

STEELE ARMOR

A Richard Steele Novel

E.J. Robb

The Richard Steele Series Order

Steele Trap
Steele Away
Steele Armor

To Be Released:
Steele Valor
Steele Judgment

Power of Steele
Heart of Steele
Hard as Steele
Knight of Steele
Days of Steele

This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

“Steele Armor,” by E.J. Robb. ISBN 978-1-62137-810-5 (Softcover) 978-1-62137-811-2 (eBook)

Library of Congress Control Number on file with publisher.

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“Shawnee author (E. J. Robb) pens thriller
series of books...”
-Shawnee Dispatch Aug. 4, 2015

“He has produced a total of five books
about Richard Steele, a character similar to
those found in the Jack Reacher and Alex
Cross stories.”
-Nico Roesler, Editor

DEDICATION

This is dedicated to MRR,
the bravest woman I've ever known

And

To David C. Taylor, a good friend and kind man.

FOREWORD

GOVERNOR TOM RIDGE was named Director of the Office of Homeland Security less than two weeks after the attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center, and the crashing of United Airlines Flight 93 in Pennsylvania. President George W. Bush proposed the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) as a cabinet-level position several months after that. In June, a year later, the newly formed Department of Homeland Security started bringing together twenty-two government agencies in order to protect our nation. The protection of our borders and people is the sole purpose of the Department of Homeland Security.

The Homeland Security Act of 2002 was the first piece of legislation ever passed by Congress expressly designed for the protection of American citizens from terrorist attacks. Later, Janet Napolitano became the first woman to head the DHS. She identified five key goals for the DHS to pursue. The most important was to guard against terrorism. The best way to protect against terrorism is to prevent those who would do us harm from entering our country. The only way to do that is to secure our borders and control who enters.

Facilitating legal immigration allows those who want a better life to contribute to the growth of this nation. The responsibility that comes with this is the necessity to enforce the current immigration laws. The DHS mandates that Immigration

and Customs Enforcement, better known as ICE, watch our borders.

Secretary Napolitano also set readiness and recovery from disaster as a top priority. Whether it is a terrorist attack or a health crisis like Ebola, this country needs to be prepared for any type of threat and, likewise, prepared to recover from any threat. This was why FEMA was included as part of the DHS.

Lastly, the DHS needs to mature and become more unified. There are twenty-two different agencies with twenty-two different missions. There were also thirty-five separate locations; consolidation improves communication and makes everyone more effective. This sort of thinking led to additional training for a select group of covert agents within the DHS called the Office of Special Investigations, or OSI for short. Agents for the OSI are able to cut across all departmental boundaries and handle the most sensitive of assignments.

In many ways the OSI operates as a domestic version of the CIA. The Section Chief in charge of the OSI is located in Washington, DC, and reports directly to the Secretary of Homeland Security. The Section Chief is supported by three Special Agents in Charge, each one in charge of a specific geographic area. The Eastern Seaboard Region is headquartered in Richmond, Virginia, with branch offices in New York, Charlotte and Orlando. The West Coast Regional Office is headquartered in Portland, Oregon, with branches in Los Angeles, Albuquerque and Denver. The Midwest Regional Office is headquartered in Kansas City, Missouri, with its branches in Chicago, Dallas and Cleveland. These twelve offices are all staffed with dedicated agents.

The OSI is the resource the secretary taps when he needs results. The most difficult mandate the OSI has is to act as the Internal Affairs Department for all of the DHS. Investigating your own is never pleasant, but it often necessary. The most common internal affairs investigation has to do with personal

conduct. The DHS requires the highest caliber of people to protect our nation. Periodically, however, there is something more sinister that needs to be looked into.

This concern is especially true when it has to do with the Secret Service, which is also part of the DHS. When one of the primary functions of an agency is to keep the President of the United States safe, there is no such thing as being too careful. One of the hurdles involved with any investigation into this highly specialized group is that ninety-nine percent of what they do is done to perfection. Finding that one percent is the challenge.

When all the agencies that make up the Department of Homeland Security are considered in aggregate, the responsibility the OSI has of being the Internal Affairs Department for so many different groups can seem overwhelming.

