



**THE LAST
MISSION**

The Last Mission
Steve Moghadam
20200707

STEVE MOGHADAM

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Ebook format ISBN: 978-1-927060-08-7

Book format ISBN: 978-1-927060-07-0

Audio Book ISBN: 978-1-927060-09-4

www.MasterSteve.com

Publisher: Silk Road Publishing



CONTENTS

Chapter 1	5
Chapter 2	11
Chapter 3	17
Chapter 4	19
Chapter 5	29
Chapter 6	37
Chapter 7	43
Chapter 8	47
Chapter 9	55
Chapter 10	65
Chapter 11	67
Chapter 12	77
Chapter 13	83
Chapter 14	91
Chapter 15	93
Chapter 16	105
Chapter 17	111
Chapter 18	127
Chapter 19	135
Chapter 20	141
Chapter 21	147
Chapter 22	155
Chapter 23	157
Chapter 24	159

Chapter 25 167
Chapter 26 173
Chapter 27 177
Chapter 28 183
Chapter 29 187
Chapter 30 193
Chapter 31 201
Chapter 32 205
Chapter 33 209
Chapter 34 213
Chapter 35 217
Chapter 36 219
Chapter 37 223
Chapter 38 225
Chapter 39 233
Chapter 40 237
Chapter 41 239
Chapter 42 241
Chapter 43 243
Chapter 44 249
Chapter 45 255
Chapter 46 259
Chapter 47 263
Chapter 48 275
Chapter 49 277
Chapter 50 283
Chapter 51 289
Chapter 52 291
Chapter 53 295
Chapter 54 299
Chapter 55 313

CHAPTER 1

* * *

IN A PLAIN, UNREMARKABLE CONFERENCE room in a nondescript hotel on a main street in Amman, Jordan, sat the Leader of the Supreme Party. She was in a closed meeting with her top military leaders and other important members of the Party. As the protocol demanded, the Leader sat at the head of an oval table, facing the main door of the room. She was dressed in a Supreme Party uniform and sat straight and motionless. With her six generals dressed in uniforms identical to her own sitting at her sides, she looked around with a stern gaze, leaving no doubt about who was in charge.

Nearly everyone who was expected to attend the meeting had already arrived and taken a seat. There was a palpable feeling of anticipation in the air and an acknowledgement that the business at hand was of tremendous gravity. Everyone gathered in the room knew that a very important action would be undertaken that day, and this action would be critical to strengthening not just the future of nation but also the future of the Party.

The Leader looked at one of the generals sitting on her right side and gave a slight nod. The general, who was in his early sixties, in

turn looked at Ammar, a tall man standing near the middle of the table, directly opposite the Leader. Everyone in the room turned to look at Ammar in anticipation. He was a handsome, twenty-five-year-old man with a chiseled nose and grey eyes just like his mother's. Ammar was the heir apparent who, from his earliest years, was being prepared to become the Leader one day.

The general broke the heavy silence in the room by asking Ammar in a strongly accented voice, "Are you sure about this man?"

"Yes, General," replied Ammar. "He's perfect for our needs. He is well trained, devoted to the nation, and he will handle things for us very quietly, just the way we want. He is fluent in English, French, and Spanish, and he has seen the world. This man will fit in amongst the locals easily. I have personally selected him from among many strong candidates for several reasons."

While explaining the reasons behind his choice, he looked around the table as if addressing all those who were present. The moment his eyes met the Leader's, he quickly averted his gaze for reasons of hierarchy and decorum, and turned his eyes instead to the general sitting to the left of the Leader.

The mother and son thought differently on matters concerning the working and running of the Party, but they preferred to leave those matters to the passionate discussions they had when they were alone. After all, although their opinions on matters related to the Party and the nation sometimes differed, they shared the same goal: to enjoy ultimate control over the country and its resources. The Leader had worked her way up to the head of the organization and Ammar had been born with a silver spoon in his mouth. After all, he was the only son of the Leader of the Supreme Party.

The general looked at a man who was sitting at the corner of the table. This man also wore the Supreme Party uniform. When the

general signaled with his hand, the man pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket and, without speaking even a single word, slid it across the table toward Ammar. The general looked at Ammar and said, "This is the list that you wanted. Now, you are to tell him what to do with these people." The general again looked at the Leader as if seeking approval for what he had said. There was no reaction from the Leader. Ammar picked up the paper and started to read. Written on the paper was a long list of names, most of which were American and European.

"These people are the enemies of the nation, enemies of our religion," the general said, his voice clear, strong, and confident. "They are against Islam, against Allah, and they are trying to incite a violent change in the nation. To preserve our sovereignty, our culture, and our prosperity, we must take action against them!" He pounded the table with his fist to emphasize his point.

Ammar raised his eyebrows and a smile came to his lips. "Excellent words, General!" he stated enthusiastically. He began to clap his hands and everyone else in the room rose to their feet, applauding. The Leader waited several seconds and then rapped on the table loudly and repeatedly until the applause died down and people returned to their seats.

The Leader looked at the general and raised her hand, signaling toward the door. The general, in turn, signaled to a guard posted at the door. "Bring him in," he ordered. The guard nodded slightly and opened the door.

Ali, a tall man of around fifty years of age walked through the doorway. He was well built and handsome. He was also wearing a Supreme Party uniform that fit him perfectly. In purposeful, even strides, he moved to the end of the table, stopped abruptly, and stood at attention, his head level, his eyes straight ahead. A row of stitches above his right eyebrow lent an aura of mystery and

adventure to his appearance. Since his injury, he had seen how men looked at him with great respect and women looked at him with great desire.

“You sent for me, sir?” asked Ali, though it sounded more like a statement than a question.

Ammar took a few steps toward Ali and stood an arm’s length from him. “At ease, Ali.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Ali. He assumed a more relaxed stance, resting his arms at his sides.

Ammar looked at Ali. “We’ve asked you here today because we have a very special mission for you, a mission of great service to the nation and all its citizens. Complete it successfully and you will have the gratitude of the nation and your Leader. We are of the opinion that no one else in the Party can perform this task better than you, Ali. You have proven yourself dedicated to the nation and you have exhibited bravery, skill, intelligence, cunning, and leadership on the battlefield.”

Ali looked at the Leader and replied, “If I can serve the nation, that is gratitude enough, ma’am. Whatever I have is because of the nation.” As Ali said these words, he could feel a surge of emotions run through him. He had dedicated his life to the nation, and an acknowledgment of that from the top members of the Party was no doubt encouraging. Ali felt humbled by all the praise that Ammar had for him.

Ammar looked straight into the eyes of Ali while handing over the list. It was as if he were testing Ali. In a very business-like voice he said, “These are the enemies of the nation. We need them dealt with discreetly, quickly. We can trust no one else but you.”

Ali brought his right arm up from his side and grasped the list securely with practiced military precision. When Ammar released his grasp on the list, Ali lowered his arm back to his side, the list

still held between his thumb and first two fingers. He looked at the Leader. "I will not fail you, ma'am. I will not fail the Party or the nation or her people. I am honored to be entrusted with such an important mission and if I must give my life to complete the mission, I will do so without hesitation and without regret."

The Leader nodded and then raised her hand. The general said to Ali, "Your skill and bravery are unmatched among your countrymen. Go now and begin your mission. Allah be with you." With that, Ali turned on his heel and walked out of the room as confidently and purposefully as he had walked in. The guard closed the door.

Ammar looked at the general and nodded respectfully. The general was smiling, as were many of the other generals seated on either side of the Leader. Ammar turned his gaze to his mother and for a few seconds, their eyes met. He could see a look of approval on her face and that was exactly what he hoped to see. He thought about the events that had just been set in motion. He smiled.

CHAPTER 2

* * *

AMMAR AND ALI STOOD TALKING in an office located on the top floor of an Amman office building. The building was on one of the main roads of the city, and the window provided an excellent view of the street. Occasionally, there was laughter between them.

Standing near the window, they looked down at the street below, which was full of people going about their lives. Ammar knew that most—if not all—of them felt optimism about their futures and the futures of their children. He knew there was hope for peace and freedom for the first time in generations. Ammar's goal was to push back that wave of optimism before it grew any stronger, and only a few days and a handful of people stood between him and his goal. He smiled.

Ali had been with the Supreme Party since his twenties. He had started as a low-level worker and moved up the ladder of the organization to become a leader during the first Gulf War with the US. In spite of the rigors of the war, he was still fit for his age and with the sun shining on his jet-black hair, he looked younger than most men his age. The war had taken away his family and friends, and he was practically alone, with no one to worry about him or notice if he didn't return home for days at a time. The Party had

also verified that there was no woman even remotely associated with him. That was another reason he was an ideal choice for the mission. All the years of war and personal loss had affected Ali on a deep emotional level. He was a man starved for company and for a personal connection with another human being. He was starved indeed.

