

Chapter 1

Early Summer,
Washington D.C.

The President looked at a sea of wealthy faces. The applause, though formal and meaningless, was all very natural to him. He felt at ease. The people encircled tables spangled with plates. The President considered the vast amount of money he would take from this one evening. Two thousand dollars a plate for anyone who wished to attend. Over five hundred participants filled the dining hall. Not bad.

The President had waited until the end to boast about his popular reforms. He cleared his throat and concluded his speech: “Let us move the improved America forward. We are a more compassionate and responsible country than we have ever been. We are now a nation that refuses to allow anyone to go unhoused, unfed, or uncared for medically. We are cutting off the power of the greedy few and giving it to the people. Social solidarity is replacing individual selfishness. We have done so much good. But we can still improve...” he paused a moment, entertained by the applause and joy with which the wealthy in the room loved his attack on the wealthy. Ironic.

“We will move forward and meet our obligations to social justice. Let us use our power to do good. Let us abandon—more than we have in the past—the roots of corruption that dominated us as a nation for so long: greed and selfishness.” As he rolled into his final punch, the crowd was boiling with energy.

“Let us hold as our motives of public service the elevation of mankind and not the elevation of self. Let us establish the equality that would make us ideal!”

The mass was now on their feet, filled with adulation for the President. He smiled, breathed deeply, and relished the moment. His countenance was awash with flashes of light that strobed him from the cameras across the room. The smile came easily now.

With the pressure of presenting now past, the President grinned and waved for a few moments before dismounting the stage. He plunged into the crowd. He greeted each person with charisma. In the thrill of the moment, he paid little attention to the drink a distinguished-looking server handed him—a drink he gladly accepted.

He moved from person to person, shaking hands with one hand and sipping from the glass in the other.

After a few minutes of mingling, another server offered a second drink to replace the one he had just finished. He accepted this new drink, but would never finish it. He began to feel drained. The skin across much of his body became cold and clammy. His head began hurting, and the rest came on fast. He remembered having heat exhaustion a few years back, and thought it felt similar—but he knew it wasn't that.

Within just a few minutes, he knew he needed to leave and get some rest. The conversation he had enthusiastically begun just minutes earlier had now become drudgery—he wanted to lie down somewhere. He tried to excuse himself, but his efforts were lethargic and came across as nonchalant. He motioned to the security personnel around him and stumbled toward an exit. He never made it.

He collapsed—in the middle of the pressing crowd—onto the ground, striking a table with his face as he fell. Unable to raise his arms to catch himself, he hit the ground hard. The crowd gasped and a sense of panic filled the entire dining hall. Screams followed. The crowd pushed back in a well-formed circle around the President.

The security entourage engulfed him. A doctor was at his side in seconds. After a moment of assessment, the doctor looked up at those gathered closest and said with blank surprise, “He’s dead.”

After a long bout of CPR in the dining hall and while en route to the hospital, multiple doctors officially declared the President dead eleven minutes after the President’s arrival.

The country mourned the sudden loss of a popular president. Speculation that the President had been poisoned swirled around the nation and across the world. However, the autopsy report concluded the President had suffered a heart attack from natural causes. Except for the few conspiracy theorists, the suspicions ceased.

For The Thread, it had all been very easy.

Chapter 2

Three months later

Utah State Capitol Building, Salt Lake City

3:05 P.M.

The Utah State Senator had nearly finished making the copies he needed. He usually sent someone from his staff to do menial tasks like this. He was a large man, whose physical presence dominated any room and any gathering. His rise to power in Utah had been quite sudden. In fact, he had been so successful in accumulating power in this state that he was now poised to try his hand in national politics, if that had been his plan. But it was not his plan. In public, he was charming and authoritative. In private, he was gruff, manipulative, and short fused.

He was nearly finished making copies when his phone rang. It was his private secretary.

“Frank, you have a call. I would’ve taken a message, but the caller insisted on waiting.”

“Who is it?” asked Frank.

“Well, that’s just it. The name is Judy.” She paused. “But Judy is a man.” Frank first felt a twinge of fear, then smiled and chuckled to himself at the audacity of the caller. He knew who it was, and was surprised the man would call him at such a critical time.

