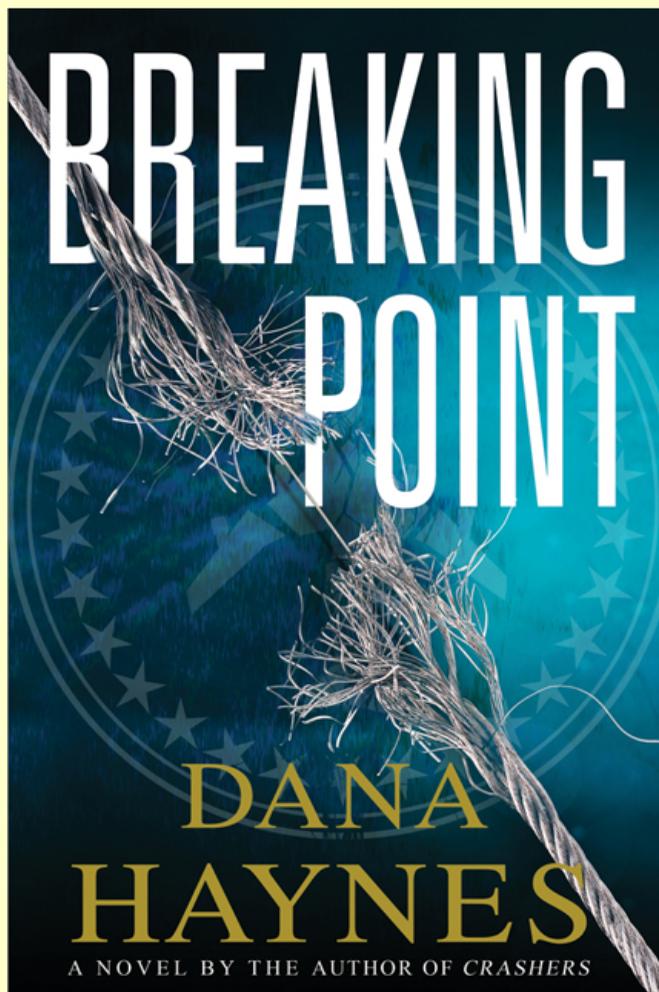


**READ IT FIRST**



This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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## SIX DAYS EARLIER

Renee Malatesta's mobile thrummed. She ignored it.

She snuggled the starched, white sheets around her and burrowed into the warm depression made by the German tourist she'd allowed to seduce her. He'd come to Segovia via bicycle. He had iron thighs and funny little ears and he smelled delicious. He slept the sleep of the just as Renee's mobile thrummed again on the white-painted, faux-Victorian side table.

Renee's nut-brown arm emerged from the eggshell-white sheet. She turned the phone so she could see the LED.

Andrew.

She glanced at the German biker, easily a dozen years her junior. He smiled in his sleep. She glanced around the havoc of the apartment, looking for her clothes. She found his bike jersey, decided it would do. She sat up, pulled it over her head, and freed her shoulder-length hair. She grabbed the phone and stepped out onto the ornate, wrought-iron balcony overlooking the plaza, thinking to herself, *You could take the call in the apartment. It's not a videophone.*

Although, with Andrew, one never knew.

Four stories below, the nightlife of Segovia, Spain, was just getting

started. It was 10:00 P.M. on a Friday, and everyone was in the plaza. Renee figured she was high enough that no one could really tell what she was wearing, and the big man's jersey covered all the important bits.

She flipped open the phone. "Hello?"

"Hi." He sounded chipper, but Andrew Malatesta always sounded chipper. "Sorry to bother you on vacation. I wanted to warn you."

Renee stared down at the canopy of trees that dominated the center of the plaza. From the sounds of it, hundreds of people were out for the warm evening. "Warn me?"

"I'm at the AVE station in Madrid." He pronounced it "abbey," Castilian-style. "I'll be there in thirty minutes or so."

She blinked. "You're in Spain?"

"I didn't know if you had company. See you in a half hour."

He hung up.

Renee tugged at the hem of the thin, blue shirt. Andrew was on his way. And he was in a mood to talk.