When he was out of the presence of the Leader, Ammar conducted himself even more confidently. The Leader had planned well for her son's future on the world stage. She had ensured that he learnt international languages like English and French. She had also insisted on Ammar pursuing a university degree in economics and history. After all, the days when he would attend conferences on peace and trade in the international arena were not very far away. For his part, Ammar already felt he was ready to hold the reins of power in his hands, and he ached for the day when his mother would hand them over to him.

Ali and Ammar, with their backs toward the two doors that opened into the room, were engrossed in an animated discussion. All of a sudden, Ali turned his head, thinking that he saw someone standing behind him, but there was no one there except a guard. He turned back and resumed his discussion with Ammar on the enemies of the nation and how the US was responsible for corrupting their culture, their economy, and their religion.

After a few minutes, Ali started to read the names on the paper handed over to him at the meeting. The fact that most of the names were Americans, Europeans, and Arabs made him frown. Ammar saw the expression on Ali's face but choose to ignore it. He handed over a bundle of passports to Ali, who nodded and started to inspect the passports in the bundle. One of the passports was American and another was British. In total, Ali counted twelve passports and together, they gave him passage into every country he would need to visit in order to complete his mission.

The passports also granted him passage to a few other countries, in case his destinations changed unexpectedly.

Ammar and Ali shook hands and Ammar wished Ali luck on his mission. Ali thanked Ammar for the passports and his well-wishes and left the room through the main doors of the office.

The moment Ali left, Ammar signaled to the guard standing in front of the second door. The guard opened the door and Omar, a thirty-year-old man, sauntered in. He was a peculiar man with a protruding head covered in thick, black hair. He was a slick, oily-looking man with an air of smugness that seemed to envelop him. He was a relatively new member of the Supreme Party, and his reasons for joining the organization were very different from the reasons that had prompted the senior members to join. For the senior members of the Party, the reason had been love for their country. For Omar and people like him, it was love for themselves, for money, and for power that drove them to join the Party. He had found like-minded people in the Party and his position was strengthening with every passing day. Every successful mission meant more money and more power for him.

“You heard that?” asked Ammar. He had an arrogant smile on his face.

“I did. Every single word he said,” replied Omar.

“Ali’s loyalties are to the nation, not the Supreme Party, and certainly not to our Leader.” Ammar’s words seemed to reflect his love for the Leader, but his tone conveyed otherwise.

“Yes, yes—the gratitude of the nation and the Leader. That may be enough for the likes of Ali, but not me,” said Omar.

He was expecting Ammar to ask what he wanted, but Ammar chose to ignore Omar’s statement altogether.

Ammar said, “So, do you know what needs to be done now?”

Omar was not happy to be ignored like this, but he decided to play on and in a voice brimming with confidence, he replied, “Trust me. Where, when, and how—leave it all to me.”

Ammar chuckled. “Very good. Do well and you will have the gratitude of the Party, which is much better than the gratitude of the nation.”

Ammar was baiting Omar, who was all too eager to take the bait. Conniving people like Ammar and Omar did not hesitate to take advantage of principled people like Ali, for whom commitments and values were the guiding forces of their actions, their words, and their lives.

Omar felt encouraged by the response that he got from Ammar and looked at him in anticipation. He thought for a moment, Is it going to be a reward day today? Nobody in the government had a right to ask for anything, he had been told; it was their work for the nation that got them a position. However, this did not prevent people like Omar from desiring a better position and more power within the organization.

Ammar knew the likes of Omar very well. They needed an incentive to work and that incentive had to be something of interest to them. Without giving much thought, Ammar said, “What do you think of the pistachio trade in the country?”

Omar was pleased to hear this. Pistachios should be good, thought Omar. Was Ammar hinting at something? His mind raced. He wanted to be sure of what lay ahead for him in the arrangement. “Excellent,” replied Omar, “but, uh, just what exactly...” His voice trailed off.

Ammar shot a curt glance at him and raised his hand, signaling Omar to keep quiet. He was getting too big for his position. He had no right to ask for anything but was only to take what the Leader gave away.

Omar got the message. “Heh-heh. We shall discuss it after the job is done. What is the hurry? I have always done as you have said and you have adequately compensated me every time.” He quickly turned and walked out of the room. He had work to do and travel plans to make.

Omar left with a grin on his face.

CHAPTER 3

* * *

THE DAY AFTER THE MEETING WITH AMMAR, Omar was sitting in an office located in a beautiful and sprawling personal estate located in a suburb of New York. The office was richly decorated and stocked with many items that would be considered inappropriate under the prevailing laws in Iraq. Western liquor, food, pornographic posters—everything objectionable to an Iraqi devoted to Islam and his country were present in this office. A massive desk sat under a huge window that looked out over the pool and the deck area.

Omar picked up a bottle of Southern Comfort that was sitting on the desk and poured three fingers worth into a whiskey glass. He set the bottle down and popped open a can of Coke that sat next to the whiskey. He lifted the can and topped off the glass, then set the can down. He swirled the contents of the glass gently and took a sip of his drink, savoring it. He held the glass up to the light on the desk and noticed the deep amber color of his drink. He considered making one or two calls to arrange adequate companionship for the night. Did he want a blonde tonight? he wondered. A redhead? A sweet girl or a nasty one? These were the kinds of difficult decisions he did not mind making. The finest things in life had

become available to him once he had reached the United States. He couldn't resist them and he took great satisfaction in knowing that he didn't have to resist them.

Enjoyment of these luxuries came as an ego massage to Omar; he could afford to enjoy luxuries that were unavailable to the common person in Iraq. Enjoying foreign liquor and a warm body in his own country were difficult, but in the United States, there was no one to watch him. His so-called loyalties to the Leader had reaped him rich profits. Travel, good food, good whiskey, and beautiful women were a way of life for Omar now. He controlled the sugar trade in the country and with every successful endeavor that he undertook for the Leader, his compensation increased. Already, his supply of money seemed unlimited.

"Oh, the things one can buy when one controls a war-torn nation's sugar imports," he exclaimed and began to drum on the desk. "Now, let's see who's going to help me out in getting the pistachio trade under control." He finished his drink and mixed himself another.

With his glass in his hand, he started to flip through a stack of resumes that sat on the desk. Two of the resumes were from Arab men and the rest were all Americans. He set his glass down and opened a map of New York City and along with it a spiral note pad. He began to review a group of addresses and names.

CHAPTER 4

* * *

ALI'S FLIGHT LANDED IN DUBAI in the wee hours of the morning. He hired a cab and asked the driver to take him to the central part of the city. He engaged in some small talk with the driver, inquiring about where different buildings in the city were located. He also asked about a particular building and whether or not it was easy to hail a cab there at any time of the day or night.

Once they reached the central part of the city, Ali asked the driver to stop in front of a lavish-looking hotel. He paid the fare, thanked the driver, and started to walk toward the hotel's entrance. The moment the cab was out of sight, Ali turned on his heels and headed back toward the sidewalk. When he reached it, he turned right and started walking east toward his destination. Ali had been to Dubai earlier and knew that money flowed in this city very easily. BMWs and Porsches were abundant on the clean, well-maintained roads and served as proof that this city not only drew people here to make their money, but it also encouraged people to spend their money here as well.

Ali stopped in front of a ten-story building which he guessed was about fifteen years old, judging from its outlook. The glass facade caught the reflection of the moon, sending its luminescent

beams off in countless directions. He entered the building and found himself in a large circular lobby. Positioned in the center of the lobby was a rectangular security desk and the guard behind it looked up from his newspaper when he heard the front door open.

Ali took a deep breath and smiled. He was only going to get one shot at this so he knew he had better make it count.

By the time Ali got within twenty feet of the security desk, the guard stood up. Ali could see he wore a gun in a holster on his right hip and his hand was resting on top of it.

“Good morning, sir,” said the guard. “How can I help you?”

“You can help me by rewinding my day by about six hours,” said Ali. “I worked until about eight last night. I had a lot of work to do and I was sure I had done it all but...” His confident smile turned sheepish. “I realized as I was about to go to sleep tonight that, yeah, I’d remembered to do all my work, but I forgot to do something my boss asked me to do for him and,” he smacked his head with the palm of his hand, “he needs it on his desk first thing in the morning, which is like—” he looked at his watch, “five hours from now. So I just came back to get the file he left on my desk and go home, get the work done, and get the folder onto his desk so he never has to know what a complete incompetent I am.”

The guard smiled. “Well, we all have days, or nights, like that. Could I see your ID please, sir?” Ali reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a passport and handed it to the guard.

The guard opened it up and studied the photo inside, then looked at Ali, then looked back at the passport photo. “Well, Mr. al-Hassan, it’s definitely you,” the guard said, looking back at Ali. “But we don’t allow people to use their passports as proof of ID. You should have been issued a pass card for this building. Do you have your card?”

