

## AUTHOR'S FORWARD

I began this novel in 1991 because of the first Gulf War between Iraq and the United States. I wrote it with the intent of bringing a deeper awareness of how an act of terrorism can be manipulated to deliberately change the course of history.

As a result of my increasing fear that certain events in this novel would indeed come to pass, I had a less polished version copyrighted in 1998. No changes to the plot were made after the September 11, 2001 tragedy; the original story stands unaltered by those events.

-Jacqueline Lloyd

*With love for the One-  
Master of Full Circles*

This is a work of fiction. All characters and events are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

## Prologue

President Sid Mahoney lay in bed, wishing for sleep. He had listened to a fast-moving storm rain torrents on the White House until its gutters gushed. Now, pale slivers of moonlight peeked around the drawn shades. He counted every light bulb in the ornate crystal chandelier hanging above the bed, then checked the time again. Eleven past one in the morning. The digits looked like neon soldiers. That reminded him of work, and his brain kicked fully into gear.

Careful not to wake his wife, he kissed her cheek, slipped out of bed and dressed in a navy jogging suit marked with the presidential seal. He crept out of the room. In the bright lights of the hall outside the president's suite, he turned past family photographs and his grandchildren's framed artwork to ride the waiting elevator down to the ground floor.

When the ranking Secret Service agent on duty met him, Sid was prepared for argument, even flat refusal. But to Sid's surprise, the agent responded to his request with, "Yes Sir, Mr. President. I'll prepare your detail."

Twenty minutes later, the armored limousine drove away from the South Portico. As the White House disappeared from view, Sid finally began to relax. He joked with the agents who shared the back seat with him about the latest Hollywood gossip. They left the limousine at the beginning of the Reflecting Pool and set off at a brisk walk toward the Lincoln Memorial. Sid's tennis shoes splashed in puddles, seeping wetness into his socks. Other than ringing him in a tight circle, the agents paid him no attention and scanned the surroundings intently, in part for safety, in part to give him some illusion of privacy.

There was no one in sight.

He took a deep breath of cold air, smelling damp earth and wet, oily asphalt. In the distance, he could make out Lincoln's regal pose. He knew Lincoln watched over the sacred trust of the presidency. He could feel it, especially at night.

In a heartfelt murmur, he said to Lincoln, "Sir, I'm trapped and I'm screwed. We passed the point of no return, and the bastards have won. Why aren't you helping me? We're on the same side, for God's sake!"

Silence. Tonight, Lincoln wasn't talking.

With a frustrated grunt, Sid threw back his head to look at the vast expanse of clouds, searching for the moon and her silvery light. Then his gaze felt pulled right, to the towering elm trees that lined the grass. Their magnificence struck him, speaking of the force that reigns far beyond human comprehension. A soothing thought; we are not in this alone. And into that wisdom, he exhaled in surrender.

Pain, like an ice pick shot through the hollow at the base of his throat. He heard gunfire, shouting. Hot panic flared in his mind. He couldn't die. Not yet. He had too much to do. Too much was at stake. He fought frantically against a sleepy, spreading darkness, desperate to stay awake and alive.

## Chapter One

At quarter to two that morning, Chief of Staff Earl Sanders sat in his West Wing corner office and stifled a yawn that made his green eyes water. He stared blearily at stacks of unread reports engulfing his computer and realized he hadn't even made a dent in one pile.

Terrorists had bombed San Francisco's TransAmerica Building and Manhattan's Holland Tunnel last month, killing hundreds. Since that day, Earl's horror had deepened into a very personal nightmare. He woke every morning to watch President Sid Mahoney, his longtime boss and friend, spiral farther into delusion and despair.

He grabbed a beer out of the small refrigerator in the corner, then dug for the stash of beef jerky in the bottom drawer of the desk. The thought of tomorrow, or was it today already-made him wince. The strikes had affected Sid so acutely he seemed paralyzed, clinging to flimsy diplomatic solutions over common sense. But the worst was listening to him rant about an evil, far-reaching conspiracy.

According to Sid, the real enemy was not the Islamic terrorists who had attacked in two U.S. cities. The real enemy had spies and agents everywhere. He didn't even trust his core group of advisors, the National Security Council, to be immune from some evil group he privately called the Powers That Be. He insisted that he was given doctored intelligence reports, exaggerated or downplayed threat assessments, and that key personnel had been compromised into robots. And Earl worried that Sid was losing his mind.

