

THE 13TH HOUR: CHAOS

by Richard Doetsch

EXCERPT

1st Chapter

CHAPTER 12: 5:00 PM

The enormous wall climbed to heaven and stretched a quarter-mile wide, like a barrier constructed to keep out the barbarian hordes. Made of five-ton granite-and-concrete blocks, the dam loomed over the green valley, its growing shadow marking time like an oversized sundial.

Nick stood on a balcony, staring up at the 410-foot-tall marvel of engineering, constructed in 1917 to hold back the billions of gallons of the Killian Reservoir.

The blue sky and crisp, clean air of the summer day helped clear his mind and calm his nerves. He had slipped through a lower-level door onto the teak porch, hoping Julia wouldn't mind his momentary disappearance from helping prepare for the reception.

The building that loomed behind Nick was as magnificent as the dam and far more beautiful. The large castle looked like something plucked from the Middle Ages, though it had never housed a king, queen, or any other royalty. Built on a whim by the eccentric industrialist James Francis Dorchester, it had been donated to the town of Byram Hills when Dorchester left for Hawaii shortly after meeting the fourth future-former Mrs. Dorchester.

Constructed of granite, the English-style castle was adorned with corner towers, high keeps, parapets, decorative merlons, and scattered turrets, with half the structure carved into the steep, rocky hillside. While the walls and battlements were stone, the architects had softened its medieval appearance with several levels of ornamented teak porches that wrapped three sides, overlooking the carved marble statuary and ornate garden of perennials below. The interior gained warmth and character from cherry-paneled walls, thick Turkish rugs, and enormous windows that provided panoramic views of both the valley below and the adjacent dam.

The warlike fortification, created out of nostalgia rather than for defense, had served as the designated fallout shelter for the local officials and their families during the 1950s and '60s. Its thick granite blocks, fused with a cement-like mortar, would not only withstand a 1960s-era Soviet bomb but also outlast the pyramids of Giza.

Nick smiled as he looked at the thousand-strong crowd gathering in the enormous, grassy park 150 feet below and wished he were down there instead of up here, dreading the next hour of his life.

* * * * *

“Wake up,” Julia gently stroked Nick’s whiskered cheek as she kissed him awake. “Wake up, my hero. Busy evening ahead.”

Nick stirred, his mind rising to the surface as he sat up straight in his office chair, twisting his kinked neck, which had stiffened during his too-short nap. His eyes locked with Julia’s, the spouses each saying so much more than they could have with words. He smiled as the fog cleared and he took in his wife. Her blonde hair framed the face he had known since they were teenagers, her full lips smiling, her impish glee at waking him etched in her warm, blue eyes. He loved when she kissed him awake; there was no better way to be pulled from a dream.

He had slept for all of a half-hour, having worked all day crunching numbers on a prospective real-estate transaction and finishing his first book here in his dark-wood library office. This was after a minor incident with Marcus early this morning which had upended his normal daybreak routine.

He had picked up his best friend at 7:25 a.m., kites and boards loaded in the rear of the Jeep Wrangler, the jet ski hitched to the back in hopes of a couple of hours of kitesurfing before work. But that all went to hell when Murphy’s Law stepped in on the back of fate, ending his chance of getting anywhere near the water that morning.

“How’s it feel to be a hero?” Julia asked playfully.

“Not a hero,” Nick groaned, clearing his sleepy voice.

“They’re saying you and Marcus didn’t want your names mentioned.”

“It’s not like we did it for recognition.”

“Surely, you can at least share the details with your wife.”

“Well, the flames—”

“Tell me later. It’s already after three. We’ve got to be at the castle by four.” Julia leaned in and kissed him again. “We both know you’re incapable of telling a short story.”

“Four? Guests aren’t supposed to arrive until 5:15.”

“We’re the hosts, remember? It’s better to be early and prepared than—”

“Late and screwed.” Nick finished her sentence for the thousandth time as an incessant ticking tickled his ears. “Where are you going?”

“I have to run some errands.” Julia blew him a kiss and left his office before shouting back at him, “Do me a favor and take out the garbage.”

“Of course,” Nick called back.

“I’ll be back at 3:45. Be ready. Don’t make us late.”

The ticking seemed to grow and echo as Julia exited through the foyer.

“I’m going to smash this thing,” Julia shouted as she walked out the front door.

