

## CHAPTER 1

Two floors below the earth's surface, a lab technician waited for DNA results. He had no idea why the blood sample he'd been told to analyze was so important, nor did he completely understand the gravity of the results. He was to look for a sequence; that was all—a particular order that must *exactly* match the code entered into the computer two hours earlier by a man he hadn't recognized, but who wore the credentials of *Dr. L.M. D'Italia* that bore the hospital administrator's personal seal. Had it not been Christmas Eve he might have sought clarification on the matter from his direct superior, but he was alone in the lab and his supervisor wasn't answering pager or phone. And since the stranger had been sent, it seemed, from the administrator herself, he thought it was in his best interest to perform the test without contention.

The computer chirped, and the technician turned his attention to the monitor. Cool blue light washed over his face as he studied the left side of the screen, where a three-dimensional image of a double helix twisted in a frame like a barbershop pole. The colored spheres embedded within the strands clearly showed the specific pattern earlier entered into the program by the doctor. In a frame to the right of the image was a continuous stream of data from the blood analysis, as the software struggled to configure a second three-dimensional double helix.

A moment passed and the new double helix appeared in the frame to the right. The technician typed in a command from the keyboard, before double-clicking the new image with his mouse. The computer overlaid the three-dimensional double helix images. The combined frames immediately flashed red, indicating an exact match.

“Perfect,” the technician breathed. He pulled a handheld computer out of the pocket of his lab coat and fingered for the stylus. Tapping the contacts button, he scrolled through a list of names and telephone numbers, searching for the extension Dr. D’Italia had instructed him to call as soon as he obtained the results of the analysis.

At the telephone on the opposite wall the technician entered in the extension number on the keypad and waited for someone on the other end to answer.

“D’Italia,” a man’s voice answered.

“I’ve just gotten the results of the blood analysis.”

“And?”

“There’s a match.”

“An *exact* match?” the doctor’s soft voice demanded.

“I would say so.”

“For your sake, I hope you’re correct.”

The technician felt perspiration bead on the back of his neck as the muscles along his spine tightened. Though not outwardly threatening, something in the doctor’s tone frightened him. Visions of the man who entered the lab two hours earlier loomed before him like a holographic projection rising out of the white tiled floor. He could see Dr. D’Italia’s silver eyes burning into his face as the undulating shadow of the man’s tall, slender body slid across the tips of his imitation leather shoes. The technician even remembered the oddly shaped pin shining on D’Italia’s black silk tie as he imagined him standing there, his presence imposing and menacing. The angles of the doctor’s chin, cheekbones, and nose were sharp and clean, as if his face had been finely chiseled out of marble, and the nails of his long fingers had appeared perfectly manicured, moving nimbly over the keyboard as he deliberately entered the DNA sequence into the computer program.

“Send the *complete* report in a *sealed* envelope. Someone will be arriving at the laboratory within the hour to remove all data pertinent to this matter from the system’s computer. I would suggest that you take your dinner break as soon as they arrive.”

The technician closed his eyes to make the haunting figure disappear as a bead of sweat ran down the left side of his face and leaked into the corner of his mouth, but the image of the doctor was branded into his memory as a reminder, perhaps, or a warning to perform as asked and never falter. Even though the computer confirmed an exact match, the technician silently prayed the results were accurate, for his own sake, whatever that might be.

“Yes, sir,” the technician answered, his voice and hands trembling. He placed the telephone receiver into its cradle, and did as he was told.

\* \* \*

Nine floors above, Jana Fashir held a newborn infant in her arms. Her husband, Abdel, elbows pressed into the bedside, leaned over his wife and peered, smiling, into the tiny baby’s face. Only hours old, she was beautiful by all standards—face and head perfectly shaped, pink skin supple and evenly colored. Her weight was healthy, and blood counts normal. The Fashirs could not have felt happier or more profoundly blessed.