Through the open door, he could hear quiet in the West Wing. The staff had gone home. Debating how to structure Sid's schedule to minimize stress and contact with hostile members of Congress, he lifted a worn, signed baseball glove that weighed down the tallest stack of documents. Lost in thought, he swiveled the chair and fired a tennis ball repeatedly against the wall that separated his office suite from that of the vice president. Then he heard a thud in response; she threw what sounded like a heeled shoe.

He smiled wryly and tossed the glove to his desk. Of course the vice president was still here. Zella was also deeply worried about Sid. Her reaction was to work even harder, as if that were possible. She had been Earl's good friend since they were both in their early twenties, when they were both peons working for Congressmen on the Hill.

Two decades later, she was a political powerhouse. She and Sid were a potent, effective team. Yet even they had argued lately. Earl knew she fought privately for military action against the terrorists and Gulf countries that allowed them to hide in their borders. Her concern also voiced Earl's biggest fear; that Sid's feeble response invited more terrorism and made the nation vulnerable to further attack.

He heard distant footfalls. Definitely the sound of running. In one move, he was out of his chair and into the hallway.

A Secret Service agent came charging toward him, bellowing that the president was shot. Almost three hours ago, Earl had taken Sid up to the residence for their ritual evening scotch and cigar before Sid retired for the night. He shook his head in disbelief, saying, "He was shot in his bed?"

"Sir, he took one of his late night walks. All I know is that he's on his way to Walter Reed Hospital."

After a stunned pause, Earl said, "I'm on my way."

"No Sir. You and the vice president are going underground."

While he protested, more agents barged into the vice president's office suite. Zella emerged, looking dazed. Her blouse sleeves were rolled up around her elbows, her wavy auburn hair loose and disheveled. Even barefoot, which was her preference, she was inherently elegant and almost as tall as the men who surrounded her. An agent clutched her shoes and suit jacket.

When she met Earl's gaze, her sapphire eyes looked wide and spooked. And for a moment, he felt torn between loyalties, not knowing whether to stay with her or go to Sid. Then he realized Sid would only tell him to go back immediately to help Zella.

As he turned and allowed Secret Service to herd him toward the elevator that would take them underground, he heard her ask, "How did the president get out of here? Who the hell would just let him leave?"

An agent said, "Ma'am, it's my understanding that he came down almost an hour ago. The lead agent at the residence must've thought they had adequate protection for an off the record movement. He went with the president."

With a deepening frown, Zella darted Earl a look. Not only did Secret Service allow Sid to go, but someone on the inside had also let the attackers know when and where he was going.

Suddenly, the dark suits that he had come to associate with her safety seemed menacing. He grabbed her shoes and jacket from an agent and waved Zella into the waiting elevator. While she typed a quick code and allowed the retinal scan needed to start the car, he followed her in and blocked the others, saying lightly, "Thanks, we'll be all right now."

They dropped through sixty feet of steel reinforced concrete. He breathed out into the silence, certain that Sid had gone to his favorite thinking spot. He pictured him walking along the Reflecting Pools and enjoying the tranquil autumn night, having his usual heart to heart with Lincoln, and then being gunned down. Suppressing a shudder, he glanced at Zella. She was staring straight ahead.

Without moving her gaze, she said, "I need you to watch my back. It's going to be total chaos. People will be giving the military orders and executing intelligence directives. Help me make sure nobody takes this opportunity to work a private agenda."

He nodded and took a bracing breath, then noticed her golden hair clip riding on the shoulder pad of her blouse, where she usually kept it when she was deep into work and didn't want to lose track of it. He reached over and unclipped it, handing it to her before he set her shoes on the floor. She pulled her hair back in the clip and bent to wriggle her feet into her shoes as the elevator opened to a long, brightly lit, white tile-lined hallway.

They crossed the hall to a thick steel door. A soldier standing guard saluted her, then glanced at security cameras with a quick nod. The massive steel door glided open.

As Zella walked into the nerve center of the Situation Room's underground compound, the military personnel in fatigues snapped to attention. Earl glanced at wall-sized screens with maps of the world that showed US forces and the status of potential threats against them. Wall screens also showed near real-time satellite feeds of barren desert landscapes, stark mountains and bustling cities where everyone in sight wore traditional Muslim attire. Banks of computers flashed classified dispatches. Behind desks staggered for privacy, analysts pored over intelligence and spy satellite photographs. The ceilings were low, and the air smelled faintly of disinfectant and mold.