The German biker was agreeable about the rush. He dressed quickly, pecked her on the lips, and didn't ask questions.

Renee took a long shower, washing all his cologne out of her hair and her skin.

She and Andrew weren't living together, true, but they were still husband and wife. And they were business partners. She didn't mind his suspecting that she'd taken an occasional lover but there was no point being cruel.

She'd carefully dried her wavy, shoulder-length hair with a diffuser. She pulled a white sundress out of her closet that would show off her tanned skin. Naked, she checked out her reflection in the full-length mirror, pronounced herself satisfied. *Not bad for thirty-eight*, she thought. Her eyes changed focus in the mirror, took in the rough, white-painted walls, the oak bedroom furniture, the five hundred-thread-count sheets, the spectacular view outside the open double doors to the balcony, and she smiled.

As Renee Noel, she had grown up in abject poverty in Haiti. She hadn't owned shoes until she was twelve. Looking around, she fired off a quick prayer of thanks to God. As she did most mornings.

She pulled the sundress over her head, tied the string behind her neck, and padded barefoot into the apartment's living room. Andrew was just

setting down his ever-present saddlebag in the attached kitchen. He smiled up at her, his black hair askew.

“Care for a cava?”

She said, “Why not?”

They went down to the Plaza Mayor de Segovia and joined the revelry. Andrew went to the Bar Juan Bravo for two flutes of the good Spanish brut while Renee sat on the ornate, nineteenth-century bandstand, watching the city come to life. Everyone was out on this Friday night. Children chased one another. Young couples flirting. Senior citizens telling stories they’d told a thousand times before. The night was clear and the moon almost full.

Andrew returned with the sparkling white wine, handed one flute to her, and stepped up onto the octagonal bandstand, leaning against the ornate iron railing. With his Sicilian roots, jet-black hair, and aquiline nose, he looked like a local.

“Cheers.”

“Cheers.” They sipped. The wine was good; not sweet. They couldn’t see the fourteenth-century wall or the much-older Roman *acueducto* from here but knew that a younger crowd would be gathering beneath its shadow tonight, to drink and laugh and skateboard. To the west, the great *catedral* glowed rose-colored at night, throwing ruby-tinted shadows across the revelers.

“I assume you weren’t just passing through.”

He gave her that brilliant Andrew Malatesta smile. The one that raised the ambient temperature in any given room a couple of degrees. He had deep-set eyes. That smile still made Renee’s heart flutter, even though she realized that everyone got the same one. A handsome man at forty, his hair remained untouched by gray and more than a little wild. He had a clean-shaven face and the body of an avid runner and soccer player.

“Darling”—he sipped his wine—“is someone, somewhere, working on the device?”

*Fuck!* she thought.

Children raced by, screaming laughter and dodging the young couples necking. Renee said, “Creating or even testing that device is prohibited by the Bruges Accord.” She smiled back over her shoulder at him. “Why do you ask?” Although she knew. She knew.

A *futbol* descended onto the bandstand from out of nowhere. Andrew shifted position, caught the ball with his raised left knee to bleed off its momentum. He glanced around, found the players. He dribbled the ball with his loafer, then side kicked it straight back to one of them. The boys howled with laughter and applauded. He didn't spill a drop of his wine.

"There are footprints in the files." He spoke with his back to her, watching the scrimmage. "Someone's been in our backup server."

"It was probably Antal looking up—"

He turned quickly. "It wasn't Antal." He crossed to her, sat on the steps, too, so they were shoulder to shoulder.

"Send Tichnor a message for me, honey."

"I haven't spoken to Barry in weeks."

"Tell him, if he touches the device or any of my designs without my express permission, I will go to the press. About everything."

Renee stared into his eyes. He didn't yell, didn't even raise his voice. But his anger seethed under the surface. There were maybe six people on Earth who could tell the real emotions behind his smile. Andrew's wife was one of them.

"No one's touched the damn thing," she said. "You're being paranoid."

He smiled, his mahogany eyes cast down.

He'd been home in Maryland the last she'd checked. To fly all the way to Spain and take the high-speed AVE train to their vacation apartment in Segovia meant he wasn't guessing. He knew. For sure.

