A tall, t man of thirty-nine, he was neatly dressed in a polo shirt and khakis and carried a briefcase. He was unmarried, childless, currently unemployed.

Nine more people boarded after Jorgensen, for a total of 243 passengers on board. The plane also carried twelve crew members.

Flight 155 took off twenty-eight minutes late at 12:58 p.m. Blue skies, perfect flying weather.

One hour and fifty minutes later, still enjoying perfect flying weather, the Airbus A320 slammed into the side of a mountain just outside of Denver.

There were no survivors.

No cause for the crash could be determined.

NOVEMBER, ONE YEAR LATER, KAZAKHSTAN

The private jet bumped over a narrow strip of pavement as it touched down. At the end of the little-used runway in a cleared area of forest a few miles outside of Aktau, Kazakhstan, a trio of covered military-style trucks pointing their headlights toward the taxiing plane provided the only illumination. It was dark, it was snowing furiously, and those trucks held one wayward American citizen and a whole bunch of rifle-toting members of the Kazakh Armed Forces.

None of those things were designed to make James "Cal" Callahan feel all warm and fuzzy inside. The plane executed a neat one-eighty as it reached the end of the runway, turning its nose back the way they'd come so that takeoff could happen quickly.

"Keep the engines running," Cal directed the pilot, Tim Hendricks. Easing the jet to a halt, Tim nodded. A wiry six-two, Tim was, like Cal and Ezra Brown, the third member of their party, former Air Force Special Operations Command, also known as AFSOCs or, more commonly, Air Commandos.

"Think there'll be trouble?" Ezra asked, following him to the door. Ezra was Cal's backup, his second gun, and a friend. About Cal's own height at six-four, Ezra was meatier, bald as an egg, and heavily tattooed, including a Celtic cross on his left cheek. Cal himself was more conventional looking, with neatly cut black hair, even features, and no tattoos. Despite the dark business suits that proclaimed their civilian status, they made a formidable-looking pair.

"Shouldn't be, but you never know," Cal said as the door opened and the stairs descended. "Let's make this fast."

The small leather satchel he carried as he stepped out into the biting cold held five million dollars' worth of diamonds. They weren't his diamonds, and it wasn't his money that had bought them: it belonged to the CIA, or, more properly, the US government. But the US government didn't pay ransom.

Unless it decided it wanted to. Then it employed private contractors like Cal to do the

dirty work, thus keeping its official nose clean.

Ezra strode past him, taking up a position far enough to his right that even a spray of bullets couldn't get them both at the same time. The missile launcher on his shoulder was aimed squarely at the trucks. The AK-47 slung on its strap over his shoulder was for stragglers if the missile launcher should prove less than one hundred percent effective.

Eyes narrowed against the blowing snow, Cal started walking toward the trucks. He'd done a lot of things he didn't want to do in his thirty-four years of life. One way or another, most of them had been for money.

Getting Rudy Delgado out of Kazakhstan was about to be one of them.

Rudy was a computer hacker. One of the best. Ten years before, under the cover of his legitimate day job as an IT specialist for the CIA, he'd gone into the system, found and publicly exposed dozens of clandestine operations that at that time had been under way in the Middle East, with the justification that he opposed the United States' presence there. The public uproar had been enormous. The private backlash had cost serving officers their lives.

Having thus royally screwed the pooch, Rudy had fled the country, eventually winding up in Russia. In the years since, he'd continued working in IT, only for that country's security services. It had been a sweet deal: Rudy did what the Russian government wanted, and they protected him from the Americans and let him live.

Only Rudy being Rudy, he'd gotten ambitious. He'd hacked his way into their classified files and started poking around.

The Russians being the Russians, they hadn't liked that.

Nor had they liked what he'd found.

Rudy had fled again.

This time everybody and his mother was after him.

He'd wound up in Kazakhstan, where, via his specialty, the Internet, he dropped a bombshell on his former bosses at the

CIA: he knew what had caused the crash of Flight 155 outside of Denver last year. He was prepared to trade the information, plus provide irrefutable proof of what he claimed, for a ride back to the States and a guarantee of immunity from prosecution once he got there.

His former bosses took the deal, but a complication arose. Rudy was arrested for some minor offense in Chapaev and wound up in the custody of the Kazakhstani government. Which decided, clandestinely, to auction him off to the highest bidder.