Ali shook his head. “I was never issued a card. I have only been

working in the building for a couple days. I was brought in on short notice to do consultation for the upcoming International Trade Embargo Impact Conference, and because I was brought in so quickly, I was told it would take a few more days to get my pass card and that, in the meantime, my passport would be enough to get me into the building.”

“I’m afraid you were misinformed, Mr. al-Hassan. Anyone working in this building, or even needing access to it, for more than one business day must be issued a pass card, or they cannot be admitted beyond the lobby.”

The guard looked at him flatly and Ali thought he saw a spark of suspicion in the man’s eyes. Instinctively, Ali knew he had to double down on his story and win the guard’s sympathy before that spark of suspicion grew into a flame.

“I understand, sir,” said Ali. “I understand the need for security, especially here in Dubai. Like I said, I was brought in at the last minute and was told by my employer that all the paperwork and security procedures would be taken care of for me, and all I needed to do was to pack my suitcase and get on the next plane here, and that’s what I did. And when they told me that my passport would get me past security for the few days it would take them to get me a proper pass card...” He shrugged his shoulders. “What could I be expected to do but trust them?” Ali thought he saw the suspicion in the guard’s eyes fading a little. “Could you just take my passport as suitable proof of my identity, just for tonight, and later today, when the business day has started, I will go see whoever you tell me to see about getting my proper pass card. Would that be okay? I really need to get that folder from my desk and get that work done for my boss. This job... This job is a big break for me and for my family. I need to keep this job so that my wife doesn’t have to work twelve hours a day taking in strangers’ laundry and so that we can begin to save for our son’s education. This one favor from you

tonight would make me forever grateful to you.”

The guard replied, “I certainly understand your situation, sir, but I’m afraid I cannot help you. I can give you the name of the member of our security team who is responsible for issuing pass cards. If you meet with him first thing in the morning, he can enter you into our system and provide you with a card.”

Ali looked devastated by what the guard had said. He leaned forward on the security desk and hung his head, slowly shaking it from side to side. He raised his head and looked at the guard. “Please. Isn’t there some way you could let me up to my employer’s office on the tenth floor? Just for five minutes? I just need to get that folder—that’s all.” Ali was wearing his most compelling face, one that showed a proud man on the verge of begging. “You can come with me, watch me, and see that what I’m telling you is true.”

The guard blew a breath through his lips and studied Ali for a few seconds. “I’ll tell you what, Mr. al-Hassan. If you will promise me that you will get your pass card first thing tomorrow, I will accompany you to your employer’s office now so you can get the work materials you need.”

Ali’s smile conveyed both appreciation and relief. “Thank you, sir! You don’t know how much I appreciate this!”

The guard walked out from behind the desk and gestured for Ali to follow him. Ali picked up his briefcase and walked toward the guard, accepting the passport as the guard handed it back to him. The guard walked toward the elevator and Ali followed close behind. He already knew that he would have to deal with the guard before he could deal with his intended target. Ali did not like having to involve anyone else in his mission, but he didn’t have a choice. His mission had to be completed and nothing, and no one, would stand in his way.

When they reached the elevator, the guard pushed the button

marked UP. A few seconds later, the door opened. The guard and Ali stepped inside, and the guard pressed the button marked with a ten inch wide, white numerals.

The elevator stopped on the tenth floor and Ali and the guard stepped out. The guard began walking toward Suite 34. Ali followed close behind him. When they arrived at the door, the guard pulled a keycard from his pocket and slid it through the scanner on the door. Ali heard a CLICK and the guard pushed down on the door handle and swung the door open. He stepped back and gestured for Ali to enter. Ali nodded and walked inside.

As soon as he was out of sight of the guard, Ali looked around for a file folder. Both of the desks closest to him were clear of all items except a computer monitor and keyboard. Ali looked around and found another office toward the back of the suite. Quickly, he walked into that office and immediately saw a filing cabinet. He pulled open the top drawer and searched for a moderately thick folder. Finding one, he took it out of the drawer and then knelt beside his briefcase and opened it. He knew how to get out of this situation quickly and easily; his real concern was the time being wasted. He was being delayed getting to his target, and he did not want to miss his opportunity. He looked at his watch. He was still within the timeframe he had allotted himself to complete his task in this building, but not by much.

“Is everything okay, Mr. al-Hassan?” the guard called out through the suite’s main door. Ali heard a slight hint of concern in the guard’s voice.

Ali called back, “Yes, I’ll be right there.” Ali closed up his briefcase, stood, and walked back toward the suite entrance with his briefcase in his left hand and the folder in his right hand.

When Ali walked back into the main hallway, the guard was standing there. “Did you find what you need, sir?” asked the guard.

“Yes, I did, thank you,” said Ali, putting his briefcase down on the carpeted floor. “There are a lot more papers in here than I remember.” He transferred the folder from his right hand to his left hand and held it up with the open edge facing the guard. “My boss expects me to go through all this information by myself? I mean, look at all these forms.” Ali reached into the folder with his right hand. As the guard bent closer to look inside the folder, it exploded with a gunshot. The guard stumbled backward several feet and fell to the floor, a red circle growing rapidly on his shirt. Ali dropped the remains of the folder to the floor and turned to walk down the hallway to the office of his intended target.

* * *

Unaware of what fate had in store for him, an Arab businessman sat behind a large desk inside the second door off the tenth-floor corridor. It was a very neat, spacious, well-furnished office with a handcrafted tile floor and large windows providing a spectacular view of the beautiful city and the ocean. The style and opulence of it testified to the tremendous success of his business. The moon shined large and bright over the ocean, which sparkled as its surface reflected the soothing light. The businessman was busy working at his computer, and the papers spread all around him concerned business dealings with several Jordanian companies.

The Arab businessman held a large stack of papers in his left hand and was thumbing through them, looking for one page in particular. When he found it, he pulled it from the stack, lay it down on the desk, right below his computer monitor, and placed the rest of the stack off to one side. He picked up a pen and slowly ran the tip of it down the page until he found the item for which he was searching. With the pen, he circled the item on the page, then put the pen down and moved both of his hands to the keyboard. He looked at the screen and began to type. He was not accustomed to working into the small hours of the morning, but he was also

not used to having such important business to attend to with so little time to complete it. Still, he would be done with this task in another fifteen to twenty minutes. Then, he could go home to his comfortable bed and sleep until noon if he so desired. It would be a good, peaceful and restorative sleep because he would fall asleep knowing that he had completed very important work in these early hours, and the profits it would bring to his business would be far beyond anything he could have dreamed.

He finished typing and looked up at what he had just entered on the screen. He smiled. Just one more piece of information to find in these piles of paper and type into the computer, and his important project would be complete.

He turned to pour himself a glass of water from a pitcher sitting on the corner of the desk. As he lifted the pitcher, it shattered in his hand and the water drenched the papers. Pieces of glass fell with such force that they cracked one of the floor tiles. The Arab businessman was motionless for a few seconds, then bent his head down and looked at his starched, white shirt. It was covered in blood, like it had been splashed on him from a bucket. He tried to stand up but quickly lost his balance and tumbled out of the chair, hitting the tile floor with a thud.

Ali was standing in the doorway. A pistol with a silencer was steady in his hand. He went inside, making sure not to touch anything. This was not the first time that he had undertaken such a mission for his country, but this mission was the biggest one of his life, and he was determined not to leave any clues behind for the authorities to discover. He poked the Arab businessman with the muzzle of his pistol. Once he was sure that his target was dead, he turned and walked toward the door through which he had entered, being careful not to step in the blood that was quickly pooling on the floor. He felt good. The enemies of the nation were being eliminated.

Ali spent the entire afternoon on the streets of Dubai, traversing them on foot. He would locate his choice building, walk into the lobby, locate a specific office, enter it, and come out to the street within a few minutes. None of the other buildings had security, a fact that he had known prior to entering them and a fact that helped him make up the time he had lost in reaching his first target.

Given that Ali had started his tasks so early in the morning, he began to get tired by mid-afternoon so he walked back to the lavish hotel where the cab had dropped him off hours earlier. This time, he did enter the hotel and checked into a room to get some sleep. He wasn't completely comfortable taking a break in the middle of the day, with his tasks only half completed, but he also knew that if he allowed himself to get too tired, he was running the risk of getting sloppy and making a mistake that could jeopardize the success of his mission. It was a risk he was not willing to take. A few hours of sleep would keep his mind and body energized, sharp, and focused, and ultimately ensure the success of his mission.

After sleeping for nearly three hours, Ali awoke to the sound of the alarm on his watch. Quickly, he tried to remember where he was and why he was there and what he was supposed to do next. As the grogginess cleared from his mind, he remembered. He was in the lavish hotel resting up before finishing his remaining targets for the day.