Nick already regretted having bought the mahogany, man-o-war-themed grandfather clock two days ago. It had been a foolish purchase. Like fireworks to a soldier suffering PTSD, the clock’s ticking reminded Nick of what he had tried so hard to forget. To make matters worse, the beautiful antique wasn’t only rattling his brain; it was also rattling his marriage.

Every hour, starting with a heavy mechanical click, the giant clock would ring out a brief, seafaring tune on its internal brass bells before intoning the hour with a rhythmic chime.

The chiming had lasted all of one night. Julia said it was worse than torture: not only the annoying clicks, but also the loud peal of the bell, which risked waking Katy every hour, on the hour. It took Nick forty-five minutes to figure out how to disable the bells, but the ticking of the brass pendulum continued. He had already listed the clock for sale online and promised Julia he’d move it out to the garage by nightfall.

It was 3:41 when Nick heard Julia’s car roll into the driveway. He jumped up from his desk, raced upstairs, hit the bathroom, shaved, made himself presentable, and headed for his closet. Though he knew it would make her mad, he slipped on a pair of Levi’s, a polo shirt, and his twenty-two-year-old cowboy boots. He also grabbed a pair of charcoal-gray Armani pants, a button-down shirt, a tie, and

a sport coat; slipped them all on a hanger; grabbed a pair of dress shoes; and prepared to face Julia's wrath.

"You've got to be kidding me," she said as Nick hung the hanger in the back of her blue Audi, then climbed into the driver's seat. She eyed him up and down. "You had to wear the jeans? You're not going to have time to change."

Nick would have plenty of time to change, more than an hour, though he had no intention of arguing with her.

"Hi, Daddy," Katy said from her car seat in the back.

"Hey, honey." Nick turned and smiled at his daughter. "Don't you look like a princess?"

And she did. With white-blond hair, giant blue eyes that matched her party dress, and a broad, giggly smile, she could warm the heart of winter.

"Say hi to Abigail." Katy held out a stuffed giraffe.

"Hello, Abigail."

"She keeps the bad people out of my dreams."

"Well, that's a good giraffe," Nick told the toy as he kissed its head. "Thank you for protecting my little girl's dreams." He handed it back. "Hi, Bonnie," he said to the teenager sitting next to Katy as he started the car and pulled out of their driveway.

"Hi, Mr. Quinn." Bonnie Powers twirled her long brown hair around her index finger the way fifteen-year-olds do when they're shy and can't figure out what to do with their hands. Still, the teenage babysitter would keep three-year-old Katy entertained and occupied during the reception.

"Thanks for coming," he told Bonnie.

"Mommy said you're her hero," Katy whispered, struggling with the word hero.

"Well," Nick laughed, "I guess I am." He didn't turn to look at Julia, who clearly wasn't sharing his mirth.

"Did you remember to take out the garbage?" she asked without looking at him.

Nick knew that she knew he hadn't. Her question wasn't so much about the garbage as it was to point out that he'd forgotten to do what he'd promised. Again.

Three years earlier, Julia had asked Nick to take out the garbage, as per their custom, and then she'd taken it out five minutes later when he hadn't—also per their custom. It was out in the driveway, on her way back from emptying the garbage, that Julia's water had broken.

Nick had rushed her to Greenwich Hospital, but what they thought would be an easy labor process turned into a thirty-six-hour ordeal: slow to dilate, slow to efface. They grew frustrated, but it was when Julia finally began to push that Nick became scared. Without a drop of medication, without ever considering an epidural, Julia pushed as hard as she could to get that baby out, her face beet-red, her temples throbbing, her eyes swelling unnaturally.

As Katy finally emerged, healthy and screaming, Nick turned to his wife, beaming with pride, only to find her unconscious.

“Julia?” he’d said softly, knowing how exhausted she must be. “I’m so proud of you.”

But Julia hadn’t responded.

“Julia?” Nick rubbed her forehead. “Julia?”

And everything had slipped to hell.

Dr. Culverhart and the nurses rushed Nick out of the room as an oxygen mask was dropped over Julia’s face. Nick could see through the circular door window as they desperately worked on her: mouth to mouth, pumping her chest, jabbing a needle in her arm. Dr. Culverhart’s voice turned grave as he ordered the nurses about.

Nick thought he was going to lose her, certain she would die without ever getting to hold their daughter.

But finally, she’d opened her eyes with a gasp, looking around, confused at the commotion. Through the window, he saw her mouth form the word, “Nick?”

He burst through the door and raced to her side, bending to take her in his arms, holding her as tightly as he dared.