The CIA won, and thus here Cal and company were.

Just another day at the office.

Three men emerged from the cab of the center truck and

walked toward Cal. Two were tall and straight in their military uniforms. The third, the one in the middle, was short, round, bespectacled Rudy. It was, in Cal's opinion, a poor trade for five million dollars' worth of diamonds, but what the US government did with its money wasn't his call to make. "Salaam." Cal greeted the soldiers in their language, bowing his head in accordance with the custom. They nodded curtly. *Not great believers in small talk, apparently*, he observed to himself, which made them his kind of guys. The soldier on the left held out his hand for the satchel. Cal handed it over. The soldier opened it up, thrust a gloved hand inside, rooted around. Apparently satisfied, he grunted, "Zhaksa," which meant "good," and closed the satchel back up again. The soldier on the right, who'd had a hand wrapped around Rudy's arm, thrust Rudy toward Cal. As Rudy stumbled for-

ward, the soldiers turned around and left, striding swiftly back toward the trucks. Cal grabbed Rudy's arm in turn and started hustling him back toward the plane, which waited with steps down and engine running just ahead of them. The fuselage gleamed silver where the headlights struck it; the logo—a circle with two wavy lines under it—painted on the sides and tail gave it the look of a sleek corporate jet, which Cal supposed was the point.

The truth was he didn't really give a damn about the plane's aesthetics, especially not now—these crucial few seconds, where the Kazakhs had the diamonds and he, Ezra, and Rudy were still outside the jet, were the most likely time for an attack.

"You're American?" Rudy gasped, breathless from the pace, as he looked up at Cal. Way up, because Rudy was maybe five-five. Beneath a red knit cap with a tassel at the crown, Rudy had scared-looking hazel eyes framed by wire-rimmed glasses, a big nose, a small mouth, and a round, pale face. Besides the cap, he was wearing a black ece jacket zipped up to the neck, jeans, and sneakers. No backpack, no gear.

"You got proof of what you say happened to that plane? Because I want to see it," was Cal's reply. Cal had been offered a nice bonus on top of his fee if he made sure Rudy brought the promised "proof" with him. Of course, if Rudy couldn't produce the proof, he'd still take Rudy back with him to the States. Rudy just might not like his reception at the other end.

"Yeah, sure. See?" Digging in his jeans pocket, Rudy came up with a small object that Cal had to squint at for a second before he recognized it: a flash drive.

Cal grunted and took the ash drive from Rudy, who looked like he wanted to protest but didn't quite dare. Then they were at the plane steps. Shooing Rudy up the stairs, Cal glanced back at the trucks. They were still there at the end of the runway, still politely lighting up the pavement, waiting for their guests to leave.

"Easy enough," Ezra said, coming up behind him.

"Seems like it," Cal replied, and followed Rudy into the plane.

A few minutes later, they lifted off into what looked to be the start of a beautiful day. Until it wasn't.

Chapter Two

F*reedom is a wonderful thing*, Dr. Gina Sullivan thought as she watched the pair of rare white-tailed eagles disappear into the gathering storm clouds. The female of the pair had been trapped in an oil slick for nearly twenty-four hours. Cleaned up, tagged, and released, the eagle had been joined by her mate and the two were winging away toward the mountains to the north. Scudding along in a bright orange motorized rubber boat in the choppy gray waters off Attu Island's Chirikof Point, Gina, an ornithologist, had been following as best she could in hopes of discovering the approximate location of their nest for later observation. But the oncoming storm meant that she was going to have to turn back, and so she'd stopped, shifting the Zodiac into neutral as she made one last observation. Lowering her binoculars with regret, she recorded in her small notebook the time—3:02 p.m.; the birds' direction—northwest; and the birds' speed—approximately twenty knots, then shoved the notebook into the pocket of her steel-blue, fur-lined parka for safekeeping.

For a moment she sat there as the little boat rode the swells, breathing deeply of the cold sea air, taking in the majesty of the rugged island with its beautiful snow-covered mountains, the wintry sea, the turbulent sky that threatened more snow. Kittiwakes, petrels, pelicans, and gulls screeched and circled above her. She watched a trio of brown pelicans gliding high above the water suddenly tuck their wings and dive toward the surface like kamikaze pilots, fishing for a meal, and felt a warm glow of contentment. *It's good to be out in the eld again.*

It had been a long time—too long.