He threw back the covers and sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed with a military precision that had long ago become second nature to him. He stood up and stretched—another habit instilled in him courtesy of the military—and then got dressed in clothes different from the ones he had been wearing when he checked in. He made his way downstairs to the front desk, checked out and paid for his room, and then exited the hotel. He headed back toward the part of the city where he had completed his tasks earlier in the day.

After walking for nearly ten minutes, he stepped into a small restaurant that he had passed that morning. Ali ordered two falafels and a small coffee. He chose a small table near the front window of the restaurant, sat down, and ate his meal while he watched people pass by on the sidewalk. When he was done eating, he walked outside and continued walking.

Over the next few hours, Ali completed four more tasks. Each one went exactly as planned and he was still on schedule.

* * *

With the sun setting over the ocean and the tall buildings aglow, flushed in fluorescent lights, Ali arrived at his last destination for the day. He entered the building and found a blackboard with white stencil letters hanging on a nearby wall. The board listed all the offices in the building and the location of each one. The office he wanted was right on the ground floor. Ali walked past the elevators and turned left down a short corridor, and then followed it when it bent right. He continued walking until he found Suite 44. He carefully put his hand on the doorknob, turned it, and slowly pushed the door open. He found himself in the reception area. Ahead of him was a desk with very little on it except a computer monitor and keyboard, a phone, a short stack of folders, a picture frame, and a small vase with red flowers. Behind and to the right of that desk was a doorway and beyond that Ali saw an Arab business executive standing by a table with his back to the doorway. He had an open folder in each hand and as he looked from one to the other and back again, he nodded his head.

Ali quickly but silently moved to the doorway of the interior room. He raised his pistol, waited a few seconds, and then coughed. Startled, the Arab executive quickly turned to see who was behind him. Just as he realized what was about to happen, a muffled gunshot filled the room and a bullet tore through his chest,

driving him backward onto the table. The folders he had held in his hands fell to the floor, spilling papers all around him. At first, the Arab executive flailed and appeared to be struggling to get up from the table. Little by little however, his struggle became weaker and weaker, until he was motionless.

Ali waited a few seconds and when he saw that the man still had not moved, he walked toward the man and stood over him, nudging him with the muzzle of his gun to make sure the target was truly eliminated. Assured that his task was completed, he left the way he had entered.

In total, Ali had done away with twelve enemies of his religion and his country today. After every hit, he would walk into a nearby restroom, enter a stall, and emerge after a few minutes in new clothes and carrying a different gun.

After having spent the entire day in Dubai, he reached the airport and sat in the waiting area near the gate. He had gone through the clearances and was waiting for the final call to board the plane. A TV mounted on one of the walls showed a perfectly quaffed anchorman reading the day's top news story. "City hit by serial murders," Ali heard him say but before he heard the details of the story, he heard the call for his flight to begin boarding. He picked up his jacket and a small bag and started to walk toward the gate.

CHAPTER 5

* * *

ALI WAS A MAN ON A MISSION and his love for his country and the organization was the motivation behind it. Nothing could stop him or delay him from getting rid of the enemies of Islam and God. He had already lost too much to the enemies of the nation and he could not afford to lose any more.

The next day, after his tasks in Dubai, he landed in the beautiful city of Paris. It was early morning when he walked out of the airport and hailed a cab that would take him straight to the export house, which was located in the heart of the city.

When he reached his destination, it was still very early—the start of normal office hours was still two hours away—so he wasn't surprised to see through the windows that there were only three people moving around inside the one-story building.

Cautiously, he placed his hand on the front door and pushed. The door opened silently into a hallway that seemed to reach nearly to the back of the building. He stepped through the doorway but held his hand behind him and against the door to make sure it closed as slowly and silently as it had opened. He watched the hallway and he listened carefully for any voices or footsteps that

would indicate someone was coming toward the hallway. After several seconds, Ali started walking down the hallway. He stopped and looked at the door on his left and read the nameplate on it. It was not the name on his list. He continued walking and stopped at a second door on the opposite side of the hallway. The nameplate read, STORAGE. Ali continued walking; he had no business with storage today.

When he came to the third door, on the same side of the hallway as the first door, he heard a man's voice singing. Ali recognized the song as a traditional French folk song but couldn't recall the name. He read the nameplate affixed to the door. It matched the name on his list. His target was inside.

Ali gently placed his hand on the doorknob and turned it slowly. When he could turn it no farther, he pushed on it and the door opened into a spacious office. Ali saw a Frenchman sitting at a conference table about halfway between the door and the back wall. The man had several file folders open on the table in front of him, and he was looking at them intently, completely unaware of Ali's presence. Without looking up from his papers, the Frenchman reached to his right and picked up a shiny, white coffee cup from where it sat on the table. He brought the cup to his lips and began to sip.

Ali brought his gun up to shoulder level and aimed the barrel at his target's head. He squeezed the trigger, and in a flash, the Frenchman's face was painted red with blood. The force of the bullet knocked him against the back of his chair. For a few seconds, he remained upright with a dazed expression on his face and the coffee cup still in his hand. Then his hand dropped to the table, shattering the cup and splattering coffee all over the papers. Lured by gravity, the Frenchman's now lifeless body fell forward against the table. A few seconds later, the weight of his limp body pulled him out of the chair. He dropped to the floor, his head thudding

against the polished wood and bouncing twice.

Ali walked into the room and poked his target with the muzzle of his gun in his characteristic style. When he was certain the man was dead, he walked out of the office, down the hallway, and out the front door.

* * *

Ali spent the entire day admiring the buildings on the streets of Paris. A mild shower had left the roads and the sidewalks wet, but it seemed to Ali that the rain made the scenery even more beautiful. While it was raining, he enjoyed a sandwich and a latte for lunch at a sidewalk café.

When the rain stopped, he paid his check in cash and walked a few blocks south to another café, where he sat down and ordered a chocolate truffle. He took care not to spend too much time at any particular place. He sat there watching BMWs, Ferraris, and Rolls Royces zipping by and students with bags hung loosely on their shoulders moving along the sidewalk. A few tables away sat a young man with long hair and a goatee, sketching portraits of tourists in exchange of some francs. On any other day, Ali would definitely have had his sketch drawn.

The afternoon passed into evening and the evening passed into the arms of night. Ali kept shifting from one café to another, relishing French pastry, coffee, and magazines.

Half an hour before his next task, Ali put his magazine down and looked at his watch. Earlier that afternoon, he had checked out his next destination, just to make sure he knew where it was and that there had not been any changes to the layout of the building since intel had been gathered on it. Now, it was time to go back there and cross another name off his list.

He got up and headed across the street toward a small, one-story building with a sign over it that read, Public Restroom. He

went inside and walked into the stall at the far end of the row. Five minutes later, he emerged looking considerably different. His hair was longer and lighter in color, he had dark circles under his eyes, which gave him an older appearance, and his clothes were drab and faded. He stopped and looked at himself at the large mirror that hung on the wall above a row of sinks. He was still amazed at how much he could alter his appearance with just a little makeup and a change of clothes. He held a small bag in his right hand. He dropped the bag in the trash bin beside the sinks and then walked outside. He pulled a piece of paper out of his pants pocket and read the address on it once again. He folded the paper up and slid it back into his pocket. He began walking. He was set to kill.

* * *

The building was small compared to the ones in Dubai. Ali knew that could be a blessing and a curse. A small building meant he didn't have to search as much for his target, and he could get in and out much faster. On the other hand, a small building offered few alternate exits if he were spotted and pursued. Fortunately, that hadn't been a problem up to this point. He had found and eliminated his targets quickly, cleanly and, most importantly, unnoticed. He had every intention of remaining a ghost.

He walked into the building and was immediately facing a security desk; however, there was no one staffing it. Ali walked past it and headed directly for the southwest corner of the ground floor. Just beyond the snack bar, he found the door to Suite 303. He grasped the doorknob in his gloved hand but it wouldn't turn. Undaunted, he pulled a master key from his pocket and unlocked the door.

Ali stealthily stepped into a fancy, beautifully decorated office. Windows looked out over the city, and the entire décor of the suite reflected the ambiance of a city of art and artists. At the far end of

the room, two men were sitting at a desk, facing each other. Neither one appeared to be especially tall but both were definitely stocky. Both men had very dark beards and one of the men was completely bald. They had stacks of papers dealing with Jordanian accounts between them and were busy talking to each other in Arabic.

Up to this point, nearly everything had gone according to plan for Ali, but now an unexpected situation stood staring him in the face. He was expecting only one person to be in the office but there were two. He had to make a decision and he had to make it quick. Silently, he moved behind a bookcase and then positioned himself so that he could see and hear the men.

One of the men pushed his chair back, stood up from the desk, and began to pull on his trench coat. The bald man, seeing him do so, asked abruptly, "Where are you going? We still have much work to do. You can't leave early every other day. You can't expect me to cover for you all the time."