This subterranean complex was staffed twenty-four hours, seven days a week with top clearance military experts. Earl had dubbed it the Crisis Pit after the first time they came down to run a drill. From here, a president could launch a nuclear strike or monitor an invasion via satellite feeds. And as if anyone could forget America's number one enemy, a grainy picture of

the terrorist's leader Abdallah ibn Fatah hung pinned to every cubicle wall. Fatah had claimed responsibility for the Holland Tunnel and TransAmerica bombings and provided proof that his network was behind the attacks.

A full Colonel met them and saluted, then said, "Madam Vice President, Mr. Sanders, I'm Colonel Davies, senior officer on this shift. The NSC members have been contacted, and they will arrive shortly. This way, please."

They followed him into the executive conference room, a soundproof, bulletproof glass enclosure at one end of the complex's main room. Earl hung Zella's jacket on the back of her usual chair to the right of Sid's seat at the head of the long, rectangular conference table. A soldier began passing copies of the latest intelligence and analyses to each empty seat around the table to prepare for the NSC's arrival.

To the Colonel, Zella said, "Where's Fatah? Were there any unusual asset movements, like aircraft deployment or border fortification that shows another country knew the shooting was going to go down?"

"Ma'am, Fatah was last reported in Iran, but that intel is a few days old. As you well know, it's been a challenge keeping real-time information on his location. Preliminary reports show no indication that another nation prepared for the attack on the president."

Earl saw Zella's shoulders relax just slightly. She said, "Good. Let's talk threat assessment until the NSC gets here."

While she spoke with the Colonel, Earl stopped a soldier he recognized from the days that they had spent underground in the aftermath of last month's bombings. "Hey Franco, we need a pair of the vice president's reading glasses. And make sure her husband is flown back immediately from wherever he is. We need to alert Congress about the shooting in order of chain of command." Then he averted his eyes, feeling like he betrayed Sid as he said, "We also need to get hold of a Justice. We need to be prepared to swear her in if the worst does happen."

"Sir, he's already on his way." A large screen on the one solid wall of the glassed in conference room distracted them both. Words scrolled in bright blue: *DOCTOR ELLISON... WALTER REED HOSPITAL*

Colonel Davies hit a red button on a telephone. The doctor's voice blared over built-in speakers. "Evening, Madam Vice President. I'm Doctor Ellison, chief surgeon on duty. The president's cause of death was a gunshot wound. The first shot went through his neck at the base of his throat. The second round entered the nasal cavity and exited through the occipital lobe. That was the fatal wound. Be aware that the fourth digit on his left hand was severed and removed from the scene."

"He's dead?" Zella's voice sounded small and bewildered. "And they took his finger?"

"Yes Ma'am. We'll send a scrambled fax with a detailed report as we complete each of the six autopsies. We lost everyone on his detail except the driver and his partner, who were both in the car."

"Six autopsies," she repeated softly.

She cleared her throat as Earl still tried to focus past two words linked in a staggering combination: president and death.

Sid couldn't be dead. Yet in the background, he could hear Davies confirming the permanent transfer of power and arranging the mostly ritualistic swearing-in ceremony. Sid was not coming back. Even Zella, a master at hiding emotions, looked downright ill.

He wiped his damp palms on his pants and stared down at the table and a plaque used in video conferencing: **President Sidney F. Mahoney**. He bit the inside of his cheek until he

tasted blood. Twenty years he had spent at Sid's side, a wild ride that led from a crowded, dingy congressional office clear up to the White House. It was over. Sid was gone.

Then his gaze rested on Zella's pale, taut face. She was only forty-four years old. This would be a brutal transition for the first female President of the United States. And worse, the country was still reeling from the recent terrorist attacks.

Locking away a tangled knot of anger and grief, he searched her blank gaze, saying quietly, "As soon as the NSC gets here, we'll film the swearing-in so we can air it when we're ready to go public with the news. For now, we'll release a statement saying he was taken to the hospital for undisclosed emergency care."

"No. I'm not starting out with a lie. Tell them he went on an off-the-record movement and that his detail was ambushed."

He opened his mouth to protest, then stopped. "All right, it's your call. We'll hold a press conference in the morning. You'll give a statement and turn it over to the FBI and someone good from Secret Service. How's that sound?"

When she nodded dully, he gave her limp arm a quick, firm squeeze. She closed her eyes. As she opened them again, she wore a mask of serene determination.