“I thought I lost you,” he said through his tears.

In his ear, Julia had whispered, “I’ll never leave you, silly.”

* * * * *

Standing on the balcony of Byram Castle, Nick stared down into the valley at nearly a thousand people playing baseball, picnicking, and getting early seats on the enormous grassy mall for the best fireworks show in Westchester County. Festivities, from parades to awards ceremonies to school-band performances, had filled the afternoon and would continue into the night, all in celebration of the Fourth of July.

Nick looked at his iPhone to check the time: 5:05. Like so many, he had disposed of his wristwatch in favor of the multi-function device that was the modern-day equivalent of his Swiss Army knife. He had wandered about the castle for almost an hour after arriving, thinking it best to stay out of Julia's way and busying himself with phone calls, emails, and the internet.

The upper reaches of the fortress held modernized conference rooms and offices, while the bowels of the stone castle seemed to exist a century or two in the past, mimicking a European stronghold in every sense. Nick had never been in a dungeon but was pretty sure the castle's subbasement came close. It felt like the center of the earth there, the depths of a man-made cave cold and damp, the echo of life above blotted out.

He explored the lower recesses like a curious child, finding a host of rooms straight out of the past, each concealed behind doors of four-inch-wide planks strapped with thick iron bands, their heavy clasps rusted with age, all unlocked, empty and forgotten.

Tired of the dank and dark and the lack of cell reception, he moved back to the balcony and spent the last hour dialing, negotiating, and checking the live feed of the Yankees game.

As he watched the crowds below, Nick couldn't help but feel a bit of envy. He was stuck up here about to endure something only a notch or two more pleasant than a root canal.

He wasn't one for glad-handing and false smiles; he had a revulsion for politics and its facades and detested writing checks to the political elite—all of which he had done over the years in deference to Julia's work world. Today, his wife's law firm, Aitkens, Isles, and Lerner, was sponsoring the meet-and-greet with Byron Chase, the senior U.S. senator from New York, who was not only the head of the Senate Intelligence Committee, but he also sat on Appropriations, the committee that held the all-important purse strings of federal funding: one of the sources of the lifeblood that made the consulting arm of Julia's firm viable.

Unlike most politicians, Byron Chase was a "friend." Hailing from Byram Hills, he embodied the hometown-boy-made-good, a politician who many believed actually possessed integrity and honesty. He had taught at Byram Hills High School twenty years earlier and served as Nick and Julia's swim coach. Despite not knowing any stroke beyond basic freestyle, Coach Chase had spent half his time yelling at Nick about how to swim better when Nick already held every school record, was all-county, and had been the team captain two years running. Chase had spent the other half of his time telling Julia she could do so much better than staying with young Mr. Quinn.

Chase had left teaching after getting his law degree at night and quickly found himself at Aitkens, Isles, and Lerner before becoming a state representative. Soon after, he became a U.S. congressman. And then he set his sights even higher.

He had been elected to the U.S. Senate on a platform of integrity and change with a large dose of voter sympathy over the loss of his son in the Akbiquestan War. Sadly, not much had changed since his election to the Senate: only the same politically-correct stances, abstained votes on controversial bills, and the hollow rhetoric of his predecessor.

At \$1,000 per handshake and \$2,500 per photo-op, Nick figured his former swim coach would be leaving the meet-and-greet with a take of more than \$400,000, two tea sandwiches, and four martinis.

Nick wasn't sure if he still held a real grudge against Chase for trying to push Julia away from him when they were teenagers, or if he was being stubbornly childish due to his dislike of politics.

Nick turned and saw a Secret Service agent sweeping the castle grounds. News vans from the local stations parked in front with their reporters, hoping they could wangle a sound bite or interview with the man who many said was the apparent heir to the throne of the presidency.

Well, Nick hadn't voted for Chase before and wasn't about to change that now.

Another glance at his iPhone told him that he'd lost all track of time, forgetting to change out of his jeans and into his jacket and tie. He left the balcony, rounded the corner into the reception room, and ran headlong into Julia. It took a moment for her to digest the moment before she gave Nick *the look*—her expression telling him, *I can't believe you...not again*. Julia being Julia, however, she never verbalized it, not once in their nearly nineteen years together, although it was a phrase she could have easily uttered multiple times per week.