The main reason everything works as well as it does is because the DHS recruits and hires only the best. Many of the current agents at the DHS were transfers from other departments. Several came from Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Border Patrol. A few came from the outside, especially the FBI. There have been a number of transfers over the years.

While there are only one hundred and eighty OSI agents in all, approximately sixty in each region, they are exceptionally well trained. The OSI can assemble a SWAT team or HRT go unit at a moment's notice. While agents may have different skills and different training, the one common denominator is a fierce desire to protect the nation and its citizens. Any agent will give his life or, without hesitation, take a life to be sure all Americans remain safe while on their watch.

The truth is there just aren't that many internal issues, even with thousands of members on the DHS team. Securing convictions is not the main focus of the OSI. Since the OSI is

geared for prevention, they don't worry about conviction rates. The OSI is willing to let other agencies take the credit in public, as long as nothing happens to the citizens they are sworn to protect.

When there is a problem, the Secretary of Homeland Security, Harold Dixon, wants it resolved quickly and efficiently. He expects everyone's actions to be above reproach. The OSI will investigate and present their findings. It is up to others to take those findings and make recommendations and set policy. In most cases the secretary, in concert with the applicable department head, will select what steps need to be taken.

Secretary Dixon has had very few internal issues to deal with. Now the horizon is darkened by an agent who could not only lose their job, but potentially cost Dixon his and make it difficult for the President to have any chance at re-election. Getting out in front of this current crisis will require Dixon to give Richard Steele and Cynthia Simmons more freedom than he is comfortable with.

PROLOGUE

THE CHURCH WAS UNIQUELY DESIGNED and oddly interesting. Built nearly sixty years ago, just north of the boundary that separated Washington from Maryland, St. Barnabas was a classic. It had large, vaulted ceilings and ornate carvings. The pews had the old-style kneelers, and the altar had been built so the priest had his back to the congregation while he faced the crucifix mounted on the back wall of the church.

This layout told Steele, raised a Catholic but no longer practicing, that this church was over forty years old. That was when Rome decreed that the priest should turn and face his congregation. Churches built after that era of papal enlightenment have a decidedly different layout. The architecture told him it was older than that. Unfortunately this church, like many older churches, lost some of its charm when the Vatican decided the priest needed to turn and face the people.

The elderly gentleman who had entered the confessional had already been in with the priest for nearly fifteen minutes. Either the poor old man was very lonely, or he was secretly a mass murderer. The old guy just couldn't have that many transgressions to confess. Finally, the old man finished unburdening himself, received his penance and exited the confessional. Looking at the man, Steele concluded that he probably didn't have anyone else to talk to.

Confessing one's sins to a priest is a concept unique to the Catholic Church. Richard Steele was baptized Catholic, but for the most part did not practice his faith or attend services on a regular basis. Fact was he'd never attended Mass in the last twenty-five years. Sometimes, when he felt like the end was near, he would do what he was doing now—wait for his turn to enter the confessional. In the past it had been to seek forgiveness and be prepared to meet his maker, just in case things didn't go well. This time it was different, though.

Now it was Steele's turn. Inside the confessional, Steele started his confession in an unorthodox manner.

"Listen, Father, I'm not here to confess my sins. I want you to help me pray for a friend of mine who was shot a few hours ago and may not live. The doctor says there is nothing else he can do. He's the one that suggested I pray. It's just that—well, it's been a while."

The response from the priest was a surprise and caught Steele off guard. "My son, it doesn't work that way. You can't pray for something and hope God will change his mind. The best you can do is pray for God to give you the strength to accept his will."

The priest's response was not what he was looking for. Obviously, Steele needed to explain the situation more clearly. "You don't understand. This man took a bullet for me and saved my life."

"I do understand. You want him to live, and I understand you feel bad that he is the one who got shot. I was a chaplain in the Marines for ten years. I have seen men struggle with the death of their fellow soldiers."

This was not what Steele expected nor wanted. "Semper Fi, Father. But I really need to convince God this man is worth saving. Can you help me?" The question was as genuine as they come.

The answer was just as sincere. "No, my son, I cannot. I can pray to God that his will be done and we are given the strength to accept it. I can pray that you are given the grace to do the right thing. But in the end, we must learn to accept His will." The priest's words were neither comforting nor what he wanted to hear.