Flashing lights above the main door signaled a breach in lockdown mode. The door slid open and the White House national security advisor entered.

Zella murmured, "Good. Dirkan's here."

Earl wished it were anyone else. Pierce Dirkan was in his late forties, tall, dark, and good-looking, a recent widower who came from wealthy European nobility, and educated alongside the global elite of financial dynasties and future kings. He spoke fluent Arabic and had fantastic connections all over the Middle East. He had proved himself an enormous asset to Sid's administration and a genius at his job, but Earl couldn't stand him. He didn't know why his dislike for Dirkan ran so deep any more than he could figure out why Sid and Zella trusted the man so completely.

Visibly shaken, Dirkan hesitated in the conference room doorway, looking at Zella.

In answer to his unspoken question, she said, "He's gone."

Dirkan sat heavily at the table. He bowed his head, and Earl heard several raspy breaths. Then Dirkan lifted his head and met Earl's gaze. "I am so sorry," he said, "I know what Sid meant to you." His dark blue eyes looked bright with fury as he added, "Zella, I don't know how this happened. I don't know if we missed intelligence that someone was planning this assassination, but I will find out."

With a crisp shake of her head, she yanked her jacket off the chair and put it on. "That can wait. I need to know what's going to happen next."

The door opened for Admiral Johnson, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, a lean, muscular man, made up of sharp angles and keen eyes. Earl knew he led survival retreats for fun, teaching soldiers which bugs to eat and how to sleep naked in snow. He watched the Admiral come inside warily, eyeing Zella as if he expected her to burst into tears or implode. The Admiral was not going to be happy about having a woman in charge of his military, but Earl also knew she wouldn't particularly care.

Returning his habitual salute, she straightened her posture to greet the rest of the NSC when they came inside the conference room. As she did, an innately commanding presence fell around her like a cloak. Earl had seen powerful people treat her instinctively with respect long before the White House. Still, he still studied the NSC for warning signs or hints of insubordination.

The Secretary of Defense stood next to the Admiral, clutching a rumpled suit coat, looking numb and totally lost. Circles of sweat ringed the armpits of his shirt. Corning was a brilliant, sweaty man whom Sid had appointed to streamline the Pentagon. Instead of finding areas for improvement, Corning got sucked into their world of cryptic acronyms and dazzling weapons programs.

Earl's gaze rested briefly on the Director of Central Intelligence, a figurehead who excelled at smiling for cameras. Sid nominated him in a compromise with the Deputy DCI, who ran the show quite well but shunned the spotlight. The scrawny, owl-like Pfau didn't mumble five words per meeting. Now, Pfau squinted at Zella like he was trying to remember who she was, and Earl made a mental note to get the Deputy DCI in to brief her as soon as possible.

Last to arrive was Secretary of State Sappelle, appearing neat and composed, as if there were nothing unusual about this nocturnal, subterranean gathering. Yet Earl knew he would be seriously stressed. Sid had given him countless chances to diplomatically pressure Gulf governments to arrest Fatah. He obviously hoped to have the same pull with Zella; he stood strategically next to Dirkan, whom everyone knew she listened to and trusted.

Everyone stood in awkward silence, looking grimly at Zella. She said, "Well, gentlemen, here we are. I'm sure each of you will do his best. Not just for me, but for our country and Sid's memory."

A knock on the door interrupted the bobbing heads and sincere murmurs. Franco poked his head in and said, "Madam Vice President, we have a justice ready to swear you in. Sirs, your presence is required."

Zella took the lead, and the NSC filed out after her. Earl trailed a few steps behind the group as they passed through an unmarked door and down a narrow hallway painted battleship gray.

Pushing through a heavy double door, he glanced at a sound stage containing a mock Oval Office, complete with a replica of Sid's desk and the photographs of his family. Behind the desk, drawn curtains hid the fact that there were no windows. A professional television camera on a tripod pointed toward the stage, and snaking wires led off to a manned editing and video control room. In here, the president could broadcast live from the safety of the Situation Room while citizens believed he or she was above ground just like the rest of them.

A staffer walked toward Zella with a makeup kit and hair spray. Earl stopped her and said, "Keep it minimal. I don't want the vice president looking ready for some pageant." Keeping his gaze straight to avoid the desk's pictures, he walked past the stage, nodding a greeting to the soldier in charge.