Nick stared back at her for a moment, not minding her anger. She wore an off-white linen dress, her hair brushed out, and looked like a model who had stepped off the catwalk. Her appearance was elegant and refined, projecting her professionalism while sprinkling it with a touch of glamor. She wore the simple gold necklace with a diamond at its center and the matching earrings that he had given her last Christmas; on her wrist was her mother's gold Rolex. Though never in need of makeup, she wore a touch of lipstick and eyeliner, which accentuated her beauty.

At thirty-six years of age, Julia looked ten years younger. Her skin flawless, her eyes filled with life and projecting her unending energy. It always amazed Nick that she could work out, grocery shop,

get her nails done, and feed Katy, all before he even brushed his teeth in the morning. She would race into the bedroom in tight-fitting shorts and a t-shirt, her blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail, head straight for her bathroom and closet, and—within minutes—emerge sophisticated, alluring, and ready to take down the business world.

“What’s going on?” he asked innocently.

“Seriously? Beyond the fact that people are due to arrive in ten minutes and you’re not dressed? Or the fact you disappeared for the last hour? All eyes are on us today—the senator, his speech, this party, the news media—all on top of a crazy day of unfinished work and missed meetings.”

She moved back into the reception room, rearranging flowers, moving chairs inches to the left or right, and ensuring that every wine bottle’s label on the bar faced out.

“It’s Coach Chase,” Nick said.

“That’s right. Senator Chase. Senator Byron Chase.”

“Byron? He’s no Byron. His name’s Carl. Carl Byron Chase. Since when did he drop Carl from his name?”

“That was twenty years ago, Nick.”

“Yeah, well, he’s the same man, he just wears a fancy suit and sits in a bigger office that doesn’t smell like sweat and Bengay.”

“He’s still a senator.”

“He’s still an ass.” Nick regretted his words before they hit Julia’s ears.

“Can you just let it go?” She turned and moved closer to Nick. “For me? This all reflects on me today. Do you understand that?”

He nodded. “Sorry. I’ll shut my mouth.”

Julia turned to adjust the podium, opening the curtains two inches more.

“It’s an awful lot of security and hoopla for a senator,” Nick said softly.

“Nick...”

“I’m just saying....”

“There’re some crazy people out there, even some death threats, and Chase may announce he’s throwing his hat in the presidential-election ring.”

“Ha,” Nick said with a laugh. “That explains the reporters. With his approach to—” At Julia’s glare, he shut his mouth again. “Sorry. What can I do to help?”

“Just...” Julia bit her lip. “Go get changed, hurry back to greet people when they arrive, and use that faux happy-to-see-you smile you’ve got in your back pocket to pretend you’re enjoying yourself.”

Nick walked through the entrance lobby and down a long, scone-lined hall to the bathrooms, only to find a Secret Service agent there. He headed back to the conference room, finding another agent on his phone, and opted instead to head back down into “the dungeon.”

He found the kitchen, where caterers were busy filling trays with cheese puffs, stuffed mushrooms, and shrimp skewers. Nick smiled a guilty smile at a young hostess as he grabbed a handful of mini-hotdogs and continued down into the dark recesses of the basement.

Once again, he found rooms within rooms, a forever maze that wound about the castle’s foundation and deep into the cliffside. Finally, Nick stopped in an especially bare stone chamber. He figured here was as good a place as any to change. He quickly slipped into his dark slacks and Armani jacket, stuffed his other clothes in his bag, and found a door out onto a lower balcony.

“When you escape hell, you’re supposed to bring your friends with you.”

Nick turned as an oversized hand fell upon his shoulder.

“Right, Katy?” the voice continued.

“Daddy!”

Katy rode upon the shoulders of an enormous bear of man.

“Hey, kiddo,” Nick said. “Did Uncle Marcus bring you down here or did you bring him?”

Marcus reached up and lowered Katy to the balcony, her tiny hand holding tight to his finger. “Fourth of July, cocktail hour...where else would I rather be than hearing a politician roar about his conquest of the jungles of DC?”

“You know that the only one more upset about this than you is me, right?” Nick said, then added, “Thanks for coming.”

Marcus Bennett stood 6'1" with 230 pounds of muscle, his bald, gleaming head shining in the late-day sun. Marcus was Nick’s best friend, next-door neighbor, and partner in all things: hockey, kitesurfing, poker, and other brands of minor mischief.

“You’d think we’d get a pass after all we did this morning,” said Marcus, as Katy pulled him toward the railing that looked over the valley.