He was getting frustrated. "Listen, Father. I don't mean to be disrespectful, but when I used to go to church, the congregation would pray for the sick all the time. Weren't they praying for them to get better?"

"I don't know what each individual prayed for, but the fact remains that all we can do is pray for peace for ourselves and comfort for the sick. We aren't going to change what the Lord has planned."

The priest paused and closed with, "We are all destined to accept his will. That is the real test here on earth."

Steele's mind was reeling. He had heard those exact words before. "You served in the First Gulf War about fifteen years ago, didn't you?" Steele could not believe his misfortune.

There was a long silence that was broken by a single word. "Yes."

"I know you. You told me that I was going to be unhappy until I could come to grips with being a sniper, and I had to accept God's will. I needed to realize I was killing people just like me, except on the other side. You told me their beliefs, hopes and lives were just like mine. You chastised me, not for killing them, but for killing them without remorse. You had no idea what you were talking about then, and I doubt you have any idea what you're talking about now." He knew getting angry with a priest in a church was some sort of sacrilege, but the feelings were still raw, even after all this time.

Steele was about to leave when the priest surprised him yet again. "You're right. I had no clue as to what I was saying. Many of those people were simply evil. Islam is a peaceful religion, but

there are those who have their own personal agenda, and they use religion as a vehicle to get where they want to be. I was young and naïve and gave you poor counsel. I can't tell you how sorry I am. As I have gotten older and wiser, I've realized we need people willing to do the difficult tasks. People like you. Can you forgive me?"

Oddly enough, Steele's personal lie detector system was silent. In spite of that, he believed the priest was being sincere and honest. Finding himself in an awkward position he tried to lighten the mood.

"I thought this process worked the other way around."

"It usually does, but that doesn't mean it's always the correct way. I am truly sorry about your friend and I will remember him at Mass, but you need to be prepared for whatever happens. In fact, your task is more difficult than his. What is his name?"

All of a sudden, the man on the other side of the curtain seemed exactly like what Steele envisioned a priest should be like. It gave him some measure of peace. Steele gave him the name and said. "By the way, I'll forgive you if you'll forgive yourself. Experience tells me that's the really hard part."

"If you are ever in this church again, please stop by. I'd like to talk some more."

They said the sign of the cross together, and Steele left. He didn't know if his friend would live—but he knew those responsible for putting him in the hospital would not.

ONE

SECRETARY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY Harold Dixon knew how to treat a visitor. First, Agent Robert Allen was sent to Steele's home to drive him to the airport. Second, instead of getting on a Southwest flight to Washington, DC, the secretary's Learjet 85 Luxury Class was ready and waiting for Steele to board.

Flying into Andrews Air Force Base instead of the Reagan or National airports eliminated the hassle that came with crowds and trying to get transportation. To avoid that problem a car driven by a DHS agent was waiting. They headed to Seventh Street SW, which was one of three main DHS locations in the District of Columbia.

This was nothing like the evening Steele had in mind. Initially, he thought he would be eating alone. Then, much to his surprise, Cynthia Simmons appeared at his front door. Section Chief Cynthia Simmons of the Office of Special Investigations, a department of Homeland Security, was returning from a trip to Dallas. Simmons and Steele had quite a history.

In the last eight months alone, Steele had eliminated three men who were trying to kill her. He had kissed her several times and when she showed up on his door step he envisioned things going even further. Then Agent Allen came and whisked him away on orders from Secretary Dixon. Those same orders forced Agent Allen to leave Simmons behind. That was very unusual.

Steele's history with the OSI was the stuff legends were made of. Prior to working with the OSI, Steele was a man who had killed nearly twenty people. All of his twenty victims would have been in prison if the justice system worked as it was supposed to. Since it didn't and Steele lacked any patience, he sped up the process of delivering what the courts were unable to do. In the end the people he worked with, who he thought were trying to make the country a better place, betrayed him.

Through a bizarre chain of events, he ended up becoming an ally to the OSI. While they were fully aware of his past, he became pivotal in helping them prevent four attacks planned against domestic targets. In a weird, left-handed way, he was considered one of the team.

