GOD'S EYE

Chapter 1

Madison Square Garden, New York

Vice presidential hopeful Gene Romano brushed a black hair from his brown eyes and waved his arms to the throngs of enthusiastic supporters who filled the overflowing Madison Square Garden for this Saturday-night political fundraiser. His running mate and presidential hopeful, Thomas Owens, had just finished his address, and the emotionally charged crowd screamed like he was a rocker. The irony of choosing this venue, made famous by legendary boxing matches, didn't escape Romano, who witnessed a master class in political speechmaking that served as a first blow against the political establishment.

The lanky Owens stepped to the mic, wiping the sweat from his face, caused by the myriad spotlights shining on him and Romano. "Ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce you to my running mate. A prosecutor by trade, he believes in doing what is right for the everyday people who make this country work. He's also a fellow New Yorker who has committed himself to serving you, his friends and neighbors, and refuses to change our platform to cater to large donors."

The crowd went wild, and it took several minutes before Owens was heard over the din.

"While my running mate is smart and savvy, we have his wife to thank for his presence tonight." He pointed at Gene's wife, Sara. "She told him that if he didn't like the way the system works, he should do something about it."

Again, the crowd erupted into shouts and cheers.

"So, without further ado, let me introduce to you my friend and running mate, Gene Romano!"

Romano gave a toothy smile as he shook Owens's hand and waited until the crowd died down. "Mr. Owens is right about me. I entered the political arena after years of being told that my efforts to get the bad guys off the streets would be in vain, thanks to the laws established by people who live in ivory towers. The idea of wealthy corporate types calling the shots, frequently at the cost of the average person, makes me seethe. Working with Thomas Owens has been a breath of fresh air that has reinvigorated my belief that we can make the system work again."

The crowd waved their signs and cheered even louder than before. "Owens, Owens, Owens!" as the presidential hopeful pumped his deep brown fist into the air.

Romano stepped away from the podium and glanced at his running mate, who wore a wide smile. He couldn't resist poking his friend and leaned into his friend's ear. "Told you this was a good idea." Romano stood back and applauded his friend.

Owens nodded and laughed.

An odd sound picked its way past the roaring crowds, reaching Romano's ear. "What's that buzzing noise?"

Was it a large insect or animal? It couldn't be; they were inside Madison Square Garden, for goodness' sake. The sound grew in intensity, and Owens's brow furrowed and his eyes darted around.

"Do you hear that, Tom?" Romano yelled over the roar of the crowd.

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A small but unmistakable explosive charge popped near Romano's head, and the side of his face changed from a smile to a pink mist of exploding flesh. Within a second, Romano slumped to the floor, a gaping bloody wound where the right side of his face used to be.

The color drained from Owen's face as his Secret Service detail grabbed him from the back and dragged him behind the podium.

"Gene . . ."

His security detail manhandled Owens off the stage and through a short hallway.

Owens tried to speak, but his mouth struggled to form words. "For God's sake, someone check on Gene!" Owens howled as his security team funneled him past doors, each of which was blocked by a member of law enforcement whose only task was to ensure no further threats popped out to harm him.

Once they reached an exterior door, his security team threaded him through a human tunnel of agents and officers and into a black SUV, which sped from the lot, along with federal and state vehicles in tow.

Chapter 2

Langley, Virginia

Jake Stone's six-foot-four linebacker frame sat wedged into the corner of the tiny workroom, serving as the site for his administrative hearing on a muggy fall Monday morning. Since the air-conditioning unit was broken, the droning sound of the ceiling fan circulating warm air filled the room where he sat across from his former mission handler and her boss. Sweat dripped down the side of his face, and his short-cropped black hair shone from the humidity.

The doorknob to the beige-colored room spun as the three-person panel filed in and took their seats at a table with paper placards identifying each of them. Two additional burly men stood at either end of the table and glared at Stone. The chair of the panel, Eileen Halsey, interlaced her fingers on the desk in front of her and addressed the room.

"Mr. Stone, as you know, you're charged with disobeying a direct order from your superior. We've heard testimony about your behavior, but I will give you a chance to respond to the charges and explain in your own words what happened."

Stone leaned into the microphone in front of him, his tanned olive-skinned face cleanly shaven for the hearing. "My team and I were responsible for extracting Dr. Anton Lyankhovych, a Belarusian scientist who wanted to defect to the West. When we found him at his medical office, he refused to leave without his wife and daughter."

