

Chapter Two



One year later
Washington, D.C.

LEE SCOTT ENTERED his Watergate apartment, expecting to find his stepbrother, Joseph Talon, Jr., waiting for him. “JT?” he called out. The apartment had the unmistakable ring of emptiness.

He’d cut his meeting short and caught the first train from New York City after JT’s urgent call, and JT wasn’t even there to meet him. He sat down on the couch and pulled out his laptop to finish his report to the Department of Homeland Security about several holes he’d found in their new network. A few minutes later, JT walked in the door.

“Sorry I’m late.” JT dropped his keys and briefcase on the coffee table and went directly to the liquor cabinet. “I got hung up in a meeting with Dad.”

“How is Joe?” Lee closed his laptop.

“He’s fine. For now. But I’m in a shitload of trouble at Talon & Drake and you’re the only person who can fix it.” He poured himself a shot of Scotch and drank it in one swallow and set the glass down with a thud. “I think Talon & Drake engineers are smuggling artifacts out of Iraq.”

Lee got up and joined JT at the bar. He splashed liquor into a tumbler as he assessed the ramifications. Thanks to a childhood—and if he were forced to admit it, possibly childish—resentment of his stepfather’s obsession with Talon & Drake, he hadn’t paid attention over the years as Joe and then later JT droned on about the engineering firm. The net result was he didn’t know much about the company. But that had to change. Now. “Legally, Joe still owns a large share of the company, right?”

“Yes, but we follow the Senate Ethics Manual to the letter. Dad isn’t on any

committees that oversee our work. He hasn't even set foot in a Talon & Drake office in twelve years."

"But he receives income from Talon & Drake."

"It's considered investment income and is perfectly legal."

"You sound defensive."

JT sighed. "Talon & Drake can weather this storm. Hell, Halliburton has gotten away with worse. But a scandal like this could destroy Dad's campaign before it gets started."

Lee took a swig as his mind raced. "How soon is Joe going to announce he's running for president?"

"In two weeks."

"Can you put off the announcement?"

"No. He can't start fundraising until he makes the announcement, and his opponents have already raised millions. He's late getting into the game as it is." JT held his hand in a white-knuckled fist and his mouth was a rigid line. It was rare for Lee's hotshot businessman of a stepbrother to show this much agitation.

He nudged JT toward the sofa. "Sit down and tell me everything."

JT dropped onto the cushions then paused and looked at Lee. "Right now, you're the only person I've told about this." He opened his briefcase, pulled out a sheet of paper, and handed it to Lee. "I received this email from one of our engineers in Iraq last week, but it was buried and I didn't see it until it was too late."

JT—

Talon & Drake employees are smuggling something out of Iraq. I don't know for certain what is being smuggled, but I suspect artifacts.

Talon & Drake equipment is being shipped back to the US via military transport. Because the military is involved, security is tight and

transport information is classified. I don't know what is being shipped or when it will arrive, but I believe the smuggled goods will be hidden inside the equipment and a Bethesda office employee will know how to retrieve them. I am gathering proof and will keep you informed.

—Matt Weber

On the surface, the email was short on substance and details. It lacked names and specifics, but was full of unsubstantiated accusations and excuses for being vague. It could be a hoax, Lee *wanted* it to be a hoax, but he recognized the name and looked sharply at JT. “Michael Weber. His picture was all over the news last night. He was killed by an IED in Baghdad two days ago.”

JT stood and began to pace. “He was killed in a public market and has been written off as another victim of insurgents.”

“But you think he died because he sent this email.”

“I'd bet my balls on it.” He stopped pacing. “He died one hour after sending me that message.”

Lee swore. “It can't be a coincidence.”

“Our best chance to catch his killer is to find out who is involved in the smuggling.”

“Where do I come in?” Lee asked.

“Talon & Drake's Bethesda office holds the Iraq contracts. Bethesda engineers designed the oil refinery and pipeline, and Bethesda employees are in Iraq overseeing construction. I need to know everything I can about the Iraq project, the employees who are working there, and the equipment being sent back. That information is in the Bethesda network, but security there is tight. It's impenetrable from the outside. I need someone I trust to hack into the system. I need someone to read all the company emails.”

“It's your company. Just go in and demand the information.”