Now he was being asked to help again. Steele had met Secretary Dixon before and learned he was a former Marine. Since Steele was a former sniper and recon Marine, he was sure Dixon would be straight with him. That was the main reason he agreed to the rendezvous without any knowledge as to why he was being asked to the meeting. Dixon was, as expected, straightforward and direct.

"Steele, it is good to see you again. Can I offer you a refreshment?" Steele was impressed. Dixon had done his homework. There were Diet Cokes on the table, Steele's preferred drink, and Dixon didn't call him 'Mr. Steele.' The handle he liked best was to be called simply 'Steele.'

"It's a pleasure to see you again, sir." The men shook hands and Steele took a seat at the table, where Dixon and two others were already in place. One of the two looked like he was probably Dixon's attaché. Steele had no idea who the other man was.

The room was set up for conferencing with state-of-the-art electronic toys. The furniture was not typical government issue—there were leather chairs, a polished mahogany table top, thick carpeting, and a panoramic view of the city as the sun was setting over the Capitol. It was awe-inspiring.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice. If it’s acceptable to you, we will get right down to it? We need some help, and I think you are just the man.” Dixon motioned to the man on his left, who handed him a file.

Though tempted to ask questions, Steele decided to wait and listen. There would be time for his queries later. The file folder had the presidential seal on it and only had six or eight individual pieces of paper in it. This wasn’t much of a case yet.

“I’ve seen the confidentiality agreement you signed earlier this year when you helped with the Guardians of American Liberty fiasco in Kansas City. I just want to make sure you realize your agreement is still in effect. I would also like to let you know I appreciated your efforts.” Dixon seemed sincere; Steele didn’t think he was just being polite.

“You’re quite welcome, sir. It was my honor. Agent Preston and Chief Simmons are two of the best I’ve ever worked with.” Agent Lewis Preston was in charge of the Midwest Region. He and Steele had a very rocky start. Preston had threatened to shoot Steele so many times he’d lost count. But when it was nut-cutting time, Preston was there and had Steele’s back.

“I am aware my confidentiality agreement is still in effect.” Steele wasn’t offended at having been reminded. In fact, he’d expected it.

“I don’t how much you know about the internal structure of the DHS.” It was rhetorical, and Dixon continued without waiting for an answer.

“We absorbed twenty-two different agencies after the attacks on 9/11. Agencies like FEMA, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Border Patrol and the Coast Guard are all part of the DHS. What most people don’t realize is the DHS is also responsible for the Secret Service.”

Dixon took a breath, which was designed to give Steele a chance to ask a question or seek clarification to anything he didn’t understand up to this point. Steele remained silent. He wanted to hear the whole story before he asked any questions.

He knew this was not the end. Likely, it was barely the beginning.

“Our biggest responsibility, in my opinion, is that we also act as the Internal Affairs Department for the DHS.” Dixon paused. This time he wasn’t waiting for Steele, he was considering what he wanted to say next. There was a completely different inflection in how the secretary ended his last comment.

“We are in a very delicate position here. People’s careers, and possibly their lives, may be on the line. Before we, the DHS, ruin a person’s reputation, I want more facts with less hearsay and innuendo.”

Steele was one hundred percent sure Dixon was telling him the unabashed truth. There was a sort of sixth sense he had. Alarm bells went off in his subconscious when he wasn’t hearing the truth. On the other hand, if he was being told the truth, he would get a little jolt to his psyche.

This warning system had proven to be infallible over the years. Steele had learned to believe it no matter what he thought may be the facts. This sixth sense had a drawback, though. It came to the surface only when it wanted to. He could not call upon it for help. It either worked or it didn’t. Sometimes it would just go dormant. The absence of a jolt did not mean he was being told the truth. Likewise, the absence of an alarm didn’t mean he was being lied to.

It had served him well. Now, if he could only figure out how to get it to work on demand instead of when it felt like it. No matter—he knew the Dixon was telling the truth. He was stressed and wanted help. Whatever this was, it had the Secretary of the DHS on worried.

Looking straight at Steele, he continued. “We have a Secret Service agent who may—and I emphasize *may*—be involved in something. Something we can’t quite explain.”