When he didn't respond, she decided to press his buttons. "How is your mom?"

He glanced up. "My mom?"

She sipped her wine. "This is delicious. Thank you. Did you bring running clothes? I was going to jog around the walled part of the city later, get—"

"Mom is fine. I don't want to run. Halcyon/Detweiler is experimenting with my weapon designs." He spoke in the same calm, even voice as always. His smile was ironic.

She sipped the brut, bought time. "You work sixteen hours a day down in your lab, coming up only for beer or to kick around a football. You're growing mad."

"There have been three breaches. I have them documented. The blueprints and their specs were downloaded in increments, hoping I wouldn't notice. After the second breach, I added a little something of my own. For

the third breach, the terminal they used was in the Halcyon/Detweiler main research facility, outside Reston. I don't know if it was Barry's fat little fingers on the keyboard but, hey, I've got logs of when he used his parking pass and when he used his swipe key to get into that very room."

Her blood froze. "Trojan horse?"

"Inside the specs. Of course. The bastards are real, dear. Barry Tichnor is real. They're studying my prototypes, trying to create the device."

The blood drained from her face. She set the flute down next to her gladiator sandals. "Andrew? Andrew, this isn't just breaking some contract. This is corporate espionage against a Fortune 200 company!"

Andrew sipped the cava.

When Renee was angry, her Haitian accent tended to kick in. "Go home. Go invent a better mousetrap. Go invent a better windmill; it'll give you something to tilt at. Go fuck Terri and leave homeland security to patriots."

Andrew smiled. He finished his wine in a gulp. "Patriots," he repeated, whispering.

"You think America doesn't have enemies? You think the Barry Tichnors of the world are just pesky capitalists?"

He set his glass down on the step. "If you provide access to the device or any of our prototypes for Barry or anyone else, be they Halcyon or even the Pentagon, I will go to the media. I'm not kidding here, honey. When have you ever known me to bluff?"

Her anger snapped. She stood, stepped down onto the flagstones of the plaza. "When you said, *I do!*"

Andrew smiled his smile. "I'm not, you know. Fucking Terri. And it's difficult to maintain the moral high ground when there's a condom wrapper in the kitchen garbage."

Renee paced, her mind racing. "I'm your lawyer. Go to the media and you'll be breaking your nondisclosure agreement. Halcyon's lawyers would crush us!"

He ran his hand through his always-askew hair. "I've written depth-charge programs into our backup server. Tell Halcyon if they go scrounging in there they'll release a virus that will fry their mainframes. I swear to God, it's the most malleable virus ever. It'll send Tichnor's corporation back to the Stone Age. They want to sue me, they'll have to scrounge up a manual typewriter to do it."

"Now it's treason and corporate espionage plus sabotage! Andrew,

goddammit! Stop being so pig-brained! This is a matter of national security!”

“It’s not, you know. It’s the military-industrial complex putting itself above international law.”

She scoffed. “International law?”

He smiled. “Spoken like a true lawyer.”

“You never understood the importance of Malatesta, Inc. being a Pentagon subcontractor. It’s not just the millions you pissed away, you holier-than-thou bastard! Your designs are brilliant! They’re revolutionary! The security of—”

Andrew belted out a laugh.

Renee flinched. “What?”

“The irony, baby, is that you’re not wrong. I have more than sixty patents to my name, and the weapon-design stuff is some of my all-time-best work. And it’s awful. Awful.”

Renee couldn’t hear the sheer anger in his voice. But she could read it in his eyes.

“It was hubris. It was ego. And, fuck, yes, it was greed. Halcyon/Detweiler and the Pentagon dangled millions of dollars in our faces and I had visions of sugarplums and Maseratis. I admit it. It was the high of the dollar. But, baby? I’m not a weapons builder. I’m not.”

She glanced around the plaza. Two hundred people out and all were ignoring their spat. Couples fight in public in Spain. It was no big deal.

She steeled her jaw. “Except you *are* a weapons builder. And America needs you.”

Andrew stood and dusted off the back of his trousers. “Baby?”

She said, “It’s Renee,” and glowered.