As Katy's godfather, Marcus had gone from being a rough-and-tumble, ex-military businessman who couldn't keep his fists in his pockets, to a childlike uncle who didn't hesitate to roll on the floor and play with dolls. Katy was the David to his Goliath, slaying him with a smile, bending him to her will like no business adversary or bar-fight opponent ever could.

Nick marveled at the constant changes in Katy: her weekly growth, the teeth that seemed to suddenly fill her mouth, her ever-expanding vocabulary. She had a tender innocence to her voice, a Cindy Lou Who quality magnified by the words of toddlerhood: *finnder* for finger, *vallilla* for vanilla, *peas* for please. He loved her mispronounced vocabulary and never corrected her, hoping she'd hold onto her innocence forever. He had never imagined the emotional depths of fatherhood—the joy, the worry, and how his heart burst with warmth every time he heard her voice.

When he'd first learned Julia was pregnant, he was secretly fearful. How would their lives change? What would come of their mornings lying in each other's arms, their lazy Sundays of breakfast and newspapers in bed? Would it all be lost and forgotten?

But as with most parents, what they gave up was replaced with something far more precious. Nick could no longer imagine life without Katy, without her laughter or tears as she explored and came to know her world; the swooshing sound of her legs against her diapers as she raced down the hallways of their home; the uncontrollable giggles and laughter when Theo, their six-month-old Bernese Mountain Dog puppy, licked her ears; or their simple game of peek-a-boo.

While raising Katy, Nick had rediscovered the wonders of childhood: the magic of Christmas, the spooky fun of trick-or-treat, manic Easter egg hunts, and blowing out birthday candles. Life's priorities had come into sharp focus, and his had taken on a new sense of purpose and fulfillment.

Like most couples with a new child, Nick and Julia had experienced a paradigm shift with their friends, many falling away, those without children still spending Friday and Saturday nights out for dinner, movies, and dancing. Only their closest friends modified their lives to spend time with the happy trio, content to come over for take-out and share in Nick and Julia's parental joy.

"Where's Dreyfus?" Marcus asked Nick. "How did he get out of this?"

"I have no idea," Nick said. "But I'm sure he'll make it. He's never late for anything."

And he wasn't. Punctual was an understatement. You could set your watch by Paul Dreyfus's adherence to schedule. A security expert for Fortune 500 companies, as well as Shamus Hennicot and his wealthy associates, Paul Dreyfus was eminently successful, highly responsible, and always timely.

He was also the third Stooge in Marcus and Nick's sandbox. He kept their reindeer games this side of legal, ensured their wounds were properly dressed, and served as a stand-in godfather to Katy whenever Marcus regressed into childhood.

"By the way," Marcus said, "Julia's looking for you."

"Mommy's looking for you," Katy echoed. "I tink she's mad."

"Why do you think that, honey?"

"Cause she said, 'Go find Fadder,' instead of Daddy." Katy giggled.

Nick looked to Marcus. "And you volunteered to leave the fun and find me?"

Marcus smiled and shrugged. "That's what friends do."

Nick and Julia stood at the large wooden entrance doors to Byram Castle, shaking hands, nodding, and endlessly engaging in questions of children, health, and the weather, while also wishing everyone a happy Fourth of July.

Among the guests was Marcus and his latest wife Anissa; Martin Rinab, another of Nick's kitesurfing buddies, and his wife Yolanda; their forever friends Kirstin and Rocco; John Bae, the rhythm guitarist from Nick's band; Michael Ponce, his skydiving compadre; the Clows, who actually enjoyed the politics of it all; the Mortimers, who would do anything for Julia; Donna Schreyer, Julia's close friend from the hospital; Sara Bitton, Katy's daycare teacher; and the Fitzgibboneses, the starstruck sort of people who jumped at a chance to meet their senator.

The castle now contained practically everyone on Nick and Julia Quinn's Christmas-party invitation list: at least forty couples, supplemented by partners from Julia's law firm, town officials, and political groupies. The only people not in attendance were the smart ones: the thousand-plus who filled the grassy mall and sports fields below the dam, enjoying their Fourth of July in the traditional way, with picnics and games while awaiting the evening's fireworks show.

Hors d'oeuvres and drinks were passed by college-aged interns of the senator as people broke into cliques of conversational comfort. Nick hated to admit it, but he was enjoying himself. As he looked around, he realized that these were the people he actually liked to be with—the people he cared about, who made him laugh, think, and smile.

"Where's Shamus?" Nick asked Julia in a quiet moment.

“I couldn’t reach him all day.”

“That’s not like him.”

“Well, he is ninety-three,” she said.

