

Chapter 2 – Shadows of the Past

Barry sits with MoJo in his lounge in South Palms Estate on his private Mediterranean Island. He downs a scotch and quickly pours another. Then he drinks that one straight down, only a slight grimace betraying the burning sensation in his throat.

“Something on your mind?” Morris asks as he sips his scotch. He holds his glass up in the sunlight coming through the twenty feet tall bay window. He peers through the golden liquid at Barry and says in a fortuneteller’s voice, “I see troubled waters in your future. You are perhaps unhappy with your assignment. You wish the government assigned you to another task.”

“No. Not at all,” Barry shifts to avoid direct eye contact with Morris. His muscular chest fills out the black T-shirt, the clean shave and close-cropped black hair giving him the look of a young man just out of bootcamp. But the three lines across his forehead and the beginning of luggage beneath his eyes carries the signs of a man approaching forty. “You are helping the USA in areas where it’s best we stay out of. I’m okay with that. It’s not like we haven’t worked with mercenaries before.”

Morris strokes his beard, tugging on the grayish streak in the middle. He gets up and walks to the bar, retrieves the decanter of twenty-year-old scotch and refills Barry’s glass. “Well, then what is it? Because you are drinking my best liquor like water. When you drink for pleasure, you can never drink too much. But when you are trying to drown your sorrows, there is never enough in the bottle. There is only pleasure and sorrow when it comes to drinking. So, which is it?”

“It’s Maria,” Barry says definitively.

“You really haven’t answered the question.”

Barry takes a shorter sip and waits for Morris to sit back down. “Why did you let her go on the mission? You had to know there was a better than good chance she was going to be taken. She could have been killed.”

“Ah, so it is pleasure that drives you to drink.” Morris’ face twists into a sadistic smile. He enjoys toying with the CIA agent. Watching his stone-cold face hold back his true emotions.

“What?”

“You find pleasure in my daughter, but feel sorrow she can be hurt,” Morris puts a fatherly tone to the statement. “Totally understandable. But not to worry, I raised her to be tougher than most. She can handle herself in a rough situation. Besides, this plan was mostly her idea, and you did agree to go along with it. So, what changed?”

Barry finishes his drink and studies Morris for a moment. He can’t tell if he really wants to know what happened in Sudan, if he already knows the details, or if he basically doesn’t care. “I agreed to the plan because I thought she would signal us the first day she arrived at the camp. If the Commander was there, we’d take the camp, if not, we pull her out by nightfall. Not let her spend two weeks in captivity. She was out of control. She went...”

“Hello, Daddy. Barry.”

“Well, speak of the devil.” Morris stands and holds out a hand.

Maria crosses the room and hugs her father. She does a pirouette to show off her new lavender and verdant silk dress. “Do you like it? It feels good to be out of fatigues. Are you two discussing the success of the mission? I just got off the phone with the Sudanese Foreign Minister, a Mister hard to pronounce name, the money has been deposited and he is very happy.”

“Barry was just giving me his critique of... how should I say this... your performance. Go ahead, Barry, continue.”

“Yes, Barry, what do you think of my performance,” Maria’s voice was sharp. She didn’t speak to him on the flight back. She spent the two days after the mission drinking with her mercs, especially Fumu, and avoiding him. Fumu told her when the girls reached their village most of it had been destroyed, burned down, but their families were okay. “And please don’t hold anything back. I can take it.”

“I’m sure you can,” he replied flexing his muscles and puffing up his chest under the black cotton T-shirt. He got up and poured her a drink. “As I was saying, you went berserk out there. Very unprofessional the way you beat those two men to death, well, one man and a boy. I’m sure they did some horrible things to you there, but this was your plan. And for the record, Morris, I was against it. And for what it’s worth, that is exactly why I was against it. Letting yourself get taken prisoner, and as I warned, subjected to all kind of torture... It was not a good plan.”

“How else were you going to get someone into the camp? You think you could have been taken prisoner?” Maria shoots her head back downing the scotch. “You wouldn’t even have left the village alive.”

“She got you there,” Morris joked, “they would have made you for a government man immediately. You have that look.” Morris enjoyed toying with Barry Thomas. He did not want an agent within his ranks. The government, the CIA undoubtably, insisted on it as part of their oversight with their armament contracts. He let Barry in on other aspects of the business to find out what the government knew. He also knew that you could learn as much from the questions asked as the answers given by your rivals.

“You were supposed to contact us the first day...”

“For what? Diambu wasn’t there.”

