

MOMS IN BLACK

A Mom Squad Caper

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ONE

Some people retire from government service with a pat on the back, a commendation for a job well done, and a hefty pension. Others are forced out when an operation goes south and the politicians demand a sacrificial lamb. Forget all the accomplishments of the past, the bad actors brought down, the lives saved.

Forget the fact that she had pointed out the flaws in the operation from the moment of its ill-conceived conception, had waved a myriad of red flags, highlighting everything that could—and eventually did—go wrong. In the end, she became the target of all those bureaucrats, politicians, and political appointees who had refused to listen to her expert advice. The people in power needed someone to blame—someone other than themselves and their cohorts, someone not a member of The Old Boys' Club—even though many of them owed their lives to her.

At least her teams had understood, even though they'd also been forced out in undeserved disgrace when everything she's spent a lifetime creating had been flushed out of existence. However, the private sector had already snapped up most of those dedicated men and women and for salaries that more than compensated for the loss of a government pension. Those still unemployed were weighing the pros and cons of various offers. Everyone would bounce back.

Everyone but her.

After thirty years of government service, the only options Carla Jordan now weighed were the monumental decision of whether to take up gardening or pottery. Heck, with so much time now on her hands, she could do both, as well as join a yoga class, a book club, and whatever else retirees did to kill eight or ten or twelve or twenty-four hours a day.

What she hadn't considered having to weigh was whether or not to invite into her home the government official currently standing on her doorstep. It had come as quite a surprise when she checked her security camera and discovered Anthony Granville, the newly confirmed Attorney General, standing on her front porch. Her first inclination was to slam the door in his face, but three decades of counter-intelligence work had trained her to hide all emotion.

Forget hiding emotion. If nothing else, forced retirement should allow her to express her bitterness and anger over the way she and her teams had been treated. People who put their lives on the line each day to protect the country shouldn't have to worry about being used as pawns in a political tug-a-war. Or worse yet, thrown under the bus by congressmen who put their careers and reelection bids ahead of the safety of the citizens who paid their salaries. But that's exactly what had happened.

She squared her shoulders and lifted her chin before swinging the door open. Without preamble she asked, "Am I about to receive my long-overdue apology?"

"If it were up to me, Carla, I'd put you in charge of Homeland Security."

Well, that certainly took her by surprise!

“So why are you here, Tony?” asked Edward, coming up behind her.

“To twist your wife’s arm, pick her brains, and make her an offer she can’t refuse. You, too, Ed.”

Carla crossed her arms over her chest and raised her chin in defiance. After what the government had put her and her people through, did Tony really have the balls to expect her to forgive and forget? “I’m not coming back, not in any capacity. I’ve had my fill of you government bozos.”

He pulled an exaggerated frown. “Even me?”

No, she couldn’t lump Tony in with the rest of them. He’d been one of the few to come to her defense when a powerful senator had railroaded her in a bid to save his own neck. He’d pushed for her indictment on trumped up charges that could have led to her serving a lengthy prison term.

Carla had fought back, exposing his corruption. Now that senator and his partner-in-crime spent their days decked out in orange jumpsuits instead of the taxpayer-funded three-thousand-dollar bespoke suits they’d once worn. Justice had won out but at a price that had soured Carla to her previous life. She was through with government service. Now and forever.

She offered Tony a begrudging nod. “Present company excluded.”

“Glad to hear that. Now let me tell you what I have in mind. Then if you still want to kick me the hell out, I’ll bend over and offer you a wide target.”

Carla softened her stance and waved Tony into the living room. “You have five minutes.”

“Fair enough.” He glanced at the furniture, unable to mask the shock registering on his face.

“Not the décor you expected from a hard-ass warrior like me?” she asked.

To his credit Granville shook his head and chuckled as he settled into the middle of her floral upholstered sofa with its overabundance of coordinated toss pillows. “Definitely not. I would have expected hard-lined minimalism. You’re a woman of many talents, Carla Jordan. And even more surprises.”

“He definitely wants something,” Carla stage-whispered to Edward as they each opted for one of the two deep rose overstuffed tufted armchairs separated from the sofa by a white shabby chic coffee table.

Edward nodded as he tapped the face of his watch. “Clock’s ticking, Granville.”

Tony leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees. “Carla and her department made tremendous headway in eliminating threats from overseas terrorist organizations looking to strike on American soil.”

Edward turned to his wife. “I think that was the thank-you we’ve been waiting to hear.”

She shrugged. “I’m not sure you could call it an apology, but at least it’s an acknowledgment.”

Granville grimaced before continuing, “The president, along with Homeland Security and our various other counter-intelligence organizations, believes our greatest security threats right now are from right-wing militias and radicalized lone wolves, not various foreign Jihadist groups.”

“Not an illogical conclusion, given the recent attacks across the country and the numerous arrests of various sympathizers,” said Carla. She locked eyes with Granville. “Including a certain senator and congressman.”

To Granville’s credit, he accepted the dagger she hurled without offering up any defense of the government’s campaign to go along with the two traitors as they tried to convince everyone of Carla’s malfeasance in order to cover up their own treason.