He stood off to the side and watched Zella and the NSC file up on to the stage. A flurry of controversy erupted over who should stand where, which she pointedly ignored, and Earl was glad no one seemed to think he should join them on the stage.

Then he overheard a staffer ask quietly, "What about the first lady?"

"No," someone else answered. "They sedated her after they gave her the news."

With a guilty start, Earl realized he hadn't even thought about Sid's widow. She would be a mess. They had been married for over forty years. He shifted his weight uncomfortably, then focused on Zella. The cut of her suit pants made her seem even taller. Good. Her suit jacket looked wrinkled. He debated sending for a change of clothes, then decided against it. The scene shouldn't be slick and clean.

The oath of office cue cards came up, and the camera's red recording light blinked on. A Justice held out a worn, leather Bible and said, "Please place your left hand on the Bible and

raise your right hand."

Zella did as he asked, then said, "I, Zella Anne Brooks, do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the Office of the President of the United States." Earl leaned against the wall with his arms folded, listening to Zella recite the rest of the oath in her strong speech voice. He felt like he was watching the filming of a TV show, with cast members he knew all too well. When she finished, a few of the staff huddled in the booth to assess the replay. He didn't have to see the recording. Experience told him it would be fine.

Seeing thumbs up from the control room, Zella turned stiffly and left the stage. Earl noticed she avoided the desk and its pictures as he had. He brought up the rear of the somber procession marching back to the main room.

As Zella and the NSC began filing into the adjacent conference room, a tall, elderly man with a solid head of silver hair came inside through the Situation Room's steel access door. Earl halted when he recognized Andrew Mofford, White House legal counsel and Sid's good friend. Sid had given him a special pass that allowed him carte blanche in the compound; the legendary attorney and Beltway power broker had enormous clout in their party. He had also pressured unions and key special interests to their side, turning the close election for them. Earl's respect for Mofford was tinged with awe and gratitude, and he knew Zella felt the same. She ducked back out of the conference room the moment she spotted him.

Mofford's steep forehead was lined with worry and grief. He nodded a gloomy greeting to Earl, then gripped Zella's shoulder and lifted his silvery eyebrows. "Zella, my dear. How are you surviving?"

The rest of their conversation was lost to Earl; Mofford steered Zella into an empty cubicle to talk in private. Earl pretended to sort papers while he watched this critical encounter on the sly. Without Mofford's backing, she would have a hard time accomplishing anything with Congress. She would also have no chance in hell during next year's election. He watched her speak earnestly, holding Mofford's penetrating gaze with a deferential tilt to her auburn head. When they shook hands and came back, she threw Earl a quick nod to tell him she had secured Mofford's support.

Colonel Davies intercepted Mofford. "Sir, records show President Mahoney made one private call last night. That was to you."

In a quiet, deeply resonant voice, he said, "Yes, he called at around ten. We spoke in general terms about the terrorism and election. I could tell he was distraught, but he did not elaborate, beyond the obvious. It is unfortunate he made no mention of his intent to take a midnight stroll. I would have heartily discouraged him."

Apparently satisfied, Colonel Davies withdrew. Earl was relieved that he didn't harass Mofford for more; he was a powerful ally and personal friend of Sid's.

As if hearing his thoughts, Mofford turned to Earl and clapped him on the shoulder. He peered keenly into his face with concern etched in the furrows around his eyes, and said, "Earl, my boy, always remember that Sid was extremely proud of you, as proud as he would be of a blood born son. Don't worry if you never told him how you felt. He knew."

He swallowed a sudden lump in his throat, remembering that like Zella, Mofford had an uncanny sense for others' weaknesses. He returned the iron handshake with, "Thank you, Sir."

He and Zella watched Mofford leave. Then she glanced at him with a question in her eyes, and he managed a smile to say he was all right. Before heading into the conference room, she said, "He'll get me full party support. He's going to work the opposition for me, too."

Earl nodded and started to follow, but Dirkan, standing at the doorway, stopped him with

a raised hand. “Sorry, Sanders. NSC only.” With a regretful smile, he swung the door shut in Earl’s face. The clear glass walls turned a frosty opaque for privacy.

Muttering darkly about Dirkan’s desperate desire to be a self-important ass, Earl felt a sudden unease at not being able to see Zella. After what happened to Sid, he didn’t want to let her out of his sight. But he couldn’t stand there pressed against the glass like a kid outside a toy store. Thinking she needed him to keep an eye on what happened on the outside during the meeting, he went in search of Colonel Davies.