“What will we name her?” Abdel asked quietly. The infant lay swaddled in a white cotton changing blanket, calmly cooing on her mother’s chest.

Jana gently brushed her hand over the baby’s bald head, pausing momentarily to feel the blood, the life, beating in the soft spot of the newborn’s skull. “What I dreamed,” she replied. “I want to name her after the little one in my dream.”

Abdel reached for his wife’s face and kissed her slick cheek. “Mara,” he said. “We will name her Mara, then.” He looked into his infant daughter’s eyes and called her by the new name. “Mara.” Taking her tiny hand in his, he placed the little fingers against his lips.

At the end of the hall, a set of elevator doors slid open and three men in black suits stepped onto the maternity ward in a triangular formation. At the opposite end of the hallway a pair of men in gray

trench coats rounded the corner and marched toward them. In smoothly synchronized movements, the two men reached into their trench coats and withdrew pistols equipped with silencers. One of the pair fired at the lead man in the triangle, striking him in the chest. The target spun against the wall, his body exploding into a quasar of brilliant light that blasted through the ceiling and into the night. His comrades continued toward the pair as if nothing at all had just transpired. The second trench coat fired, hitting a black suit, and he, too, burst into a flare of white light, his soul released from his body like his leader's, taking the same path as the first. With only one man of the triangle left, the elevator doors opened again, and another triplet of men in black suits invaded the maternity ward.

The hallway had been quiet, the Christmas Eve skeleton crew of nurses and doctors now ran for cover, screaming and crying. Over the intercom, a metallic voice called for security; alarms sounded, doors closed and automatically locked, sealing off the ward. Stainless steel carts were knocked over sending aluminum trays sliding across the tiled floors. Jana Fashir, the only patient in maternity, was left unprotected as the third man burst into light with the dull pop of a bullet forced through a silencer.

The new triplet of men in black suits weren't quick enough to beat the trench coats to the room where the newborn baby cooed contentedly, unaware of the strange commotion only yards from the security of her blanket. Nor did she realize, in the blindness of her baby gaze, she was the objective.

Jana Fashir screamed, the trill pitch of her frantic cry echoing through the hospital corridor. Within seconds of having entered the room, the trench coats appeared in the hallway again, one of them cradling the newborn in his arms like a football, while the other fired at the three black suits rushing toward them. In a moment, the two men and the baby were gone, fading down the hallway, smashing through the sealed doorways as if unobstructed.

Two of the black suits broke off and pursued them. The leader, however, entered Jana Fashir's room. The commotion in the hallway behind him grew more frantic at every moment. Electronic voices panicked in speaker boxes, and doctors and nurses flashed by the open doorway as blips of white.

In the room, Jana sat up in her bed. Her cheeks were red and wet with perspiration. On the floor lay the father, bleeding from a gash in his temple. The obstetrician was slumped against the heart machine, moaning. Wild-eyed, the mother whimpered and pulled her knees to her chest.

"My baby," she stammered. "Where have they taken my baby?"

He could hardly contain the smile. "We'll find her," the man said softly. He reached out to wipe the sweat from the terrified woman's brow. "Soon enough."

Backing away, he stopped in the doorway and surveyed the chaotic scene in the hallway. He smiled again, then turned toward the new mother as he reached inside his suit coat. "Soon enough, dear," he said, withdrawing a 9mm. "Don't worry."

He shot her in the forehead.

\* \* \*

Racing through the parking lot, the baby robbers far outmaneuvered their two assailants as they wove around the parked cars to the clearing on the other side. Realizing their disadvantage, the black suits halted to withdraw their pistols. Bullets exploded into the night, tearing through the mist, but the pair with the baby were undaunted. At the grassy edge of the clearing, they lurched forward morphing into wolves. The lead wolf gripped the swaddled package between his fangs, careful not to harm the newborn life within, and disappeared into the night. Halfway across the clearing, the other stopped and threw back his feral head in a terrifying howl. The two still in the parking lot, fired wildly at targets they could no longer see.