“Tell him I’ll be right there.”

“Will do.”

Frank grabbed the satchel—gripping the handle to remind his consciousness he was not forgetting his critical cargo. Frank had decided to keep the satchel with him at all times for these last twenty-four hours prior to the transaction. What he did not know was that this precaution to secure *Key #3*—the most important document he had ever possessed—would prove disastrous.

Distracted by the call, he failed to close the satchel. Frank turned to leave the room. He had not seen the small, older lady enter the room. The two collided—hard enough that Frank dropped his precious load. As his satchel hit the ground, its contents spilled under the copy room table. Folders and papers from the satchel spread out across the floor much like a deck of cards.

Frank’s heart sank. Ironically, his first thought was not about the document in his satchel. Rather, because of the woman’s presence, his first thought was about the magazine that had

fallen out and was now in plain sight. He bent and confiscated it, quickly placing it back into the satchel.

He jabbered quick and profuse apologies to the lady, trying to perceive whether she had noticed the magazine. He was satisfied she had not, and that brought him great relief. Someone spotting him with a magazine like that would have been political poison—not to mention the career-ending fallout that would happen if the people of this state were to discover that he, Frank Tomlinson, was its principle financier.

In his relief, he failed to notice the document that had scattered the farthest. In fact, it was well under the table and out of sight. He gathered what he supposed were the entire contents of his satchel from under the table, finished packing, and apologized again to the lady. In the most careless act of his life, Frank Tomlinson left the room.

Less than ten minutes after Frank Tomlinson left the copy room, Colton Wiser walked in. He made the copies he, as an aid, was often required to make. As he stood near the copy machine, he noticed—in his peripheral vision—a tan colored document far under the table. He walked over and picked it up.

From the instant he held it, he felt a bit like an intruder. He recalled being much younger; hiding in a tree, listening to his older brothers and their friends meet in their club—a club that kept secrets from him. As he began to scan this document, he felt much the same way. Colton was holding something that was strange—to the point of being fascinating. This was not an ordinary document.

The paper was so thick it almost seemed like a tan fabric. It had a leathery feel to it. He now could see that there were three pages stapled together. Yet, the pages were thick enough the document looked and felt to have more pages than three.

It had the feel of something private. He felt a sense of duty—he wanted to identify the owner and return it.

The title was odd: *Master Plan for the Rising of The Thread*. He began skimming the document, looking for clues as to what it was or who its owner might be. The headings on the first page held no meaning for Colton—just an outline.

The outline spoke of a series of transactions. The points under each heading were elusive, even childish gibberish at times.

He analyzed the second page, which made more sense than the first page. The second page was mostly economic jargon—much of which he could at least identify: the Fed, price controls, universalized medicine, and so on. Most of these things had been in the news recently.

He had had a small dose of economics at Brigham Young University, where he had excelled, and had graduated with a bachelor's degree just a few months prior. His degree was in political science, and he had landed a job as an aid to a state senator. It was an ideal entry job. Colton loved politics.

He looked at the inside of the final page, which was blank.

And then, for the first time, he looked at the back of the document.

His heart quickened as a shot of adrenaline coursed through his body. Across the center of the back page, from left to right, was a long, thin, outlined rectangle. A raised red blotch filled the inside of the rectangle. It was a smear of blood. The page bore the title: *Key #3*. Below the blood was an ominous, almost silly warning: "This key must be secured until transaction. Great trust has been placed in the holder. Ample reward will follow its proper use. If this key is lost or misused, the life of the key holder must recompense."

Chapter 3

Utah State Capitol Building

3:15 P.M.

Colton marveled at what a strange document he had found. It was a combination of technical economic jargon, coded phrases that sounded ridiculous, and a death threat. Was it real? He doubted it. Yet, so much about it seemed real. He began walking back to the office to deliver the copies he had made and return to his cubicle. But he could not focus on anything other than the document. If this were a death threat on the back, the owner would want it badly.

Here was a dilemma. How do you find the owner of a confidential packet that is either silly or dangerous in the extreme? Just as he got back to his cubicle, inspiration struck. His roommate and best friend, Jeff Palmer, had worked at the Capitol Building for almost three years. Jeff worked security. Surely he would have some ideas.