That thought she'd had about freedom? She realized that it applied to herself as much as the eagles. Only her prison was grief. And guilt. For five years now she had been mired in both as helplessly as the eagle had been mired in oil. This trip, the first research project she had undertaken in the eld since she'd lost her family, was an attempt to jump-start her life.

Baby steps.

Thunder crashed loudly in the distance, echoing off the mountains and startling the wheeling birds into silence. The clouds piling up on the horizon were noticeably darker than before.

Time to go.

Reluctantly coming about, Gina juiced the throttle and raced for camp, meaning to follow the coastline around the point until she reached Massacre Bay. The small plane burst through the heavy cloud cover approximately five minutes later.

Gina had been eyeing the amassing clouds with misgiving in the wake of another earsplitting clap of thunder. Thunder snow was never a good sign, and she'd just seen an ominous flicker of lightning behind the threatening wall of weather that was now chasing her across the sea. When the plane torpedoed out of those self-same clouds, she sat up straight in surprise on the fiberglass bench seat that ran across the bow. Muffled to the eyes by a snow mask and huddled into her waterproof parka with her hood secured tightly around a face that was all blue eyes, wide mouth, high cheekbones, and pointed chin, she gripped the wheel tighter and watched in astonishment as the plane streaked across the leaden sky toward her.

It's way too low, was her first thought, even as she registered that it wasn't a seaplane like the orange and white Reeveer that had delivered four of her fellow scientists to this remote atoll in the Pacific; it was, rather, a sleek silver jet. That realization was followed by an alarmed *There's something wrong* as the plane continued to descend, blasting through the snow flurries on a trajectory that would bring it down way before it reached the island's runway, which was the only one within hundreds of miles.

You're being paranoid, she scolded herself, which, given her personal history with small planes, was no surprise.

The thing was, though, the plane looked like it desperately needed to land. It was dropping fast, losing altitude if not speed.

It's going to crash. As the thought crystallized into a near certainty, Gina's heart leaped into her throat. Sucking in a lungful of the freezing, salt-laden air, she watched the plane dip low enough to disturb the flocks of birds circling the bay. Their cries, coupled

with the splashing waves, the moan of the wind, and the Zodiac's own whining motor, had masked the sound of the plane until it was nearly upon her. Now the birds wheeled wildly in the face of this violent intrusion, their alarmed screeches almost drowned by the roar of the jet engines, which was close enough and powerful enough to reverberate against her eardrums. As she watched the jet shoot across the sky, she registered the logo painted on the side and tail—a circle above two wavy lines—which probably denoted some huge multinational corporation but held no meaning for her. She also had an excellent view of its smooth silver belly. There was no sign of the wheels descending, no sign of any attempt to control its descent. It was, simply, coming down.

Bone-deep fear twisted her insides. *Pull up, pull up, pull up*, she silently urged the pilot. Then, *Dear God, protect whoever's on board*.

Gina yanked her snow mask down.

"There's a runway about eight miles to the east." Her shout was drowned out by the noise of the plane, not that there was any real chance that the pilot could hear her. Still, arm waving wildly over her head in hopes that the pilot might see, she gestured in the

direction of the no-longer-operational LORAN (long range navigational) Coast Guard station that was home to the only place to land on the island. It was idiotic, of course, but it was also instinctive: she couldn't just do *nothing* as the plane hurtled toward the waves.

The section of cockpit windshield that was visible from her angle was black and impenetrable. It was her imagination that painted the pilot at the controls, white-faced and desperate as he fought whatever disaster that had brought the plane to this, and

she knew it. She also knew that the chances that her gesture had been seen and understood were almost impossibly small.

Oomph. With her eyes on the plane rather than on where she was going, she was caught by surprise as the Zodiac hit one of the larger swells the wrong way. The impact sent her flying up off the seat and then smacked her back down onto it hard enough that her teeth snapped together. Thus reminded of where she was and the importance of keeping her mind on her business, she eased the throttle back to near-idle speed, retaining just enough forward power to keep the boat from being tossed around like flotsam by the waves. Pulse pounding, she switched her attention back to the oncoming plane.

Whether it was exhaust from the engines or actual smoke from an onboard fire she couldn't tell, but a billowing white vapor trail now marked its descending path.