“And the plan was if he wasn’t there, we get you out. And move on to the next camp,” Barry stares her down. “You showed bad judgement. And your lack of control...”

“He wasn’t in camp the first week,” Maria says emotionless, “you wanted to leave those girls behind to face whatever happened to them. Then they would have known I was a spy; the next squad would have killed me on the spot. However, he did show up to make that arms deal, and we got him.”

“What you did was crazy,” Barry shouts. “And you let the arms dealer slip through our fingers. If you would have signaled us sooner, we would have cut off his escape from the camp. Maybe, ambushed them in the bush before taking down the camp. That’s how you run a professional op.”

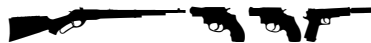
“I may have gotten a little rough,” she yells back, “but they deserved no better. This isn’t like an ordinary war. These people are animals, and we should exterminate them like the vermin they are. It is what we are being paid to do. If you can’t handle it, Mr. Special Forces, stay home and out of my way.”

“She did go to extremes in Sudan, but that is not necessarily a bad thing,” Morris interjects, “When details of those people’s death get out, and I will make sure it does, other warlords will not be so willing to take children. What is the axiom? An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of the cure.” Morris goes to refill his drink and pats his daughter on the knee as he passes her sitting at the bar. “Do you know why I like drinking in this room?” Morris asks, slipping away from the argument to look out at the Aegean Sea.

“Is it the foot-thick bulletproof glass?” Barry is seething, knowing he’s losing the argument. Naturally, father and daughter would team up against him.

“Yeah, that’s part of it,” muses Morris, “it’s because I can see the world real clear from here. I can see my enemies coming from a ways off. Gives me a real sense of peace knowing who my enemies are and where they are coming from.”

Barry isn’t sure what Morris means, or whom it is directed to, but he knows he isn’t going to win a battle on two fronts. He will have to come back later and talk to Morris. Maria is obsessed with finding this sergeant of hers. He had been briefed on her history by the Agency and so far, she was living up to her reputation. On the missions he was part of, she was reckless, ruthless, and murderous beyond reason. He gives Morris one last piece of advice before moving on, “your enemies might know what to expect from her and not give her the chance to do it next time.”



Maria pours herself another drink and stands next to her father at the window. The medieval castle dominates the tiny island. Morris did a little modernization to the structure to make it a comfortable living place, but as castles goes, it is impregnable except from an airstrike. He has anti-aircraft brigades on two of the turrets. There are a few people, mostly generational inhabitants, who aren’t in the BSA.

“What is that man’s problem?”

“I don’t think he objects to you playing rough with the boys,” Morris puts his arm around her shoulder. “I think he objects to you not playing with him.”

“EEYOO! He’s a government man. I don’t know why you allow him to hang around. He can’t be trusted.”

“That sounds like your Uncle Nicky speaking.” He turns her head slightly and lightly pokes the bruise under her eye. “The lavender in your dress almost makes that look good. He does care about you.”

“Well, at least you put him in his place.”

Morris laughs, “Honey, I was speaking to you.”

“What? Me? What did I do?”

“I was trying to tell you not to be looking for your enemies so hard that you can’t see them coming. Remember, if you let people know you are looking for him, he will start looking for you. Don’t become an easy target.”

Maria drops her head. “That arms dealer had the types of weapons Warren would have been able to get his hands on. US rocket launchers, the new ones. I should have called in our guys sooner. He got away; it was my fault.”

“Doesn’t really prove it was him,” Morris lifts her chin, “I can get a hold of them too. And he didn’t get away. I had a second team bird-dogging yours. We have eyes on him.”

Maria leaves the huge hall with a bounce in her step. She wonders why her father didn’t tell her about the other team. But she knows him well enough to know he wasn’t leaving her safety to some government man. She may be a trained killer, but she is still his daughter, and he probably felt he needed to protect her. She wonders what would have happened if she sent the SOS signal. Undoubtedly, he would have leveled the camp to get her out.

The arms business is by far the most dangerous of all the illegal ventures they are involved in. And it was the introduction into this life at age twelve that she became Warren's and the government's target. It was also her first job a couple of years later, thanks to her Uncle Nicky.



She was in New York for a couple of months when a black caddy pulled up outside the building she was hanging out at. She sat on the stoop in a short fur jacket, jeans, and sneakers. She was surrounded by ten boys, some younger, some older than her by a few years.

The window rolled down, "Maria, your uncle would like to have a few words with you."

The boys formed a line in front of her.

She parted them with her two hands, "it's okay, guys, I know him." She walked over to the driver, "Hi, Rocky, what does he want to talk to me about?"