“Renee?” He stepped closer to her, his hands on her shoulders. He kissed her and she stood her ground, not kissing back but not averting her lips, either. “I love you. I’m sorry about . . . you know. Everything. Tell Tichnor I’ll strafe his mainframe if he takes any files off our server. Tell him I’m out.”

He turned and walked the length of the plaza back to their pied-à-terre.

## FIVE DAYS EARLIER

“Your argument,” said Susan Tanaka, “is perfectly clear. I see your points clearly.”

She had met the three men in a conference room in Washington, D.C.’s L’Enfant Plaza, home of the National Transportation Safety Board. It was a Saturday but the concept of *weekend* is often lost on federal agencies. The men sitting on the other side of the wide conference-room table smiled and nodded at her. The man in the middle said, “This is great. We knew the NTSB would see reason. We felt it highly likely that—”

“Don’t get me wrong,” Susan smiled serenely. “We’re going to ignore your recommendation in its entirety. I just wanted you to know I understand the basis of it.”

Susan Tanaka wore a black pencil skirt and black Max Mara tunic jacket over a shimmering ruby-red blouse with four-inch Kate Spades, a double strand of pearls and matching earrings. She was the very essence of fashion, and that probably led the representatives of Homeland Security, the Transportation Safety Administration, and the Federal Aviation Administration into the false sense that this would be a fair fight. The

men were all around six feet tall and wore severe business suits. And they were used to getting their way.

The representative from Homeland Security blinked. “Ma’am?”

The National Transportation Safety Board’s senior-most intergovernmental liaison, Susan Tanaka, was neither an engineer nor a pilot. She couldn’t tear apart an airplane wing or conduct an autopsy. That was not where her gifts lay. If a crash occurred anywhere in the United States or its territories, her job was to ride herd on the local, state, and federal agencies that tended to gum up the works. Sometimes that took dexterity, sometimes that took quick thinking and teamwork, and sometimes that took leg-breaking ruthlessness. Susan Tanaka could muster all three.

She batted her lashes, smiled sweetly, and watched the three men across from her glower.

“Miss Tanaka, we are hoping you’ll take this to Wildman. We think he should make the call.”

“It’s missus,” she said, smiling. “And it’s *Delevan* Wildman or Chairman Wildman to those who are not his friends. The chairman has given me the authority to decide on this issue. Your idea has the rare combination of being both more expensive and less efficient than the status quo.”

The representative from the TSA shook his head ruefully. “Listen, honey, this is the right thing to do. Come on, just take it up to your boss, please. We really do insist.”

Susan Tanaka ratcheted up her smile enough that one could read by it.

“Gentlemen?” She slid the cap onto her Mark Cross pen. “From your perspective, there’s good news and there’s bad news. The bad news is: your recommendation for altering safety protocols in high-density corridors is dead on arrival. At first blush I thought there was a kernel of merit in there somewhere, but the more you explained it, the worse the idea got. Now, alas, I would categorize it as *silly*.”

She closed her portfolio, stood, and buttoned her formfitting tunic. She adjusted her sleeves. “I would sooner play handball in a tutu than bother Delevan Wildman with a silly idea. That said, I think our meeting is adjourned.”

The FAA representative adjusted his tie. “You said there was good news . . . ?”

“We validate parking.”

. . .

Susan Tanaka returned to her office to find Kiki and Tommy waiting for her. She hugged them. Susan had to rise up on the balls of her feet to reach Kiki, despite the four-inch heels.

Tommy Tomzak drawled, “Suze. So, you really doing this?”

“I really am.”

Kiki winced. “This place can’t handle you being gone for a month! It’ll fall apart!”

“They’ll get along just fine. Kirk’s back surgery went better than we could have hoped but he’s got a long recovery period ahead of him. And we’re going to go through it together.”

Tommy gave her a lopsided grin. “Yeah, in Italy. Tough assignment, Tanaka.”

“Hey.” She laughed. “I’m taking one for the team. Shall we?”

Susan led the way into the office of Delevan Wildman, longtime director of the NTSB. The office was clean but a little cluttered.

