

CHAPTER 1: I WANT CONFIRMATION

August 25, 1968

For the third time in the last 45 minutes, the president is receiving an update from the Pentagon about activity along the border between East and West Germany, the so-called Inner German Border, and along the border between Czechoslovakia and West Germany. The three reports are for the most part identical in their lack of actionable detail. He and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff are waiting for any word from small commando units heading for the Neckar River in the German state of Baden-Württemberg, in and around the historic city of Heidelberg.

The tension in the Oval Office is exacerbated by the sense that the president and his national security team are operating in the dark, waiting for a determined and powerful foe to finally show its hand. NATO is on a hair trigger at DEFCON 3. The NSA is digging and listening. ASA field station and tactical units are furiously working to intercept every communication on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Every general grade officer in USAREUR, USAFE, NATO, and SHAPE is waiting for word from the White House. All of them know that one small move in the wrong direction could spell disaster for much of the world, if not for the earth itself.

The president, leaning over with both fists on the desk reserved for his use and his use alone, his frustration mounting, thunders into the intercom in front of him.

"How far west?"

"The reports are in conflict, sir, but two columns of Soviet tanks have been spotted somewhere between 10 and 20 kilometers west of Prague."

"Tanks? Just tanks? How many damn tanks? A company? A battalion? Any air support? Dammit, we still have radar, don't we? What about their ground support? Any mechanized infantry? Any self-propelled artillery? Rear echelon support? Are the tank columns moving? What about their comms? God dammit, I'm not going to launch World War III over the presence of a handful of Warsaw Pact nation tanks sitting in the middle of a Warsaw Pact nation. Do you understand?"

"Loud and clear, sir."

"And what the hell happened to our CIA man, this Nick Temple fellow?"

"He hasn't checked in since his last communication, sir."

"Maybe, just maybe that's because there isn't a damn thing to communicate! Engineers inspect bridges, right? Especially bridge engineers who are bridge specialists who just happen to

work for the goddamn government, or did I miss something? We've got tanks in a country that, guess what, has tanks! And we've got bridge inspectors in a country that, guess what, has bridges! What the hell am I supposed to do with this?"

"We continue to process the intelligence in real time, sir."

"You do that, whatever the hell that means! This line's gonna be open. Let me know the second anything, and I mean anything at all, changes. Jesus Christ! I feel like it's August 31, 1939, and this time we're Poland!"

The president hits the kill switch on the intercom. He looks up at the gathered members of the National Security Council, men who have been living on caffeine, nicotine, and an assortment of bad food for the last 24 hours. The mixture of civilian, political, and military expertise represented by these men constitutes the best the country has to offer, the deepest, brightest minds called together to respond to what many have predicted, and all have feared would someday be a reality.

The president continues to scan the room. The other men meet his snarling face without flinching. They're all thinking the same thing: we have one chance, and one chance only, to get this thing right.

He breaks the silence.

"Well, gentlemen. Any bright ideas?"