"Like he would tell me." Rocky rolled his eyes and smiled. He was eighteen, merely three years older than her. His boyish demeanor amused her the few times she met him. "He said drive here, pick you up, and bring you out to the island." Then in a mock harsh voice he grumbled, "no detours."

She laughed, "Can I bring some of the boys with me? They would get a kick out of seeing the mansion."

"What? You trying to get me killed? I thought you liked me."

Maria turned back to the guys who had fanned out in front of the building. Two of the twenty-year-olds were nervously fidgeting with the guns in their pockets. "Relax, guys. I told you I know this guy, he's family." Maria opened the back door and waited a couple of seconds to show

there was no one else inside. Then she climbed in and rolled down the window, “I’ll be back tonight. Maybe I’ll bring back a nice present from my uncle.”

Rocky put on the radio and headed for the highway. It was an hour drive from the South Bronx and its burned-out buildings to the green lawns of Long Island. It would have been longer if Rocky didn’t drive like he was fleeing a crime scene. He was dodging cars on the left and the right all the way there.

Maria walked in the front door and went directly to the office in the back. It had been years since she was last in the house. She was standing at the window looking at the garden when Nicky walked in.

“Do you miss the old place?”

“A little, I guess,” Maria turned and ran to hug him. “You haven’t changed anything.”

“Why mess with perfection,” Nicky said and held her at arm’s length. “Now This! This right here is perfection.” He pulled her back in for another hug.

“OK, what did I do? What do you want?”

“You haven’t done nothing. Can’t I just want to see my only niece. You come back to the city and not a word, not a hello, Uncle. How are you doing?”

“Come on,” Maria laughed, “I know you are not the sentimental type.”

“I am when it comes to you.” Nicky walked over to his desk and sat down. Maria was about to sit in the plush chair by the window. “No, not there. Come sit at the desk, I have an opportunity to discuss with you.”

Maria sat down and he laid out the details. In two weeks, during Christmas break, Rocky will drive her to Norfolk, Virginia. She will pick up a suitcase filled with books and take the train back to New York.

“Hold on,” she interrupted, “you want me to be a drug mule? Uncle Nicky...”

“No! Not transporting drugs,” Nicky protested. “I would never put you in that position. The books will hold guns... pistols. I consider you more as a courier than a mule. It is really safe. No one checks baggage on the train.” He gets up and walks around to sit next to her. “You know gun running is the cornerstone of my empire. It is how your father and I got started.”

“Then Morris is okay with this?”

“Well, let’s keep this between the two of us for now. I just need you to make a trip now and another during spring break. Forty guns each time, I’ll pay you two hundred dollars each time.”

“You’re kidding me, right?”

“What?”

“That’s five dollars a gun,” Maria frowned, “guns on the street go for at least one hundred, maybe two if they are good quality. Five hundred a trip, Uncle Nicky, that’s fair!”

“Your dad taught you too good.”



Maia boarded the train in Newport News, Virginia at 6:00 am dressed in a green and white school outfit. The suitcase was too heavy for her to lift, so a porter placed the black rolling luggage at the front of the car for oversized baggage and asked what she is carrying.

Maria replied, “Books. The nuns don’t want the devil sneaking in while we are away for Jesus’ birthday. So, lots of homework, lots of books.”

She rode to Washington, DC. where they switched out crews and she waited to see if there was anyone left onboard. There were a couple of people who remained, and she got off with her suitcase. She went into a restroom where she turned her skirt inside out and it was now an orange and blue checkerboard pattern. She did the same to her blazer. She pulled the black covering off the suitcase revealing a bright pink exterior and left the restroom.

Five minutes before her train arrived, a girl her age and size went into that same restroom wearing the exact same outfit as she had on. She waited a few minutes then switched to Maria’s green and white outfit and pulled the pink covering from her baggage. She boarded the train Maria was on, taking up the vacated seat. Maria boards a few cars behind her.

Except for the near panic attack she had, as she assured Nicky she would experience in the restroom, the trip went fine.

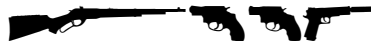
Nicky told her in his office, “I am sure you have been in a public bathroom since you were twelve.” She said sure. “Then this will be no different. In fact, this will help you get over your anxiety.”

But it was different, maybe the illegality of what she was doing wreaked havoc on her mind. She could not get the taste of chloroform out of her mouth, or the feeling she was about to be grabbed from behind again.