“And he would never miss one of your parties, even if he had one foot in the grave.”

“That’s not right,” she scolded.

Hailing from ancient English heritage, Shamus was the wealthiest ninety-three-year-old in the world—not that it mattered to Nick and Julia. To them, he was more than a friend or client. He was like a father or grandfather: stern but loving, filled with wisdom but never pushy with it. Shamus and his wife Katherine had no children and no other family, so they looked to each other to fill that void and chose their “family” with care.

“I didn’t mean it that way.” Nick rubbed her arm.

“I meant to go by his house, but work had me so tied up.”

“We’ll swing by his house on the way home. I’m sure he’s fine.”

At 5:37, twenty-two minutes late, the large entrance doors opened and the two Secret Service agents walked in, followed immediately by a tall Byron Chase, who smiled as he headed directly to Julia.

“I can’t thank you enough for arranging all of this,” Senator Chase said, looking properly regal in his dark-blue power suit and red, striped tie.

“It’s our pleasure, Senator.” Julia gave him a small hug.

“Julia,” he chided her gently. “Formalities were for high school. Call me Byron.” He turned to Nick and thrust out his hand.

“Coach Carl,” Nick said, immediately feeling Julia’s eye bore into him. He took the senator’s hand and smiled the smile that Julia had asked him to pull from his back pocket.

“Julia said you just wrapped up two large real-estate acquisitions and finished your first book.”

“She’s always bragging about me.”

“Good for you,” Chase said. “You were the only high-school couple that I knew would get married and stay that way.”

“Thank you.” Nick held his false smile. “I’m hoping she keeps me for a few more years.”

“If you’ll excuse me,” Chase said, “I just need to review my notes with one of my aides.” Chase’s focus had shifted even before he finished his sentence; now he moved with a young assistant to a far corner.

“Coach Carl?” Julia glared at Nick. “Really?”

Nick gave his wife the same smile that she’d requested as she turned away and marched into the reception room.

“This was supposed to be my moment,” Senator Chase said through gritted teeth. “He was supposed to be here to introduce me.”

“Things happen,” the young aide said. “I’ll introduce you.”

“No offense, but you lack even the appearance of someone important. After all this effort I’ve gone through to help him, he screws me yet again? I want to know the real reason why he blew me off.”

“I don’t know if I can—”

“Just do it, or find a replacement who can.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Julia said from the podium, the crowd reacting by dropping their conversations to a murmur. “Please welcome Senator Byron Chase.”

Chase climbed the eighteen-inch platform and stood at the podium, nodding to the applauding crowd, pointing at strangers as if they were friends. He was an imposing man, fit, with dark, grey-flecked hair, a disarming smile, and steely blue eyes.

He rested his hands upon the sides of the red, white, and blue podium and cleared his throat.

“Before we get it started,” he said, raising his hands to quiet the room, “it’s my great honor to announce something that has not even hit the press yet. President Matthew McManus, two hours ago, after a series of top-secret negotiations, signed not only a cease-fire but a far-reaching peace accord with Akbiquestan and Russia, resolving longstanding economic issues. As the head of the Senate Intelligence Committee, I am proud to have been involved with this process and I applaud our Commander in Chief on a difficult job well done. The war in Akbiquestan is over.”

The room erupted in genuine applause. The four-year war had dominated the press, water-cooler talk, and prayers of most Americans, who feared an escalation into World War III.

“Which is a perfect segue into why I am here today,” Chase continued. “Peace through strength. Prosperity through charity. It’s time to step back from war and focus on peace and prosperity for all Americans, while never letting our guard down against terrorism again.”

Nick pulled out and glanced at his phone: 5:53. The two-minute political oration already felt like an hour. Julia turned toward him with a painted-on smile and gave him the look. He quickly tucked his phone away.

Katy charged through the room, her blonde hair floating behind her, and latched onto Nick’s leg, pulling him toward the door as if he were being saved from hell by an angel.

Nick picked her up and carried her to the lobby, out through the enormous heavy glass doors, closing them carefully behind them, cutting off the droning speech in favor of far more important words.

“I want to go outside and play,” Katy said.

“Honey,” Julia said, following them into the lobby with Bonnie the babysitter at her side. She took Katy out of Nick’s arms. “I need you to stay with Bonnie for fifteen minutes.”

“Why don’t I take her outside?” Nick offered.

“We need to be in there,” Julia said with a forced smile. “We’re the hosts.”

“But Katy wants to play.”