Gina shuddered. The memories that trailing plume brought back made her dizzy.

Get over it, she ordered herself fiercely, shaking her head to clear it. *You're not in that plane. What happened is in the past. You're a different person now.*

Now she was twenty-eight years old, a respected ornithologist whose specialty was the environmental impact of pollution on birds, and at that moment she was out alone in the frigid Bering Sea, doing her job. This plane had nothing to do with her. Whatever happened, she was present merely as a bystander, a witness. There was no reason for her heart to pound, or her stomach to twist.

Her heart pounded and her stomach twisted anyway.

Lifting her binoculars to her eyes, she tracked the plane until

it plunged into the outermost edge of the deep gray blanket of clouds that formed an ominously low ceiling above her head. The clouds swallowed it completely. Only the snarl of its engines told her that it was still racing toward her through the sky.

Her concentration was so complete that when the radio clipped to her pocket crackled, it made her jump.

"Gina. Are you there?"

The voice belonged to Arvid Kleir, a fellow scientist. The faint Swedish accent he

retained even after years in the States was unmistakable. Along with the rest of the twelve-strong party culled from various top universities, he had chosen to forgo his Thanksgiving break to join the expedition. They had all arrived on Attu two days prior, eight of them, including Gina, dropped off by a chartered boat that would return for them in a week and the rest delivered by the aforementioned Reeve. Their purpose was to observe and record the hazards posed by the island's unique pollution to resident and migratory bird species. Arvid came from Yale. Gina herself was an assistant professor of environmental studies at Stanford.

Yesterday afternoon, having been alerted that something was amiss by the abnormal signals emitted by the female eagle's micro-chip, she and Arvid had set out from camp in the Zodiac, located the bird, and rescued it from the pool of degrading oil in which it had become trapped. Attu was littered with a ton of debris from World War II, and the intermittent leakage of decades-old oil, the source of the pool, was a serious problem. Partly full oil and fuel drums, forgotten weapons, unexploded artillery, heavy equipment left to rust on hillsides and in the ocean, overturned ship-

ping containers, and crumbling small structures abandoned by the military were everywhere. As the site of the only World War II battle on American soil, the place once had been home to more than fifteen thousand American troops as well as, on the opposite end of the island, two thousand enemy Japanese. When the war had ended, everything had been left right where it stood. Now the place was both a birder's paradise and an ecological nightmare. She and Arvid had set up a temporary camp, then spent last night and this morning painstakingly cleaning up the bedraggled eagle and making sure it was tough enough to be returned to the wild. At about one in the afternoon they'd released the bird. Arvid had then headed back to the party's main camp at the erstwhile Coast Guard station on foot while she'd followed the bird in the Zodiac.

Snatching up the radio, Gina pressed the reply button even as she craned her neck in a useless effort to locate the plane through her binoculars.

"I'm here," she said urgently into the radio. "Arvid, listen. There's a plane out here that looks like it's about to crash into the sea. You need to call the Coast Guard right now."

Gina and her eleven compatriots were the only people on the island. With cell signals nonexistent, their only means of communication with the outside world was the satellite phone they'd brought with them, which was back at the main camp.

Letting go of the button, she listened in growing dismay as Arvid responded. ". . . understand me? Gina? Are you there?"

It was clear from his tone that he hadn't heard her transmission. Interference from the oncoming storm, probably. Gina let the binoculars drop to concentrate on the radio.

“Arvid? Call the Coast Guard.” Gina only realized that she was shouting into the radio when her voice echoed back at her.

Static crackled through Arvid’s next words. “...back to camp. This storm’s a doozy. You —”

Gina stared down at the radio as his voice was swallowed up by more static. Clearly, her message was not getting through. A rattling roar almost directly overhead had her thrusting the radio between her knees for safekeeping, then snatching up the binoculars and searching the churning gray ceiling for some sign of the plane.

The clouds were too thick. She couldn’t see it.

Tilting her head back to the point where her neck hurt, bracing her feet against the rocking deck for balance, she was gazing almost directly up when she saw a bright ash that looked like a horizontal lightning bolt light up the sky through the obscuring clouds. Then a deafening *boom* hit her, along with an invisible tsunami of a force led fronted by heat. A strange, high-pitched whistling sound split the air.

Oh, my God, the plane’s blown up.