After her spring break trip, Maria arranged for another girl to make the runs. She worked out a deal with Nicky to make a monthly run using girls she supplied. She tried to bump up her cut, but Nicky held fast, saying, “you will be making six times the money, so pay the girls what

you want out of your end. Pick your runners carefully, because if they lose a shipment, you will have to pay the eight thousand dollars.”

Nicky was proud of the way she handled the business. He told Morris she took to it naturally and was a leader from the start. Morris contacted his gun manufacturer in North Carolina and told him to step up production. By the next year they were using the trains to move guns from the south to five major cities in the north. All the couriers were Maria’s school girls. She cut the number of couriers on a run to one girl, who just did a quick change of clothes at the layover stations. Also, there was no need to change the color of the luggage, she kept them in basic colors, indistinguishable from other people’s bags.



Barry was back at the bar in the Window Room, as he called it. It was late in the evening, and he was waiting for Morris, knowing he’d be there soon. Morris was not a creature of habit, but he did like to watch the night sky. And Barry knew for the last two years, this was where he watched it.

“Am I going to need to send for more scotch?”

“I’m just having a short one this time,” Barry replied. “Don’t you have a cask or something down in the dungeons?”

“No, I keep drunk CIA agents in the dungeons,” Morris laughed. “Look, I know why you are here. Yes, she can go a bit overboard. I guess she gets that from me. I’m sure you have been briefed about New York, Washington, the whole situation. But as long as we are getting the job done, and might I add, Washington is getting their weapons. You know, staying ahead of the Ruskies, they don’t care.”

“But I do,” Barry insisted. He steeled himself with the remainder of the scotch in his glass. “It’s not just that she is putting her life at risk, and mine, and the team’s. She is doing it for insane reasons. She is chasing a ghost. It is going to catch up to her one day. She is going to dig herself into a hole we can’t get her out of.”

Morris poured a drink and took a seat in his favorite chair. He stared out the window for a good while before continuing the conversation. “Ghosts aren’t real. They can’t hurt you. But I have real enemies. And so does Maria. And for the record, she was a soldier in the gang when she was fifteen. She asked to join, and I facilitated it. Maria trained hard for years, when I said she can handle herself, I meant better than you. If she gets herself into a situation she can’t handle, you will be of little use to her anyway.”

Barry stood in front of Morris, this was the conversation he wanted to have earlier, “I know what you are really afraid of. You are afraid that without Sgt. Warren, your personal boogieman, she’s going to leave you. I see the hate in those cool blue eyes. I know you see it too. I’m not sure if you know who that hate is directed at... So, you keep her looking for someone you killed years ago. Hell man, you blew up half of Washington D.C. to do it.”

Morris laughed, “I heard it was a gas leak. You know... bad pipes.” He rose out of his chair in one smooth move and was face-to-face with Barry. “You know the only way to know if someone is truly dead...” he put two fingers to the side of Barry’s temple. “You look them in the eyes and put a bullet in their head. Now, I actually came in here to watch the senate hearings on terrorism. I’m testifying.”

Morris clicked the remote and the panel behind the bar slid open. The television went on and the Senate was in sessions. The committee chairman was asking his question. The camera then focused on Morris for his answer.

“You bugged Congress?”

“No, you idiot! This is C-Span.”

“So, this is live. How are you able to watch it over here?”

“You do know how television works, right? They broadcast, I have a satellite receiver,” Morris chided, knowing the real meaning behind Barry’s question. “Now shut the fuck up! I need to hear this.” He turned up the volume.

“Terrorism is on the rise around the world. Suicide bombers, militia groups here and elsewhere, are finding it easier to plan and carry out attacks,” said TV Morris. “The war you are used to fighting is not going to be the war you will be fighting. A handful of dedicated people willing to die for a cause is nearly impossible to stop,” Morris and TV Morris said in unison. “Instead of a large army, you are going to need to station small rapid response teams, like SWAT teams all around the world. People in places that will not be big targets but can unleash devastating firepower quickly.”

“Are you suggesting we scrap our bases overseas, for what...” the chairman asked.

Morris put on a headset, “Not scrap them. Downsize and spread them out.” TV Morris repeats his response.

“Why not just appear before the Senate yourself?” Barry enquires.

“Yeah, that’s not going to happen, Barry. If you want, take the bottle with you. I must watch and make sure this guy sticks to the script and doesn’t screw up anything. So, if you please, shut up.”

TV Morris hesitated before answering the next question, “the best use of government forces, and government dollars, would be in operating high-altitude bombers from airfields around the world. But instead of dropping bombs, they launch guided missiles at selected targets.”