As Colton made his way to the security office, he concealed—for some reason he could not explain—the mysterious papers by hiding them in a folder.

He found Jeff in the security office as he had hoped. To Colton's relief, Jeff was at a secluded work station.

Jeff had an appearance that was similar enough to Colton's that the two were often mistaken for brothers. Both had brown hair that they kept short. Colton's hair was a little more inclined to stand up and poof out, while Jeff's hair was softer and rested on his head. Jeff was a bit taller and more athletic, but both were good athletes and loved to compete with and against each other.

"Well, well. It's the 'cool' aid," greeted Jeff. Colton usually matched Jeff's lighthearted wit; but not this time. Instead, Colton was serious and focused on what was in the folder. Jeff sensed Colton's mood. He adjusted and asked, "What's up?"

"I found a crazy document. I'm not sure if it's legitimate, or part of some sort of game."

"Where did you find it?"

"In the copy room about ten minutes ago. It was on the floor under the table."

"Well then," said Jeff, "I'll bet it's sensational. All great documents are discovered under the tables in copy rooms." Colton again gave no response to the jesting. Without otherwise

reacting, he removed the document from the folder and tossed it in front of Jeff. Jeff looked at the title.

“*Master Plan for the Rising of The Thread,*” read Jeff. Looking up at Colton he whispered, “So you’ve gone and joined Utah’s secret sewing club.”

Jeff picked it up and scanned the first page, then turned to the second page. As he perused it, he made little mumbling noises—mocking the way one might read it with great sophistication. He glanced at the blank third page. Assuming he had seen the entire document, he tossed it on the desk in front of him.

“Well,” concluded Jeff, “we should call some very important people and have them deal with this amazingly boring treasure you unearthed in the great copy room of the Utah State Capitol Building.”

Colton knew Jeff well. Had he not known his heart so well, Jeff’s jovial reaction might have been offensive. Colton, absorbing Jeff’s humor, reached, took the document, turned it over, and once again set it in front of Jeff. The back of the document was facing up.

“That’s sick!” said Jeff upon seeing the blood stain. He read the warning. The mood change was complete and his curiosity peaked. “You think this is just some kind of joke, don’t you?” Jeff asked, hoping for an affirmative answer.

“That’s what I’m wondering. But there’s too much serious stuff in this for me to pass it off as a joke or a game.”

“And you have no idea whose it is?” Jeff was fully inquiring now.

“That’s why I brought it to you. I would have taken it to Senator Nelson, but I thought you could help me find out whose it is.”

“Yeah!” Jeff said as a plan unfolded in his mind. “Come here.” He led Colton across the room to a computer. “Were you in the copy room on the south side of the building?”

“Yes. About ten to fifteen minutes ago is all.”

Jeff sat down at a console of computers and multiple screens and went to work, punching information on a keyboard. In just a few moments, Jeff had an image of the copy room pulled up on the monitor. In the top right corner of the screen was a large series of numbers that made no sense to Colton. In the upper left was the time of the recording. Standing near a copy machine was Colton, examining the document. The footage was too recent.

Jeff began rolling the image back in time. Both men watched as Colton seemed to awkwardly bend to put the document under the table, back up to the copy machine, wait, turn around, and back out of the room. After a little while, an older lady seemed to back into the room and wait at the copy machine.

“Okay,” said Jeff, “let’s watch her closely.”

Not long after her entrance, the older lady seemed to back most of the way out of the room before a large man seemed to back in and around her.

“Here’s another one to watch,” said Colton.

The hefty man squatted down and rummaged around the floor. After he popped up, there was what appeared in reverse footage to be a visible collision between the two people.

“Bingo,” said Jeff, “that must be it right there.”

“That’s where the document was,” said Colton, pointing at the screen, “under the table.”

They continued watching as the large man backed into the room and put his hand to his ear—apparently talking on his cell phone. The older lady had already backed out. Satisfied he had found the source of the strange document, Jeff froze the image and began tinkering with it. He honed in on the face of the large man until it filled most of the screen. Even before Jeff had the image made sharper, Colton identified the face.