The man in the trench coat said, "I have a very important appointment tonight. I hope you understand. In any case, we can continue in the morning."

The bald man looked puzzled for a moment, and then he smiled slightly. "The woman does not appreciate being kept waiting. Right?"

"Oh, no!" replied the man in the trench coat. "It cools down her passion!"

"Pay her an extra one hundred Euros."

"I don't have to pay!"

"Ha! So you say. Every man ends up paying for these services in one way or the other. In any case, we still have much work to do."

The man in the trench coat ignored his colleague and continued to gather up his belongings. When he tried to open his umbrella in

the office, the other man shouted at him, “Don’t open that in here! It’s bad luck!”

The man in the trench coat was excited about his rendezvous and opened the umbrella anyway. It was quite a large umbrella when opened fully, so he had to keep it lowered so as not to hit a light fixture that was hanging directly above him; consequently, the umbrella blocked his view of his colleague. The man in the trench coat said to the other man, “Don’t worry about the work. We will finish it in time. And by the way, you are such an old woman! That’s a silly supersti—”

A loud thud cut him off in mid-sentence. He shifted his umbrella to one side and what he saw caused his face to contort in horror. The other man’s head was on the table in a pool of blood.

“What the...?” The man in the trench coat took a few steps toward his colleague. Suddenly, blood spurted from his chest. He stood motionless, appearing paralyzed. After a few seconds, he turned toward the door and saw Ali standing there. The man in the trench coat opened his mouth to say something but only blood came out. He collapsed to the floor.

Ali had made his decision.

The blood of both men flowed across the floor in separate, widening streams, eventually joining and gaining size and speed, like a stream of blood flowing in the room. Ali walked up to the table and avoided stepping in the blood. He nudged the man in the trench coat to confirm the kill. He then carefully stepped over to the bald man and did the same. One more name off his list, and one more innocent sacrificed for the good of the nation.

Once again, having completed his task, he started to check the papers on the table. Most of the papers were no longer white. He tossed some of the papers on the floor and walked out of the room.

Since there was no overnight flight available for his next destination, Ali decided to check into a hotel. The room was small and modest, with no special furnishings or frills provided, but that was fine with Ali; it was the success of the mission that was most important to him. That was his greatest reward at the end of his long, busy day, and it was all the luxury he needed.

Ali was sitting on the corner of the bed, bent forward, with his elbows dug into his thighs. For a minute or two, he held his head in his hands. The image of blood flowing on the floor was still fresh in his memory. For a moment, it seemed he felt pity for his victims. But they are enemies of the state and they practically caused me all my losses, he thought. No, he was not about to give in. This mission must be completed.

He straightened up, ran his hands through his shortly cropped hair, and took a deep breath. He put a hand in his pocket and drew out a piece of paper. After a few minutes, he picked up a retractable pen that lay on the nightstand beside the bed, clicked the top end of it with his thumb, and drew a line through each of two names on the paper. He laid the paper and pen on the bed and started to pace around the room.

After a few minutes, he picked up the hotel phone, which sat on one of the side tables, dialed zero for the front desk, and requested a wake-up call. He wanted to reach the airport by six in the morning.

Ali lay on the bed. Being confined to a room and not doing much made him feel melancholic and depressed. Lost in his memories, he did not realize when sleep engulfed him.

CHAPTER 6

* * *

A LIGHT SHOWER AND THE NEWS of murders greeted the city of Paris the next morning. The rain shower had left the streets of the entire city wet, and the news of the killings had left the citizens bewildered. There was not a single soul who was not discussing the murders. The photographs of the office buildings, the people murdered, and headlines such as Three Murders in One Day were on the front page of nearly every national daily. The police had requested citizens to come forward and provide any information that they thought would help to find the person or persons responsible for this heinous crime spree. The local and national news shows flashed shots of the buildings, the men who had been murdered, and the police officers who were moving in and out of the buildings. Reporters from TV, radio, websites, newspapers, and magazines stood outside the buildings, waiting for investigating officers to come out and comment on the crimes. One TV reporter asked people walking along the street for their opinions on what had happened.

The small building was cordoned off with red tape. Police officers stood at the entrance, checking the credentials of every person walking in and out of the building. After photographs of

the scene had been taken, the bodies were removed and sent for autopsies. The outlines of the bodies marked on the floor were still fresh and patches of dry blood were still visible on the floor.

Two men with the letters CSI monogrammed on their blue shirts moved around in the office. The taller of the two moved around cautiously, trying his best not to step on or disturb any pieces of evidence. The other man was busy working with the video surveillance equipment that monitored all the building's interior hallways, interior rooms, and exterior walkways. What they were both searching for was the one clue that would give them a strong lead on a suspect. Now and then, one of them would point to something on the floor, or some part of the room, and they would speak to each other.

An inspector, the investigating officer assigned to the case, stepped into the room and looked at the two CSI agents. He said, "Talk to me, gentlemen. Give me something to work with. Give me something to begin with." Both men turned and looked at him simultaneously.

"There was only one shooter, and he has not left much for us, sir," replied the taller CSI agent. "Definitely a professional hit. The man was in and out within seconds. He took nothing and seems to have left us nothing. He was quick and neat."

"Come on, give me something at least. He must have left something for us. The reporters and the chief inspector will hound me if I don't have something definitive to tell them." His face and his voice both conveyed his frustration.

Suddenly, the man working with the video surveillance equipment pointed and exclaimed, "Ah-ha! Yes! He left us nothing...except one thing! One really big thing!" The inspector and the taller CSI agent hurried over to where the other agent stood and looked at him in anticipation.

“It better be something good,” said the inspector.

“His picture!” answered the shorter CSI agent. He turned the screen toward them. The other men stared at the screen and they saw the image of a man standing over the body of the man in the trench coat.

The inspector got all excited and told the CSI techs, “Clean it up! Give me a better image! I need to see the face! I cannot see it at all! Come on, do something! Make it useful for me! Can you do that?!”

Before the agent working the surveillance equipment could answer, the three men heard a voice with a strong French accent say in English, “No, but maybe I can.” The men turned and saw a woman standing in the doorway.

The inspector, inquiring in a placid tone, said, “And who might you be, my dear?”

In response to the question, Heidi pulled out her ID card and flashed it in front of the inspector. It read, Chief Inspector Silvana Ristor and below it, Interpol. The French inspector raised his eyebrows.

The woman was Heidi June, a slender-looking woman in her early thirties. Her soft and delicate features were misleading when it came to the quantum of strength she possessed. Her agency came as a surprise to the inspector and he exclaimed, “Interpol? What is their involvement in this case?”

Heidi replied, “The two gentlemen who were killed here a few hours ago were part of huge money-laundering organization. They are tied to a string of killings in Dubai, Rome, and Madrid.”

It was not easy for the inspector to accept all this so easily. He tried to dismiss her claims and carry on with the work. He started to walk the length of the room and shouted at one of his assistants, demanding that the preliminary ballistic report be delivered to

him within an hour.

Even before the assistant could say something, Heidi replied, “The bullets will not match the bullet that killed the man at the other crime scene this morning.” Her voice conveyed the strength of her confidence.

This was getting to be too much for the inspector. He gave Heidi a top-to-bottom look and asked, “Are you sure?”

“How do you know that?” added one of the CSI agents. “We only sent them to the lab a few hours—”

“That’s not important,” Heidi interrupted.

The inspector quipped in, “She’s right. We have a professional assassin in our midst. The question is, where will he hit next?” He waved his hands in the air and in a mocking tone said, “My money is on Berlin, Amsterdam, or London. What do you have to say, Miss...?”

Heidi ignored the sarcasm in his voice and the comments aimed toward her. “I agree—you’ve got an assassin loose in your city, which is why I’m here,” she replied in an even, emotionless voice, her eyes locked on the screen. She moved closer to it and said, “I don’t mind sharing the details with you. As I already mentioned, the two men who were killed here a few hours ago were part of huge money-laundering organization. They are connected to a string of killings in Dubai, Rome, and Madrid. These men have caused huge losses to the Supreme Party in Iraq. It works mostly with Arabs, Americans, and Europeans. It prefers not to work with the Iraqis; the local people know too much about its real intentions and resent the methods adopted by the Supreme Party to stay in power. The Party controls the major businesses and organizations in the country. In fact, its people monopolize major trades both nationally as well as internationally. As I mentioned earlier, it is money laundering at an international level, with its own set of

rules and regulations.”

The three men stood listening to what Heidi had to say. The inspector was full of doubts about the capabilities of this young woman and he challenged her again. “All this is fine, but you say you can clean up this picture?”

“Perhaps. Give me the video, and I’ll see what I can do.”

The inspector looked at the CSI agent running the surveillance equipment and nodded. The agent ejected the videotape and handed it over to the woman. The inspector looked at her intently and said, “Get me those pictures—fast! We’ve got to alert the authorities in those cities as quickly as possible.” Except for the ID, there was no reason to believe her, the inspector told himself. But then, because of the ID, there was no reason not to believe her.