“Guided by whom?” asks the congressman.

“By an operator here in the United States,” Morris said and a moment later the words came from the television. “We can have assets on the ground, either our own or trusted allies, pick out targets. We can then remove them with surgical precision. We strike small sites with greater effectiveness.”

“It sounds rather inhumane.”

“Does to me too,” adds Barry.

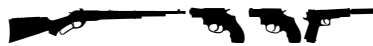
Morris gave Barry a stern look, “there is nothing humane about war. This is the fight we will be having in the future. Our enemies are not going to line up thousands of men and send them charging across a battlefield. And even if they do, it will be far better to take out their headquarters than to cut down countless numbers of troops.”

TV Morris echoes his sentiments with the same conviction. Barry left and Morris continued, “it is cost effective in a number of ways. The cost in equipment, the cost in human lives, our troops as well as theirs, the cost in collateral damage. This is the war of the future, and I am bringing it to you today.”

“And what happens when this technology falls into our enemies’ hands?”

“Most of the technology will be here, State side. Or on our planes, what tech is in the missiles will be destroyed in the strike. Like it or not, big war is going to be downsized. You are going to need to redefine your armed forces, first to identify your enemy, then to snuff them out quickly. And my company can help you do just that.”

TV Morris was done. The closed-door hearing, which was not broadcast publicly, was wrapped up with a few superfluous speeches by senators. Morris clicked the remote and disabled the hack into the senate chamber.



Morris sat staring out the window at the night sky. The hearing had gone well. He didn't mind dealing with the government as a whole, it was having to work with individuals, either persons or agencies, that he distrusted. They wanted his knowledge and technology and were willing to overlook New York and Washington, and some wanted it bad enough to have caused what happened in those places. His life was a double-edged sword, and he could never forget it. He started for another drink then sat back down. He needed to be clear-headed for the moment.

Barry was right, Maria was becoming more aggressive in her pursuit of Warren, impulsive to the point of recklessness. Without a body, or any other evidence to prove Warren's death, her past haunted her. He trusted Representative Webber had given him the correct time and place to strike Warren, the damage caused by the missile verified that. Webber was too much of a coward to have lied. But somebody else, Senator Carter for one, could have tipped him off. And he didn't really know who Warren worked for. So, he created a ghost.

Perhaps, Maria working with Barry Thomas was causing her to become unhinged. She had become more dangerous over the last year. He laughed out loud when he thought about the glove. It was a dingy, tarnished, old relic falling apart when she found it in that crypt. The whole castle had been about to come down around them, but she saw it and had to get it, crawling over bones between crumbling slabs to reach it. A week later, she had restored it, and proudly showed it off as the most valuable treasure she had. He had no idea what she had in mind to do with it.

When he heard her tell the tale of beating the two guys to death in Sudan, saw the glee in her eyes as she relived the moment, her standing there with the glove on, mimicking her actions... At least she said she disinfected the gauntlet, taking great care of her favorite weapon. He did teach her to always clean her gun after each use, keeping it battle ready; she treated it the same. The way she held it up, flexed her fingers in it, he knew she had gone over the edge.

There will be no more missions with Barry. No missions at all for a while. But she isn't going to like that, he thought.

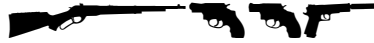
Morris looked at his watch, it wasn't that late in London. He picked up the phone and dialed. "Hey, I need you here... Now, that's when." He hung up. He would wait until tomorrow night, maybe a day or so later to ground her. He saw his reflection laughing at him in the window.

I know she hates it when I ground her. But it is for her own good, her safety. She is not a kid anymore, she'll get over it. Yeah, I know, she is not going to take it well at all.

He decided it was finally time for that drink, and he needed to come up with a catchy name for his new proposal for the government.

Something with a good acronym. The military loves their acronyms. Something like STRIKER, Sky Threat Reconnaissance and Interceptor Kinetic Energy Rocket, or Worldwide

High-Altitude Missile, WHAM. That's it, I'll give the assignment to Maria. That will take her mind off Warren for a while.



The jet touched down on the airfield predawn. It dropped off one passenger and left immediately afterwards. The blacked-out Mercedes arrived at the south gate a few minutes later. Morris was on hand to lower the drawbridge as the car rolled slowly and quietly into the castle's grounds. It turned left and proceeded to the underground garages. The dozen men on duty never saw the driver; it didn't matter, everything that happened on the South Palms Estate Island was strictly on a need-to-know basis. If Morris opened the gate, that was all they needed to know, and no mention of the visitor would ever be discussed.