A side door opened, and a man stumbled through, looking barely coherent, and fell into Nick’s arms. His clothes were wet, his salt-and-pepper hair damp. Shocked, Nick realized he knew the man and knew him well. It was his close friend Paul Dreyfus, who had been at the top of the guest list and uncharacteristically late.

Nick supported his friend’s sagging weight and led him to a large couch on the far side of the lobby, where Dreyfus collapsed heavily.

“Are you okay?” Nick asked Paul. “What the hell happened?”

“Listen to me,” Dreyfus whispered.

As Nick let go of his friend, he saw blood covering his hands. Quickly, Nick ripped open Dreyfus’s shirt, revealing what looked like a bullet wound to the chest.

“Oh my God,” Nick breathed. “Julia?”

Julia was immediately at his side.

“Bonnie,” Julia turned to the babysitter, “could you take Katy to the bathroom in the back?”

Bonnie averted her eyes as she pulled Katy down through the back hall.

“What happened?” Nick asked his friend again.

Dreyfus pulled the strap of a dark leather satchel from about his neck and shoulder and looped it over Nick’s. “Listen to me, Nick. Listen very carefully....” Dreyfus paused to breathe, struggling to get the words out. “Don’t let that bag out of your sight.... He’s coming for you. He’s...coming for Julia.”

“Who? What are you talking about?”

Dreyfus reached into the bag and withdrew a single picture that made Nick’s blood run cold. It was an image of a man floating against the rocky shoreline of a lake, water lapping at his body, his face having lost all color, the skin white and curdled like rotted cheese, lips blue, cracked, and wet. There was no question that the man had died a painful death. In fact, he had almost surely drowned, his wet body and vacant stare leaving little doubt about the means of his demise.

Nick tried to catch his panicked breath. He knew the man, knew him well, better than anyone: he was looking into his own lifeless eyes.

“You all die....” Dreyfus whispered.

Julia turned to Nick, her skin flushing red as confusion filled her eyes. “Nick?” Her voice trembled.

Nick stared at Dreyfus, the impossibility of his words echoing in his head.

“You, Julia....” Dreyfus struggled to draw another breath. “Katy. Everyone.”

Nick turned and looked through the glass doors at the gathered crowd, which listened in rapt attention to the senator’s speech. Everyone Nick cared about was here, most listening to political rhetoric they couldn’t care less about. They were all attending as a favor to Nick and Julia.

“When?” Nick whispered to his dying friend.

Dreyfus seized Nick’s hand, locking eyes with him. “It’s all in the bag.”

“What’s in the bag?”

“You have to find me....” Dreyfus’s words sounded like a plea.

“I don’t understand...find you where?”

“I’m so sorry—”

A sudden roar exploded from the room, cheers and applause, as if the senator had concluded the speech of his life. The rising voices of the now-standing audience only amplified Nick’s dread.

And then a rumble shook the world, deep and foreboding.

Another rumble, an explosion, like a bomb, and then another and another and another....

The crowd fell silent, eyes darting about in confusion. New York was not the land of earthquakes, but the shaking earth said otherwise. Deep heavy rumblings seemed to roll the flagstone floor.

“Nick?” Julia looked around the lobby in fear as a hum began to grow. “What the hell is that?”

As the rumble grew in intensity, a collective panic took over the reception room, chaos filling the air as everyone tried to flee from the unknown with incoherent screams of fear, cramming through the doors to escape whatever danger was approaching.

The deep roar grew deafening, drowning out the screams, shaking the castle’s foundations. And then, as if hell had been unleashed, the reception room’s outer windows shattered; incomprehensibly, a wall of water drove through the space, rising toward the ceiling in seconds. Like a tidal wave, the barrage of water tore the room apart. Tables, chairs, fixtures, and carpets spun into a churning maelstrom. Men and woman were scooped up, helplessly tossed about, bodies hurled and twisted into dark whirlpools.

The light of day dimmed as the wall sconces winked out. Emergency lights reacted to the loss of power, their bright halogen rays flicking on, impervious to the water’s assault within their clear plastic housings, their beams like shafts of lightning, piercing the murky, rising, roiling waters.

An enormous howl of wind groaned as air was driven from the building, its gusts sweeping the water’s surface into blinding mist. Husbands and wives, friends and neighbors were quickly swept away, their screams doused as they were pulled under and sucked out through the narrow window openings like water through a drain.