“Frank Tomlinson.”

“Are you sure?” asked Jeff. “I see these people all the time, but I only know faces. I don’t know many of their names.”

“I’m sure,” said Colton. “Anyone involved in the workings of this state will soon get to know Frank Tomlinson. He’s sort of an in-your-face kind of a guy. He gets his way a lot, but he burns a lot of political bridges. He does have quite an influence in the Senate; but he’s a thorn in Senator Nelson’s side and opposes him on most major issues.”

“So,” said Jeff, “we think we know who the document belongs to and when it was lost. Should we just take it to his office and hand it to him and say, ‘Here Senator, we found your death threat document. Did we save your life? Maybe you could see that we get a raise.’”

“You know, if this thing *is* part of a joke or game, he’d be embarrassed to know we saw it. If it’s *real*, he’d be mad. We have to find a way to return it without him knowing we’ve had it.”

“True,” said Jeff. “But if it’s serious, this thing is sinister to the tenth degree, and there’s no way this document should ever get back into his hands. Maybe these transactions are some sort of drug deal, or fraud.”

Jeff thought of something important and continued. “You know, Colton, if this is a raw deal going on, and this document is important in a bad way, that man could use this same footage to learn that you were the discoverer—that you know about his paper. This video record puts you at risk.”

“You’re right!” said Colton. “What should we do?”

Jeff did not answer. He inserted a device into the computer, continued working, and then pulled the device out of the computer.

“Done.”

“What did you do?” asked Colton.

“Solved your problem.”

“Are you allowed to do that?”

“No,” said Jeff honestly. “Now, what do we do with this document?”

“How can we find out if this thing is legit?” asked Colton.

Jeff sprang up. He grabbed Colton’s shoulders and looked him in the eyes. “Hey, do you trust me?” It was a strange question at a strange time. Colton looked at Jeff quizzically. “Do you trust me?” repeated Jeff with a large smile.

“Sure,” said Colton untrustingly.

“I’ve got a plan. You just wait here and watch.” Jeff, with his hands on Colton’s shoulders, sat Colton down in the chair. “I’ll be back in a few.” And he left.

Jeff returned eight long minutes later, brimming with energy.

“Check this out.” Jeff sat again at a computer and pulled up the current image of the copy room. The room was empty.

“What did you do?” asked Colton.

“Okay,” said Jeff, using his hands as he talked, “Tomlinson’s secretary is receiving a message about an important document Frank left in the copy room.”

“You’re crazy. That could be traced right back to you.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” said Jeff, “but I think we’re about to find out if we need to run and hide, or if it’s safe to play.” Jeff chuckled to himself.

“How?”

“Just watch. My guess is that it won’t take long. We should find out if it’s bogus once he gets back to that room.”

“How?” said Colton again.

“You see that white thing on the table right there?” asked Jeff.

“Sure.”

“That, my friend, is the golden ticket.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just watch.”

It did not take long. In walked Tomlinson. He seemed frazzled—almost in a panic. Jeff honed in to where he was standing and focused the image. Tomlinson bent and looked under the table. He jerked up in distress. He noticed the white envelope on the table. Tomlinson tore the envelope open and removed a small piece of paper from within the envelope. His face turned ashen, as if someone had just punched him in the gut. With panicked eyes, he raced out of the room.

“Whoa!” said Jeff. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

Jeff pushed buttons and the monitor now showed the large, open rotunda and foyer through a different camera’s perspective. Tomlinson was running, as best he could, across the great open space of the Capitol Building. He was swiveling his head in paranoia. He ran for the doors that led out of the building and toward the covered parking garage. Soon he was gone. Jeff switched to a parking garage camera. Both young men watched, stunned, as this large man continued to run in a panic to his car. The car sped away, out of the Capitol.

Both roommates looked at each other in shock.

“How ‘bout that...” It was all Jeff could say. Colton was silent. After a while he looked at Jeff.

“What in the world was in that envelope?”

Jeff shrugged. “The envelope said, ‘For Frank Tomlinson.’”

“The paper, Jeff, what was on the paper?” asked Colton.

“I just wrote a little note. All it said was... ‘Frank, you were warned.’”