“Until recently, this agent was part of the presidential protection detail. We will get into the essence of the investigation once I am convinced you can help us. If I, and only I, decide you

cannot help, my plane will return you to Cleveland. If I think you can help, and you agree to help, then you and I will get into much more detail." Dixon finished with an inflection in his voice that told the listener the ball was in their court.

"I appreciate your desire to give me as little information as possible until I come on board, but I need something more. Why is this being addressed at your level, sir, and why are you coming to me?"

Steele remembered several weeks ago when Simmons requested his presence in her office. She had a mission that required one of the OSI 'kites.' Except 'kites' in OSI jargon was an acronym for Keep Your Team's Exit Secure (KYTES).

The OSI used KYTES when they wanted to be able to cut the string if anything went wrong. The KYTES could then just float away. This prevented any unwanted political blowback on the agency. Maybe that was the problem in this case. Maybe it was something politically sensitive.

"It is being addressed at my level because it involves the President. Anything involving the POTUS comes to me."

Steele was aware of the acronym—President of the United States. He realized there was far more to the story, but for now he would let it go. "And you want me involved, because...?" He let his voice trail off, indicating that it was up to Secretary Dixon to finish the sentence.

"Before I do anything officially, I want to be sure that this person deserves to have us tear their life apart." Dixon had a pained look on his face. Steele understood the concern.

The DHS had set up an online searchable system for all law enforcement agencies. If Dixon had Simmons or any other agency work on this, then the paperwork would be out there in cyber space and a problem for the agent involved, even if the agent was exonerated. If Steele worked on it and there was nothing to it, then there would be no report to deal with.

"I will help you out, but I think Simmons should be read in. You know, just in case I need some sort of assistance." Steele

really wanted to work with this woman who had caught his fancy, again.

“That is not a problem. I intended to lend her to you as a resource from the beginning. I just didn’t want to get her involved at this point if you were going to be unavailable.” Dixon’s facial expression asked if there was anything else on Steele’s mind.

“You didn’t bring me here without some sort of plan. I assume you have an idea on how you want me to proceed.” Steele was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“You are correct, but first there is something you need to know about the agent involved.”

TWO

STEELE TOOK A SIP OF HIS DIET COKE and waited. His suspicion was that whatever came next probably had more to do with why he was here than anything he had been told so far. As it turned out, his instincts were right on the money.

“This particular security detail is a choice assignment. Some agents join the Secret Service for the sole purpose of guarding POTUS. Most of them never get there, and the ones who do rarely ask to be transferred.” Dixon was giving Steele a long and unnecessary explanation. Whatever there was about this agent must be a big deal, since it was taking Dixon forever to get there.

Then, at last, Dixon was ready to lay all his cards on the table.

“The agent we need to look into is a woman named Jennifer Cannes.” As soon as the words were out of the secretary’s mouth, Steele understood the breadth of the problem. This was going to be a problem no matter what she was suspected of doing.

“Wow, Jennifer Cannes. You’ve got a really big problem. What’s happened to cause her to pop up on your radar?” Steele was clearly surprised, and it was on two fronts. First, that Dixon came to him for help—and second, that Cannes was the one on the proverbial hot seat.

Jennifer Cannes was the poster child for recruiting women into the Secret Service. She was a former Navy pilot, graduated

at the top of her class at MIT, and had a father who was one of the richest men in the United States.

In a totally selfless act she had passed on all the wealth to serve her country. For anonymity, she used her mother's maiden name while she was in college, and then again in the Navy. She loved her parents, but wanted to make it on her own. When she joined the Secret Service she went back to Cannes, but by then she had made an outstanding career for herself and a stellar reputation of her own.

Getting into the Secret Service was easy for her. She had everything they wanted. She spoke three languages, was extremely smart, and genuinely wanted to make a difference. Add to that the fact she was richer than God and absolutely stunning, and the Secret Service had a proverbial walking recruitment poster.

At five foot six and one hundred and twenty five pounds, she could have anything she wanted. She chose to put her life on the line protecting the First Family. She was the agent in charge of protecting the First Lady. And she had done just that. Not two months ago, a man had tried to accost the First Lady at a fund raiser. Cannes took him down on live television, before millions of viewers.