JT ran his fingers through his executive-perfect hair. “If I do that, then whoever is in on the smuggling will know I’m investigating. I want to catch the sons-of-bitches who are using *my* company to steal and make an example of them. This has to be done from the inside . . . in secret. Now please tell me you’ve never met Edward Drake face to face.”

Lee suppressed a grim smile. As a kid he’d visited the main office of Talon & Drake in New York several times, but he’d never been to the Bethesda office, which was run by Drake. “Nope. I’ve never met the man.” He swirled the amber liquid in the crystal tumbler. “And I highly doubt he’ll hire me to vet his system.” He took a large slug.

“I have a better idea. You’re going to pose as an intern.”

He nearly spewed his drink. “An intern?”

JT stopped pacing, and a hint of a smile played at the edge of his mouth. “It won’t be easy to hide all six-feet five-inches of you in plain sight. But interns are the least noticed people in any office.”

He considered JT’s crazy plan for a minute. “But I know nothing about structural engineering.”

“You won’t be working with the engineers. You’ll be with the archaeologists.”

“Talon & Drake employs archaeologists?”

“They’re part of our environmental division—archaeological sites are protected just like endangered species and wetlands. It’s the perfect cover. We get clueless applicants for the archaeology jobs all the time. I have a packet for you to read before you start on Monday.”

“Monday,” Lee repeated flatly. “I have two days to prepare for my new job as archaeological intern. I do have a life, you know. And a business. With clients and deadlines.”

“In two weeks Dad will announce he’s running for president and the press will scour every inch of his past. We won’t be able to hide the fact that you were once his stepson, and our chance to hide you in the office as an anonymous intern will be shot.”

“How do you plan to pass me off as an intern?”

JT smiled like a man about to reel in a big fish. “I’ve got it all worked out. You’re a student and you’ve decided to major in archaeology. Your family pulled strings to get you an internship—to make sure digging up ancient crap is right for you.”

“So I haven’t taken any archaeology classes yet.” He was surprised by how easy it was to talk with a hook in his mouth.

“You’re just a fool who’s watched *Raiders of the Lost Ark* one too many times.”

“I’m too old to be a student,” he said.

“You’ve changed your major four times already. You’re one of those people who makes a career out of being a student.”

He hung his head and wanted to groan. “I can’t pretend to be a flake.”

JT laughed with obvious glee. Sometimes he was such a . . . *big brother*. “You’ll have to be more than a flake. You’ll have to be inept and a total pain in the ass. Alienate your supervisor—make her life miserable—and she’ll only give you ridiculous busywork. Then you’ll be free to dive into the computer files and find what we need.”

“Great. I get to play the inept, indecisive, Indiana Jones wannabe. I hate me already.”

Lee took another swallow of his stiff drink and mentally rearranged his schedule. His stepfather needed him, just like he’d needed his stepfather when he was a stupid thirteen-year-old kid who’d hacked into a CIA database for fun. His mother had divorced Joe the year before, but Joe still stepped in and fixed the situation. Lee didn’t even have a juvie record. Now the government paid him to hack into their systems to find flaws and secure their phone systems. He owed everything he had to Senator Joseph Talon.

“Dad can’t know what’s going on,” JT said. “He has to be completely in the dark. That way, the media won’t be able to claim he attempted a cover up when this hits the front pages.”

“I assume you’ve developed a list of suspects.”

“Ed Drake is my top suspect. He likes running the Bethesda office because it’s closest to D.C. and therefore the most convenient for senatorial ass-kissing.”

Lee laughed. “You don’t like Drake.”

“He’s the one who tightened security on the network. I think he’s hiding something.”

“Who else?”

“Everyone even remotely connected to the Iraq projects.” He pulled a file from his briefcase and dropped it on the coffee table. “That’s my dossier on the project manager. The others you’ll have to identify once you’re inside.”

Lee sat down in front of his computer. “Anyone else?”

“The two staff archaeologists.”

“Why do you suspect them?”

“They could know the artifact market.”

“Would archaeologists sell stolen artifacts?”

JT shrugged. “That’s for you to find out. It should be easy—you’ll be working with them the most.” Another file hit the table. “This is the dossier on the woman who runs the archaeology program. She hired a new assistant several months ago, and I don’t know much about her.”

“I can find out about her on my own.” Lee opened the laptop and wiggled his fingers, eager to begin. “What’s her name?”

“Erica Kesling.”