Heidi, in a very complacent tone, replied, “Agreed. Don’t worry—you can depend on me,” and smiled back at the inspector with a decidedly unfriendly smile and sauntered out of the room.

The moment she left the room, the inspector raised his eyebrows and the three men exchanged mischievous smiles.

Heidi walked out of the building and out onto the street. She pocketed the videotape, pulled out her cell phone, and dialed. When the person on the other end answered, Heidi began speaking with an American accent. “I got it. It is safe with me. Check with our people in Amsterdam. I am going on to London. Also, slip his picture into Scotland Yard’s database. I want to see just how good he is.”

CHAPTER 7

* * *

A COMMERCIAL AIRCRAFT flew over the English Channel, which separates the United Kingdom from France. The blue-green water of the channel looked mesmerizing from that height, and from his window seat, Ali could see not only the channel but also the lights of Paris as they faded into the distance. The Parisian portion of his mission had gone well overall, but this had been the second city in which he had left dead bodies in his wake, and he knew that the attention on them was growing fast. The police in London and throughout Europe had certainly been notified by now that whoever was responsible for the killings might be within their jurisdiction soon, if not there already. Ali was not concerned, though; he was good at what he did, but he also knew that a slip-up in London would be more risky to the remainder of his mission than it would have been in Dubai or Paris. He was determined not to alter his plans, but he was equally determined to be extra observant about his actions and his decisions. He had not made any slip-ups yet and he wasn't about to end that streak.

Before long, the aircraft landed at Gatwick Airport. True to its reputation of being the second busiest airport in the country, all Ali could see in the terminal was an ocean of human faces, and the

only sounds he could hear were announcements coming over the P.A. system and the sounds of airplanes taking off and landing.

The terminal was a large, open area with counters where passengers checked in for their flights, and nearby were chairs where they sat and waited to board. Screens flashed the flight numbers, departure times, and the respective gates.

Right in the middle of the terminal was a transparent fiberglass kiosk with four police officers standing inside. The officers stood in front of a row of video monitors flashing faces of criminals. The screens stood back to back so each police officer was looking in a different direction. Every few seconds, the image on the screen would change and the police officer would look around for a suspicious face in the ocean of faces. One of the images was of Ali.

Ali, unaware that his picture had been sent to every airport in every major city in the world, disembarked from his flight and walked through the terminal. He was in disguise. The police officers looked around in an attempt to find any person bearing a resemblance to an image on the screens in their kiosk, but there were no matches. None of the travelers walking in or out of the terminal bore any resemblance to any of the images.

As Ali passed the kiosk, a small child suddenly walked right in front of him, and Ali had to slow down to avoid knocking the child down. The mother of the child rushed to hold the child. She apologized to Ali and smiled at him in a way that told Ali she was sincerely sorry as well as sincerely embarrassed.

In the kiosk, a red light atop one of the screens started to flash, indicating the surveillance system had spotted a possible physical match to one of the images. All four officers began looking around the terminal carefully, scrutinizing each face that came into their view. Ali was unaware that the police had identified him. Casually, he walked out of the airport, carrying only a small bag and a black

briefcase in his hands. Traveling without luggage was always more convenient and quicker and that is the way Ali liked to travel.

It was not the first time that he was visiting London. He did not like the weather of London much, but he had no choice. His duty required him to be in this city, so he was there. He joined the throng of people walking on the sidewalk.

After walking for a few minutes, he flagged down a cab. He climbed into the backseat and it pulled away from the curb, speeding off toward the city.

Four police officers in two private cars drove out of the parking lot and started to follow the cab. The three cars merged into the afternoon traffic. Ali was in an iconic, yet common, black London cab, so it was very easy to overlook in the heavy traffic crowding the London streets. The two cars carrying the police officers took turns taking the lead so that they could stay as close as possible to Ali's cab without arousing suspicion. Officers in both cars were trying to catch a glimpse of Ali.

Ali checked his watch. The time was exactly two o'clock in the afternoon. Well within schedule. Everything is moving as planned, thought Ali. He was still not aware that police officers were following him.

CHAPTER 8

* * *

IT WAS A DULL DAY, and in spite of the best efforts of the sun, it could not penetrate the thick smog that had engulfed all of New York City. The weather could not dampen the spirit of the people of New York, and they were ready to take on the day with full zeal. Millions of people rushed to work in this city known around the world as The Big Apple.

On one of the crowded streets of midtown Manhattan stood Mohammed, a man in his mid-fifties. His salt-and-pepper beard and balding head made him look older than his age. He stood against a lamppost. He was reading The New York Times. If his attire was not neat, it was not shabby either. The color of his black jacket seemed to have turned green under the sun. He had lived in the city for the last ten years, and in that time he had grown familiar with its unique personality. He knew that around this time in the morning, the city was usually mad with activities. He did not like to be late for his meetings so he had reached his destination a few minutes early.

Mohammed checked his watch. It was eight minutes to nine, and he began to walk along the sidewalk. As people were moving in all directions, he would occasionally have to step to one side or

slow down.

Finally, he stopped before a tall building and again checked his watch. It was two minutes to nine, and it was time to go in for the meeting. He entered the building and walked through the lobby toward the bank of elevators facing the front doors. He reached the elevators and pushed the button for the one on the left. As soon as the door opened, he hurried in, waited for three other people to step in behind him, and then pushed the button for the top floor. One of the other people pushed the button for the fourth floor and a second person pushed the button for the ninth floor. Mohammed looked at his watch again. It was one minute to nine. He felt confident he would still be on time for his appointment, but just barely.

Finally, after the elevator made stops at the two lower floors, the door opened on the top floor. He walked down the hallway and reached the corner office. Very confidently, he opened the door and stuck his head into a large office. Windows lined three of the four walls and offered a spectacular view of the city in the evenings once all the billboards were lighted.

Right in front of the windows sat Kelly Delaney, an attractive-looking, petite woman with red hair and grey-green eyes. She was dressed neatly and professionally in a navy-blue business suit that added a pretty hue to the color of her eyes. She was working at a computer that sat atop a massive mahogany desk. On one side of the desk sat a telephone that also worked as an intercom. Her chair had a tall back and all this added to her business-like aura.

The moment Mohammed stepped into the office, Kelly stood up from her chair and greeted him in an elated voice. "My dear friend, I'm so glad you could make it today." She offered her hand.

Mohammed walked to the desk and shook her hand. He looked at Kelly and replied, "Kelly, you know I'm always available to see

you, especially when the cause is so just. It is something which gives me a lot of satisfaction.”

Kelly smiled back. “Coffee?” she asked and gestured toward a side table ready with a coffee pot, two cups, and some bagels.

Mohammed looked in the direction of her hand and took a deep breath with his eyes closed. “It is, as usual, my favorite. I can smell it, Kelly. How on earth do you get it?” asked Mohammed in a voice as excited as that of a little boy who smells his favorite cake in the oven.

Mohammed’s response to the hospitality made Kelly feel very happy. “Oh, don’t bother yourself about that. I have my ways. Shall I serve it for you?”

Mohammed held up his hand and shook his head. “And don’t you bother yourself about that. I will get some for both of us. If you can get it from wherever to here for me, I can surely get it from the side table to your desk.”

He poured coffee for both of them then carried the cups back to Kelly’s desk. He placed her cup in front of her and placed his own cup on the side of her desk. He went back to the side table, chose a bagel for Kelly and one for himself, placed each on its own plate, and set the two plates on the desk. He then pulled a chair up to the side of Kelly’s desk and sat down.

It was always a pleasure for Mohammed to come to Kelly’s office. She always took good care of him. They were comfortable with each other, and a mutual respect flowed between them.

They sipped their coffee in silence for a minute. Mohammed looked at Kelly and thanked her for the coffee once again. She smiled and said she was glad he enjoyed it. After a few more sips, he asked her, “And what is it, my friend, that you wanted to see me about today?”

Kelly put her cup down on the desk and moved forward in her chair. She looked straight at Mohammed and said, “Well, Mohammed, I wanted to see you for a couple of things. Let us start with the first and the most important one. There is good news. We have a whole slew of new parents looking to sponsor some children. I truly think that the new ad campaign that we are using currently has really touched people’s hearts. It has done wonders and we have lots of work to do in the days to come.”

Kelly and her partner, Alan Mayhew, were associates in an organization dedicated to placing children from developing and third world countries in foster homes or arranging sponsors for them in the United States. Their firm had often dealt with children from Iraq and that is when Kelly would seek Mohammed’s help. In fact, the first time they met was around two years before for one such assignment.

She pulled a bundle of papers out of a drawer and placed them on the desk between them. Mohammed seemed in no hurry to review the papers. He continued to relish his coffee and bagel. None of this was new to him and he knew Kelly could be trusted with the paperwork.