She became an instant hero. She refused all interviews, stating she had just been doing her job. Only after the director of the Secret Service talked to her did she say anything to the press. The fact that the crazy man said he only wanted to kiss the First Lady was lost in all the reports. Jennifer Cannes was a rock star to every girl over seven years old.

Steele could not even imagine what had happened to put her under the DHS microscope. "I think you have quite a bit more to tell me, if you still want my help."

"You are correct. There is more to the story than you have been told, obviously. I'm ready to fill you in, if you're ready to help. Are you?" Dixon was waiting. Nothing else was going to be said until Steele agreed to be part of the team.

This was going to be incredibly interesting, and maybe Steele would get to meet the First Family. Of course he was in. "Mr. Secretary, I'll be glad to help. Give me everything you've got and tell me what it is you want me to do."

"Start by looking at this." Dixon handed him a sparse folder with the presidential seal emblazoned on it.

Steele opened the file and started reading. The contents of the file seemed unusual, to say the least, as they spilled out on the table. There were a few copies of handwritten notes, a bank statement, a letter from the Iranian embassy, and a picture of Jennifer Cannes with a swarthy-looking Middle Eastern man.

"Mr. Secretary, without some context, these don't really tell me anything." Steele motioned at the few pieces of paper in front of him.

"I imagine not. We are working with the White House on this and the President's deputy secretary here, Orrin Jenkins, will put everything in perspective, and then answer any questions you have. I hope Chief Simmons was correct in her belief that you would be able to uncover the truth. Thank you in advance for your help." Dixon and Steele shook hands, and the secretary and his associate left.

Clearly, he wanted to be at arm's length if this thing went south. Steele was not deluding himself. If someone pulled the pin on this and it exploded, Steele would be the one holding the grenade. But it was the last comment that really got Steele thinking. Had Simmons told Dixon about Steele's internal lie detector? If so did Dixon now think he was some sort of nut? He'd ask her when he got the chance.

THREE

THE PRESIDENT'S DEPUTY SECRETARY said, "If you will please take a seat, I will explain each document in this file to you." Steele was going to hate this.

Orrin Jenkins had a squeaky, sissy-sounding voice that made him seem effeminate. He sounded like a whiny school girl and was talking down his nose, as though Steele were an idiot. Jenkins, who didn't stand more than five foot five and was skinny, looked like the type who would eat tofu and salads instead of real food. Steele realized he needed to be careful not to say anything that he would regret later. He needed to keep his mouth shut and feelings in check.

"Tell me the significance of the bank statement. We already know she's loaded. Why does this mean anything?" Steele held the document out, waiting for an answer.

Jenkins took the bank information and held it as though touching it would give him the plague. "This bank is in Bermuda, and the account was opened five months ago. The account has over a quarter of a million dollars in it. All of the funds were wired into it from the Middle East. The money has come in at the rate of approximately twenty five thousand dollars every two weeks."

"Have you asked her about the account?" Steele asked.

"No, we can't prove conclusively that she opened it. There are no security tapes. They were conveniently misplaced. The

paperwork used to open the account may or may not have been signed by Ms. Cannes. The Bermuda banks aren't as fussy about identification of the account holder as we are, especially when it comes to deposits."

"Okay, what is the reason you have these two handwritten notes in the file?" To Steele, they were meaningless.

The paper in the file was standard letter-size sheets, but the image on each of the two pages was obviously made from a much smaller piece of paper. It looked like it could have been copied from a Post-it Note of some sort.

"Time to meet and settle this" was scrawled on the first copy and seemed to have been written in a rush. There was no signature or any names on it anywhere. Without any context, it could mean anything.

Looking at the second sheet, the note copied on it had a more sinister slant. *"Do what I say or this will end unpleasantly for you!"* This note was more carefully printed and had fairly precise block letters. Steele wasn't enough of an expert on handwriting to know for certain whether the same person wrote both missives.

"We actually don't know what either note means." Jenkins was not exhibiting any emotion; he was just stating a fact.

The picture of Jennifer and the mystery man had that look of having been taken while during surveillance of some sort.