From behind the thick glass doors, Nick and Julia watched in horror as their friends drowned, their twisted bodies becoming human flotsam and jetsam before being sucked out through the shattered picture windows on a violent tide into oblivion.

The lobby had already become a deep pool, the waters rising to Nick and Julia’s shoulders. Then, as if a tornado had struck, the glass doors were torn from their moorings and thrown into the tidal flow. A rush of water quickly rose toward the ceiling, sweeping Dreyfus’s body away.

Water filled the vestibule, its polished granite walls momentarily looking like an Italian pool. The couch where Dreyfus had lain, the tables and chairs splintered in the onslaught, all flushed through the main doors, carried on a raging current.

“Katy!” Julia screamed.

In the rising water, Nick swam for the bathroom where Katy and Bonnie had gone, the leather satchel looped about his body complicating the impossible task. The bathroom was at the far end of the vestibule, sequestered in a corner where the water’s attack had been delayed by the turns of the hallway. But the small, high windows now exploded, water pouring through as if from the spigots of heaven.

Julia swam hard in the same direction, battling the raging waters that rose higher and higher. She fought with all her might, kicking and pulling against the current, but the suction created by the millions of gallons of flowing water took hold of her. Despite all her years of swimming, in spite of her natural strength, she was losing, drawn inch by inch toward the door where death awaited.

Nick caught hold of her hand, his other arm wrapped tightly around a chandelier overhead. They were pulled and tossed by the water as it rose, pushing them up against the ceiling. Holding on with all his strength, Nick pulled her to him, but the suction made her feel like a two-ton weight, straining his arms, his grip.

“Hold on!” Nick yelled as their heads banged the ceiling, the water continuing to rise around them.

“We have to get Katy!” Julia struggled to hold on as Nick fought with every fiber of his being to not let her slip away.

“Mommy!” Katy’s cry pierced the cacophony of churning waters.

“Katy!” Julia screamed back. “Mommy’s coming!”

As the water pulled at them, Nick and Julia’s eyes locked in an unspoken understanding of what was happening. In order to get to Katy, to have any hope of saving her....

“Let me go,” Julia pleaded. “Save Katy, please. Please save Katy.”

Nick looked deep into his wife’s eyes; he couldn’t bear to do what she was asking. She was everything to him, his life, his heart. She was his soul.

“No,” Nick said. “Hold on.”

“It’s okay,” she said, holding his gaze. “Let me go.”

With her free hand, she grasped Nick’s fingers and gently pried them loose.

And with their eyes still locked, she released Nick’s hand. Her body, caught in the suction, instantly disappeared.

Despite the agony in his heart, Nick turned his body toward the bathroom. He reached and caught hold of one of the brass wall sconces mounted on the granite wall as the water continued its rise, only an inch of breathable air remaining.

Nick plunged under, into the current. The brass sconces lined the wall leading to the bathroom like a horizontal ladder. Hand over hand he pulled himself along, fighting with all his might, his arms burning with the impossible effort.

He briefly surfaced. "Katy!" he screamed in the narrow airway as he gulped sweet oxygen. "I'm coming!"

But the force of the current, the draw of the millions of gallons of water flowing through the building, had grown tenfold. Sapped of strength, Nick dug deep within himself...he couldn't let her die, he wouldn't fail her.

"Peas, Daddy!" Katy cried from up ahead. "Peas..."

As the rising water squeezed away the last bit of air, Nick took a deep breath and dived under again.

He spotted the door, its giant brass handle gleaming with the refracted beams of the emergency lights. The thick mahogany portal opened outward, seated against a heavy metal frame, its design still withstanding the building pressure of the rising waters. But Nick knew it wouldn't hold for long, the waters were surely pouring under the door, through any and every crack as it sought the path of least resistance.

"Daddy!"

Even under the churning water, Nick could hear Katy's cry.

The violence of the current grew unbeatable. The weight of the satchel around his neck, like a bag of lead; his lungs burning, fighting the rush of water that pulled at him like a colossal magnet.

Nick reached for the handle of the door, his fingertips swiping the brass; straining for purchase, he planted his legs against the wall and used his last bit of strength to grasp the door.

The fire in his lungs pushed him to the brink, twinkling spots dancing before his eyes as his brain thirsted for oxygen.

And the suction caught hold of him, yanking him away, pulling him backwards toward the shattered windows.

With utter despair, his heart broken, having failed his wife and daughter, Nick knew he would join them in death.

Unable to resist, he gasped, and the water invaded his lungs....

And his world fell to darkness.