“No, Kelly,” said Mohammed, “it’s not the ad campaign; it’s merely you Americans—you are a truly generous people. It is only Americans who do such things, not only for Iraqis but also for people all over the world.”

Kelly sat back in her chair. “Glad you think so. I just wish we could convince the rest of the world, too, or at least the people in your country. I sometimes feel that the world thinks about us the other way around.”

“Oh, trust me. The common people know,” assured Mohammed. “They are not fools and they understand everything around them. Do not believe all that...that...bull that they show on the television

and print in the papers. There is no truth, and the common people know it.”

After a minute of silence, Mohammed spoke. “So, we need to assign children, eh? Good, I always love that. Young children, good homes, caring sponsors, good futures—nothing can be better than this. These children are the future of my country.” He took a sip of his coffee and put the cup down. He drummed his hands on the mahogany desk and looked excited. He always enjoyed doing this. He felt that he was doing something positive for his people and his nation.

Suddenly, he remembered that Kelly had mentioned that she wanted to see him for a couple of things and until now only one issue had come up. He stopped drumming his hands and said, “Wait, Kelly. You said a couple of things. What else did you want to discuss? Anything important?”

The moment Mohammed reminded Kelly, her face grew grim. She again moved forward in her chair. After thinking for a minute, she said, “Well, Mr. de La Osa, our contact man in Madrid... Something seems to have happened to him. He has not answered any of my emails or voicemail messages for the last few days. I am a little worried about him. This has never happened before.”

While expressing her concerns for Mr. de La Osa in Madrid, she was constantly fiddling with the pen in her hand. Mohammed could see that she was tense and apprehensive. Hearing what Kelly had to say wiped the smile from Mohammed’s lips, and he felt himself growing more concerned.

When she was finished, Mohammed looked at her and said, “That is strange. Never has he done this before nor has this ever happened with any of our other contacts. They all know they have to keep people informed.” Saying this, he went quiet.

After hearing Mohammed’s words, Kelly grew pale. She wasn’t

sure what to do. She didn't want to overreact but she also didn't want to sit and do nothing. What if something serious had happened to Mr. de La Osa? She felt a certain responsibility to make sure he was okay, not just as his colleague but also as a fellow human being. There were the organizational considerations too. Mr. de La Osa was a valued and dependable contact—in fact, their only contact in that whole area—and he was an integral part of the work the organization did to provide better lives and brighter futures in the United States for children from countries around the world. What if someone objected to his work? How could they? How could anyone object to a man who had dedicated his working life to helping needy children in his own country find loving families and greater opportunities? But maybe someone did—someone with an entirely different agenda—and maybe that someone had made their feelings known to Mr. de La Osa in a manner far beyond mere words.

Kelly was starting to get more and more concerned. She stood up from her chair and walked behind it. Mohammed realized that his words had only made Kelly feel worse and heightened her concern. He checked his watch and said, “As soon as possible, I’ll call his family; they’re old friends. Maybe he has just taken a holiday or perhaps he’s ill. Do not worry. I will find out.”

“I’m sure he’s fine,” said Kelly, looking at Mohammed for reassurance.

Mohammed got up from his chair and walked back to the side table. He was worried and in need of time to compose himself. He knew that the people of the organization were capable of reaching anywhere and doing anything. He placed his empty cup on the side table and said to Kelly without looking at her, “Is that all, or is something else troubling you?” Then, hoping to divert Kelly’s mind by changing the topic, he asked, “Could I help you with some more coffee?”

There were still issues that she needed to discuss with Mohammed. Ignoring his offer for more coffee, she replied, "There is one more thing I wanted to ask. The Supreme Party in Iraq, if it continues to gain control of the lives of the people in your country, will that...affect our work?" There was a hesitation in her voice.

Mohammed knew what the situation in his country would be with the Supreme Party taking more and more control of the people and the resources. He may have been out of the country but he had his ways of gathering information, and he knew that nothing less than total control would satisfy the Party. He also knew that it was only a matter of time before he and Kelly would no longer have any more Iraqi children to place with foster families in the United States. Until that time came, though, he saw no reason to burden Kelly with this knowledge.

In a very nonchalant manner, Mohammed replied, "No. Don't worry about that either, Ms. Kelly. The Supreme Party knows how important our work is to children. Ah, what progress we have made! It seems like only yesterday we were struggling with the revolution. Things were bad in those days and we have come a long way from all that."

Mohammed had been about to utter the prohibited word but had caught himself. He was not sure whether Kelly could be trusted with the details and whether she would understand everything. He believed it would be best if she came to know the facts from her own people. He did not want to confuse her.

Kelly seemed relaxed after hearing all this. "Sorry, a little before my time," she replied. "I think I am being apprehensive for no reason at all. Probably Mr. de La Osa's absence is too much on my mind." She took a few deep breaths, and then smiled at Mohammed.

In an attempt to humor Kelly, he started to comb his hair with his hands and said, "Oh, Kelly, don't you say that; you make me feel

so old!” They both laughed. The tension seemed to have diffused.

Kelly, again speaking with a business-oriented tone of voice, said, “Well, your work here has certainly helped a great many children. So, shall we get started?”

Mohammed nodded and pulled a pen from his pocket. “But Ms. Kelly, it is not my work but our work.” He smiled, and Kelly smiled back. Soon, both of them were engrossed in the bundle of papers. There were children waiting eagerly for them to finish their work.

CHAPTER 9

* * *

ALI INSTRUCTED THE TAXI DRIVER to take him to the Hotel Green. As instructed, the driver pulled up to the front porch of the modest-looking hotel. Ali thanked the driver and paid for the ride. He got out of the cab and started to walk up the stairs leading to the hotel lobby.

The police car following the taxi stopped just outside the hotel. Without any delay, one of the officers in the car picked up his radio, squeezed the button on the side of it, and began taking into it.

Several yards away, a police officer got out of the second car and signaled to the cab driver to stop. One of the officers opened the front passenger door and instructed the driver to take the cab to the police station for examination because it was now evidence in a criminal investigation. The driver, though surprised at first, nodded and began to drive away.

The Hotel Green, though modest, had a warm, welcoming feel to it. The exterior paint and trim were a deep green, and ferns and creepers in various shades of green grew all over the building. That's probably why it's called the Hotel Green, thought Ali. The lobby was spacious and decorated with classic furnishings, and the

generous use of glass and mirrors created an even greater feeling of open space. The windows on the left side of the reservation desk looked straight into the garden. Soft music was playing, which added to the overall classy, welcoming atmosphere of the lobby. Ali walked up to the desk and the clerk greeted him warmly.

“Hello, sir. Welcome to the Hotel Green. Are you checking in?” asked the clerk, smiling.

Ali smiled back. “Yes, I have a reservation. I’m Mr. Jones.”

The desk clerk started to type on a computer keyboard while Ali stood there, giving an effortless performance. The transformation to Mr. Jones was smooth and he gave no reason to the clerk or anyone else who might be observing him to think that he wasn’t a native-born American on a business trip to England. There was nothing Iraqi about him in either his speech or his looks. Ammar had not made the wrong choice.

The clerk looked at Ali, smiled, and said, “Certainly, sir. Just give me a moment.” He looked at the computer monitor on the desk.

Meanwhile, Ali stood waiting patiently and let his eyes wander all around the lobby. He quickly assessed his surroundings, noting any other doorways leading in or out of the lobby, and memorizing the approximate distances from the stairs and from each other. He also sized up the other people in the lobby. None of them aroused his suspicion.

Suddenly, movement in a mirror on the wall right in front of him caught his eye, and he immediately shifted his glance back to where it had been. He saw two police cars pull up to the porch. He frowned.

The clerk’s voice shook Ali from his thoughts. He heard the clerk saying, “I have a nice suite up on the seventh floor. Would that do, sir?”

Impulsively, Ali asked, “Do you have any available rooms on a lower floor?” As he said this, his eyes were watching the police officers’ reflections in the mirror as they move around on the porch.

“One minute, sir,” the clerk replied and looked at the screen again. After a few seconds, the clerk turned to Ali and said, “We have something on the second floor. It’s not as good as the room on the seventh floor, but still I’m sure you will like it.”

Ali, his eyes still glued to the police officers in the mirror, answered, “That should be just fine.” He nodded and smiled back at the clerk and took the keycard from the clerk’s hand. The clerk signaled toward the elevator. Ali thanked him and said, “I would prefer to take the stairs.” He began to walk toward them.

By this time, more than a dozen police officers had reached the hotel. They were all armed and gathered in a group in the street in front of the hotel. They were all looking over a laptop resting on the hood of a police car. The screen showed a layout of the hotel. One of them appeared to be the leader. He was speaking in a loud voice as he looked from one officer to another to another, and occasionally he looked back at the screen and pointed to one part of it or another with a slender, black pen. The moment he finished speaking, three of the police officers headed for the back of the hotel and another three began walking toward the entrance. The rest dispersed in various directions.