“You’d go a long way in stopping the fomenters and perpetrators by shutting down their social media accounts,” said Edward.

Granville heaved a sigh as he ran his hands through his buzz cut. “We’ve tried. Some of the social media sites are working with us; others refuse, citing first amendment rights. However, even when we do get compliance, new accounts immediately pop up. There are tens of thousands of them. It’s like a never-ending game of Whack-a-Mole. On top of that, we’ve now discovered many terrorist organizations are using encrypted end-to-end smart phone programs to prevent us from accessing their communications once they lure in new recruits.”

Carla cut to the chase. “What does this have to do with us?”

“I’m getting to that. As you know, some of our intelligence gathering operations, especially those by the NSA, have been severely hampered or even curtailed of late. Too many citizens object to the government snooping into their lives, and disgruntled voters tend to kick their representatives out of Congress come election time. Above all else, even the safety of the nation, congressmen and senators want to keep their jobs.”

Carla raised both eyebrows. “Oh, really? Tell us something we don’t know, Tony.”

Granville heaved a more forceful sigh. “I did fight for you.”

“And yet here we are,” said Carla, extending both arms in a wide sweep.

He grimaced but plowed forward. “I have an idea for putting a serious dent in terrorist recruitment operations.”

“And how does that concern us?” asked Carla.

Granville laid out his plan. He concluded by adding, “You’d sit at the top of the pyramid, directing and coordinating the various satellite groups. Each group would consist of eight teams with one person heading each group. The group leaders report directly to you.”

“Then what?” asked Edward.

“When a threat is identified, I notify the proper authorities who take over and neutralize the threat.”

“Those proper authorities didn’t exactly do a bang-up job in the past,” said Edward. “That’s why Carla’s department was created in the first place.”

“We’ve learned from our mistakes,” said Granville. “Communications between various agencies are improving all the time.”

Edward snorted. “Forgive my skepticism.”

Carla eyed Granville as she mulled over his proposition. He had offered her a Karmic, stick-it-to-the-man do-over to avenge the wrong dealt her by the government she’d sworn to protect. Granted, few people would ever know of her role in this new operation, but few people had known about her previous role—until treason had trumped patriotism in the hallowed halls of the capitol and her picture was plastered across every news outlet in the country.

She glanced over at Edward. He offered her a nod that told her he knew what she was thinking and would go along with whatever decision she made.

“We have no feet on the ground?” she asked.

Granville patted the sofa cushion. “You and Edward remain safe in your chintz-covered ivory tower.”

Carla laughed at the absurdity of his plan. “And Congress is onboard with this?”

“Congress won’t even know you exist.”

“Congress holds the purse strings,” said Edward. “How the hell do you plan to pay for this operation without their approval?”

Granville smiled. “Through a private donor.”

“He’d have to have incredibly deep pockets,” said Carla.

“The deepest.”

Carla studied Tony as she mentally catalogued everything she knew about him. Then it hit her. She smiled back. “Liam Hatch.”

“Give that lady a cigar. You haven’t lost your touch, Carla.”

“How do you plan to recruit your team members?” asked Edward.

“That’s the genius part,” said Tony. “There are thousands of ordinary citizens across the country who have lost family members to terrorism. They want justice but have no way of achieving it on their own. We’re going to offer them the opportunity to make a difference and gain justice for their loved ones.”

Including Granville. This idea of his was too personal. Carla jumped to her feet. “You want to use untrained civilians? You’re out of your freaking mind, Tony. There are only a million different ways this plan could blow up in your face.”

Edward reached for her hand and nudged her back into her chair. “Actually, I think he may have something here. With the proper training this could work.”

Carla stared at him. Edward might be ex-special forces, but he was the gadget loving techno-geek, who’d employed his vast knowledge of computers to wage war on terrorists. She preferred more old-fashioned methods, like color-coded pins in a map that spanned the width of a wall, to keep her abreast of both her teams and all worldwide threats. What Tony Granville had proposed was more in Edward’s wheelhouse than hers.

Carla mulled over Granville’s plan. She always trusted her gut, and her gut had always before told her not to trust civilians. They were too unpredictable. Too many things could go wrong, things that this time could land her in prison. Or worse.

Edward was far more analytical. Their eyes met, and he nodded again. He actually thought this crazy idea of Granville’s could work. Maybe it could—but not without some serious modifications.

“I get to pick the group leaders,” she finally said. “And they won’t be civilians. I want trained operatives in charge of each of the satellite facilities.”

“Fair enough,” said Granville. “As long as Gavin Demarco heads up one of the satellites.”

She knew Demarco and why Granville would want him in the game. Fine. The guy was FBI. He’d know the difference between revenge and justice. At least she hoped so. “Demarco know about this?”

“We came up with the idea together.”

Given their connection, this didn’t surprise her. She nodded. “Fine.”

Granville stood and extended his hand. Carla accepted it, matching his solid handshake with her own equally firm grip.

Edward clapped his hands together, then rose from his chair. He looped an arm around Carla and

slapped Granville on the back. “Looks like we’re getting the band back together.”