Jennifer, the primary subject, was looking off to the side, and the gentleman was actually looking in the opposite direction. If you wanted to read something into the photo, you might say they were checking their surroundings or looking for someone they were supposed to meet. The background was totally nondescript. It was daytime and a clear day, but there was virtually nothing else to see.

The letter from the Iranian Embassy was the most troubling of all. Addressed to Ms. Jennifer Cannes, it was short, but to the point. It read:

At this time we are unable to meet with you. If the information you have is as represented, please contact our intelligence liaison and he will handle your request. As far as obtaining political asylum goes, that request needs to be done in person, here at the embassy.

"Do you have any idea what this means?" Steele could see how each little piece was like a building block, creating a wall of concern.

"No, not at all. We don't know what any of it means." Jenkins was not a font of information, and he seemed clinically detached.

"What has Jennifer said about all of this?" This was a key part of the story they had yet to volunteer.

"We have determined that it is not in our best interest to discuss any of this with her. After the First Lady was safe and the attacker in custody, the Service put her on desk duty while the investigation is completed, as required by the Service's protocol. The First Lady is demanding her back, and we don't have much time." Jenkins finished as though that was an answer to Steele's question, which it was not.

"Fine, but that doesn't explain why you haven't talked to her." Steele really hated talking to this little twerp.

"We got a call from a man claiming to be the one who sent us this." Jenkins waved his arm over the assembled documents.

"He told us that if we tip our hand, he will not be able to continue providing information to us. The threat to the nation will move deeper underground. We might never be able to root it out and neutralize it. The man said that Cannes is relying on her star status to pull this off, and consequently is being careless." That squeaky voice was going to drive Steele crazy.

"But you don't know what the 'this' is, do you?" Steele was still not clear on why they were putting so much credence in a few pieces of paper with no context, and an anonymous tip over the phone. He still believed the best approach would be to just bring Cannes in and ask her what the hell was going on. There

might be a perfectly logical explanation—although for the life of him, he couldn't think of what that explanation would be.

"Does Cannes have access to sensitive information that she could sell to an unfriendly country?"

"No, not directly. She has mobility within the First Lady's residence and could maybe find something, but it would have a low strategic or diplomatic value. The reason we are being so cautious is that we don't know what she may have gotten access to, so we can't really assess the threat level.

Secretary Dixon is of the opinion that this is a ruse to besmirch the reputation of one of our best and brightest agents. We can't determine why that would be a priority for any foreign government. We want you to figure that out for us." Jenkins was finally done. To Steele, the voice of the squeaky little man had the same effect as using fingernails to scrape a chalkboard.

"And just how the hell am I supposed to do that?" Steele suspected they had a plan.

"You like baseball, right? Well, for all her strengths, Cannes has one major weakness. She loves the Washington Nationals. The season starts in two days, and you will be seated next to her at the game." Smugness did not wear well on Jenkins. He looked like he was sick and ready to throw up.

"Enjoying baseball is not a weakness." Steele was just looking for an excuse to be angry with Jenkins.

"No offense intended." There wasn't an ounce of sincerity in his apology.

"How do you know I'll be sitting next to her?"

"Her family has had the same season tickets since the Nationals came here from Montreal. They have two seats, and she attends every game when she is in town. Now that she's riding a desk, she will certainly be there. We have arranged for you to have the two seats next to her." With that, Jenkins handed Steele tickets to the home opener and the following two games between the Washington Nationals and the Cincinnati Reds. The

opener was an afternoon game, as many of the early season games were.

Jenkins gathered himself and was preparing to leave when he delivered one last bit of instruction to Steele. "You are on your own. The only person you are to contact at the DHS is Simmons, and she will keep Secretary Dixon updated. In turn, I will keep the President in the loop. Do not call us. Understand?"

"I get the picture. If there is any mud that comes out of this, you want to make sure your shoes stay clean."

"Precisely. You're smarter than you look." If Jenkins didn't erase that stupid look on his face, Steele was going to remove it for him.

Steele took exception to the weasel's comment, but he was out the door before Steele could say anything. It was time to let the secretary ferry him back to Cleveland so he could pack and return in time for the game. Well, if nothing else, he'd get to see some baseball.