Del sat on one of three deep-green couches clustered around a maple-and-glass coffee table. He twisted around and waved in Susan, Tommy, and Kiki. Beth Mancini was already seated. Kiki poured coffee for herself and Tommy.

Tommy, in chinos and an untucked cotton shirt, shook his head ruefully at the attire of Wildman, Susan, and Beth. “Any of y’all understand the concept of *Saturday*?”

Del smiled. “I’ve heard the term.”

“Swear t’God, if I said, ‘Hey, the Jets are playing,’ you’d wanna know if they landed safe.”

“We were explaining,” Kiki interrupted, “that we don’t for a minute believe Susan is taking an actual vacation. I need to see photos, with Susan in them, mind you. Oh, and, Susan? I know how Photoshop works. Don’t even try.”

Susan unbuttoned her form-fitting jacket as she sat. “It’s not Siberia. It’s the Italian Lake Region. You can reach me if you need me.”

“We won’t,” Del said in his baritone Tennessee accent. A bear of a man, his years in the military and years as a chief pilot for the airlines left him with a gravitas. “Beth will be acting senior intergovernmental liaison for the four weeks you’ll be gone. She’s ready for it. Aren’t you?”

“Sure.” Beth Mancini gave a little, self-deprecating shrug. She was always self-conscious around Susan. It was partly Susan’s I’m-in-charge demeanor. It was partly a wardrobe thing. Beth’s jacket and pants had

looked perfectly fine in the mirror that morning, but as soon as Susan walked into the office, Beth found her own outfit frumpy.

Susan waved away the conversation. “Beth isn’t the concern. I only worry about getting my job *back* from her. No, the problem, as always, is Dr. Tomzak.”

“Bite me,” Tommy said without rancor.

Susan ignored him, per usual. “Since the Oregon incident, the NTSB’s profile has never been higher. And Idiot-Boy here is a national hero.”

Tommy snorted a laugh. “You’re meshuggener. I served in Kuwait. I know from real heroism. I didn’t do jack-shit in Oregon.”

“And you can’t pull off Yiddish with a Texas twang. Look, we got great national coverage, but that was almost nine months ago. Budget hearings are starting up on the Hill. We’re out of the spotlight, and I don’t think that’s a good place to be right now. I want to do some more media. I want us to consider a nonfiction book. And I need Tommy.”

“Get Isaiah,” Tommy said. “He actually stopped the bad guys.”

“Isaiah’s as stubborn as you. Kiki, talk sense into this man!”

Kiki held her cup to warm both hands. “Yes, because of the vast history of Tommy actually listening to me. That tactic *always* works.”

She reached out and tousled his hair. Tommy shot her a cocked eyebrow and a lascivious wink. “You could always try coercing me.”

Beth Mancini cleared her throat. “Here’s a thought.”

The others turned to her. It had taken Beth years to get over her fear of public speaking. Her trick: she pretended to be Susan Tanaka.

“Northwest Tech.”

Tommy shrugged, lost.

“It’s one of the big technology expos,” Kiki explained. “Thousands of geekazoids go each year. More to Beth’s point, so do a lot of technology-oriented media.”

Beth immediately warmed to Kiki, whom she didn’t know well. “But it’s like Comicon for technology. Mainstream media covers it, as well. Imagine putting together a panel discussion: Dr. Tomzak—”

“Tommy,” Tommy grunted.

“Tommy,” Beth corrected, “Isaiah Grey, and Kiki. You could talk about the technology that brought down CascadeAir 818. You could talk about the way the Go-Team untangled the mystery. No one person has to play the hero. It was a team effort. I have a friend on the executive committee this year. I called her. I can make this happen.”

Tommy started to protest as Kiki beamed, "I'm in! So is Tommy."

"Whoa, honey! I'm in? Since when?"

"You are." Kiki patted his knee. "We'll talk Isaiah in, too. Beth: good call!"

Beth beamed.

Del sat back, hands clutched over his solid middle. "See? I just shut the hell up and let you youngsters sort it out. That there's leadership."

Susan reached across the maple table and squeezed the back of Beth's hand. Then she smoothed her skirt and stood up. "Good. *Now* I'm on vacation."

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