Halsey glanced at the paper she was holding. "And what happened next?"

"I contacted my handler, who told me that under no circumstances were we to deviate from the mission in order to assist Lyankhovych's family. If something happened to them, they were collateral damage."

Halsey frowned. "But you didn't follow that directive."

Stone shrugged a shoulder. "We wouldn't be here now if I had, would we?"

Halsey wrinkled her nose. "Did you consult with your men before deciding to disobey a direct order?"

Stone tensed. "No. I was the team lead and informed my men of the updated parameters of the mission," Stone lied.

He'd spoken with his team, and they unanimously agreed to take the whole family, each man willing to risk his life to save them. Stone wasn't about to repay their bravery and loyalty by hanging them out to dry now.

Though there were close calls, Stone's team successfully extracted Lyankhovych and his family, deposited them at Ramstein Air Base for their debrief, and transferred them to the United States. Lyankhovych's tearful wife and young daughter hugged every member of his team and

thanked them, so Stone considered the mission a success. Unfortunately, his superiors didn't feel the same, and now Stone would pay the price for pissing off a bureaucrat for not following a direct command.

Halsey lifted a brow. "Is there anything else you care to add before we render our decision?"

Stone narrowed his eyes as he studied the face of each panel member. "As a matter of fact, yes. My team and I were tasked with retrieving a leading researcher in synthetic biology from a hostile country. We successfully completed our mission and brought his wife and daughter along. I'll remind this panel that Belarus has a history of violating human rights and what that would have meant for the Lyankhovych family if we left them there."

He pulled away from the microphone. Now his fate rested in the hands of the three-person hearing committee.

"Mr. Stone, your arrogance in disobeying a direct order and placing your team and Dr. Lyankhovych in harm's way is unacceptable. Your actions have left this committee with no option but to recommend your termination. Security will escort you to your division, and you will surrender all agency equipment."

Stone gripped the arm of his chair so hard, his fist turned white. Rage surged through his body, but he contained it, lest he give them reason to lock him up. He glared at the panelists in turn, and two refused to meet his gaze.

I wouldn't be able to look at me either.

Halsey squirmed in her seat as their eyes met before motioning for a guard to come to her. The man strode to the spot in front of Halsey, who instructed him to retrieve additional agents to escort Stone back to his division area.

So now I'm a threat to the agency?

The sound of cell phone notifications filled the hearing room.

Halsey looked down at her phone and raised her hand to her mouth. "Oh, my God."

Chapter 3

Washington DC

The air conditioner hummed softly in the background, keeping the oppressive early fall humidity at bay in the lobby of the Robert F. Kennedy Department of Justice Building, and that suited Charlene Silva just fine. Charlene had served as an entry guard for the building for years, and as she approached retirement, she found the humidity took a toll on her in a way that it hadn't when she was younger.

Such was life, but Charlene didn't mind. With age also came the wisdom of what mattered and what didn't. When she started her career, the thought of guarding the entrance of a building would have brought her to tears of boredom. Younger Charlene wanted adventure and action, and she experienced all of that. Now, a more mature Charlene was happy to greet employees and visitors.

Charlene adjusted the stool where she sat. A young attorney, Abdul Kassis, who had worked at the DOJ for nearly a year now, walked toward her. He was a nice young man, always so friendly. He was also handsome, with big brown eyes and a beautiful head of black hair. In fact, he normally carried his gym bag to the office on Monday mornings, and, sure enough, he had a large black bag today. But instead of his typical smile, he frowned and licked his lips, his eyes darting around as he trod up the steps to the entrance.

As he opened the door, their eyes met. Charlene studied him over the rim of her glasses, her lips pursed, her eyes soft with a motherly expression. Abdul slowed as he walked through the door, nearly run over by a messenger hustling to deliver a package.

Charlene waved him to the detector. "Did you and Mila have a fight about the engagement?"

His eyes glazed over, and tears spilled out as he stood still.

Charlene cocked her head. "Are you okay, hon? Isn't it too hot to be wearing—" Charlene's voice caught in her throat as an object glinted in Abdul's right hand. Her eyes went wide as she recognized the detonator.

Abdul sobbed. "I'm so sorry."