The three police officers approaching the hotel’s main door entered the lobby and went straight to the reception desk. Ali noticed the officers and continued to climb the stairs. The hotel staff and the other guests standing at the desk were surprised to see the three police officers, and some of them began to talk animatedly amongst themselves.

The three officers at the registration desk asked the clerk to identify the man whom the clerk had just checked in. The clerk

told them it was Mr. Jones and that he was booked into Room 24 on the second floor and that he had taken the stairs. The officers then headed for the stairs and began climbing them in single file, with the officer who was leading the assault—distinguished by his tall stature—leading the way. Soon, they reached the second floor and spread out in the hallway, searching for Room 24.

Wall-to-wall carpeting covered the floor, and room doors lined both sides of the hallway. The police officers held their weapons at the ready.

The tall officer was the first one to locate the room. He silently signaled to the other two officers, and they hurriedly but quietly moved to his position outside the room, lining up behind him. A red light on the keyless door lock was flashing. The leader checked the time on his watch and pulled from his pocket the keycard the desk clerk had handed to him. He swiped it through the slot in the lock. They heard a click and the light on the lock turned green. The tall officer immediately turned the knob, kicked the door, and almost instantly all three officers were inside the room, their weapons aimed straight ahead.

The moment they entered, they heard a loud sound. Fooooom! The sound roared through the room, and was followed a split second later by a deafening crashing sound as all the glass in the room shattered. Almost instantly, thick, white smoke enveloped the room and billowed out into the hallway through the open door. It was a smoke bomb!

The officers bent down close to the floor, coughing and choking. At first, none of them could hear anything, but as their sense of hearing recovered from the blast, they were inundated by a multitude of sounds that filled the room and hallway, the loudest being the sound of the officers swearing.

Stealthily, Ali opened the door to the linen closet just inside the

bathroom and stepped out. He tied a handkerchief over his mouth and nose and he had his bag and briefcase in his hands. Quietly and casually, he slipped right past the three officers and out of the room. He reached the stairs, descended them to the first floor as he pulled the handkerchief off his face and stuffed it in his pocket, and walked across the hotel lobby. His face showed no trace of panic or concern, and his gait was even and controlled.

Amidst the chaos in the hotel, Ali walked out the front door of the hotel without drawing the attention of either the hotel staff in the lobby or the police officers posted outside, who, after seeing windows on the second floor blow out, ran toward the hotel entrance just after Ali had exited. The moment Ali was outside the main gate of the hotel, he hailed a cab.

In Room 24, coughing and hacking made it difficult for the three officers to communicate with each other. One of the police officers managed to find his way out of the room but the other two dropped to the floor inside the room. Ali had slipped out of the hands of the police and within a few minutes, a once elegant room of the hotel had been reduced to shambles. It bore the scars of a smoke bomb detonation. The windows, which once added to the beauty of the room as they overlooked the hotel garden, were shattered and the glass strewn all over the floor and all over the garden below. The plaster on the walls and ceiling was blackened and sooty.

Hearing the sound of a blast, guests from other rooms stepped out and headed for the stairs. Everyone wanted to evacuate the hotel that very moment, and this only added to the chaos. The hotel staff tried to reassure guests that everything was under control and there was no need to panic and no need to evacuate the hotel. Still, the rush of even more police officers across the lobby and up the stairs, along with the sound of sirens in the distance as paramedics raced toward the hotel, only made the guests more nervous. Many

ignored the staff's reassurances and headed outside nonetheless.

Within forty-five minutes, police tape marked the entrance to the room, and two officers stood guard at either side of the doorway. Two crime scene investigators moved around inside the room, as they chose places where they would set up their equipment and start cataloging the evidence. One of the investigators sifted through the debris, looking for clues, while the other started to dust the room for fingerprints. A third investigator was downstairs, dusting the reservation desk for prints, too. In the lobby, other police officers took statements from hotel guests and from hotel staff members who were on duty at the time of the blast.

Heidi entered the hotel lobby, this time dressed as an inspector from Scotland Yard. She had picked up Ali's trail about the same time the police at the airport had, and she had followed the police officers who had been following Ali. It was clear from the chaos and confusion, as well as from the blown-out second-floor window she had seen as she walked into the hotel, that Ali had known he was being followed, and he'd been ready to send the police from hot on his trail to cooling their heels in the blink of an eye. Now, Scotland Yard had an interest in this Ali guy, or so she would tell these local cops, and she needed to find out what they knew. Maybe it would be enough to move her from two steps behind him to one step ahead of him.

After the check-in clerk had finished giving his statement to one of the police officers, he started to walk away. Heidi caught up with him, introduced herself as she flashed her ID, and proved him for details. They spoke for a couple minutes, after which she took the stairs to the second floor.

It was not difficult for her to locate Room 24. The moment she reached the room, she displayed her ID and said in a very convincing British accent, "Good Lord, it seems a bloody bomb

went off in here! Anyone injured?”

The investigators, upon seeing an inspector from Scotland Yard in the room, stopped all activity and stood still. One of them replied, “You’re definitely not that far off, Inspector. Whoever he was, he knew our people were on his trail. And please do not ask about the injured.”

Heidi wanted to know the reasons for his thinking that Ali was aware that the police were on his trail. “And how do you figure that, may I ask?”

She walked carefully across the room and reached the windows. She looked down through the shattered panes and saw the paramedics tending to the unconscious police officers lying on the front lawn of the hotel.

Too professional a job for one man and one smoke bomb, thought Heidi.

“It is surprising that not a single shot has been fired—it was just a smoke bomb—but the man had planned it so well that not only did he leave many people injured and unconscious but he was also successful in escaping without anyone stopping him or even slowing him down,” said Heidi. “He is definitely good at his work.”

After taking a quick look around the room, she asked, “How did this guy do so much in such a little amount of time?” She genuinely wanted the answer to this question. It was becoming clear to her that the man she was tracking was more skilled, and therefore more dangerous than she had first thought. What other tricks might he have up his sleeve? she wondered. What do I have to defend against his techniques, other than sheer luck? She wasn’t feeling outmatched, and she certainly wasn’t feeling defeated, but she was feeling the slightest pangs of doubt that catching this fugitive was going to be wrapped up fast and clean. Yes, there was definitely more to this case than she had anticipated, and she wondered how

much more unwieldy it would become before it was over and done.

One of the investigators spoke, shaking Heidi from her thoughts. “He asked for a room on a lower floor, which led our lads to believe that he wanted a room from which he could easily jump. They planned accordingly but, as you can see, they were grossly unprepared for this bloke.”

Heidi looked at the man. “And is that the reason why they were covering the window?”

“Yes, ma’am. But instead of jumping from the window, he rigged some sort of a device to the door. When the lads burst in, it shot a canister of tear gas through the window and onto the lawn below, and it dropped another canister of tear gas, along with a smoke bomb, in the room. After that, he just walked right out the front door and the lobby.” The investigator gestured at the open door.

“Yes, the clerk downstairs mentioned it to me. Anything else you people found in this room?” asked Heidi. She had made some observations of her own but intended to keep those to herself, just as she intended to learn as much as she could about what information the investigators had gathered.

The investigators were in no mood to send Heidi back without anything in hand. After all, she was visiting them from Scotland Yard. He held out a passport for her to see. “Not much. Just this, ma’am. A British passport.”

Now that was something that pleased Heidi. She took the passport, flipped through it, and said with mock surprise, “Ah, so it would appear Mr. Jones has been retired.”

One of the investigators asked Heidi, “Any clue as to what Mr. Jones was doing here, Inspector?”

“We’re fairly certain he’s responsible for a murder that took place a few miles from here,” replied Heidi. “It should match this person’s

handiwork, but we'll know for sure when more of the reports start coming in."

This information took the man by surprise. "Murder?! You're sure?"

"Well, nearly the same *modus operandi* and the same type of victim as a string of murders on other parts of the continent. I heard an emergency call related to it just before I left to come here. I didn't know how much you people had heard about those murders."

"Any chance of catching him?" asked the investigator who had handed over the passport to Heidi.

"Hard to say. He's a pro—that much is certain. Still, we have his picture at every train station and airport in the city. It won't be easy for him to get out of the area."

"And what about the ferry to Ireland?"

"Also covered. I have to wonder, who is his next target? Where is he heading to now? I need to be quick."

Heidi felt comfortable speaking more openly with these men than she usually let herself be with other people on this case. The pressure to catch Ali seemed to be building on her. Suddenly, her cell phone beeped. She pulled it out. It was a text message. The moment she read the message, she smiled and exclaimed, "Gotcha!"

CHAPTER 10

* * *

A 747 FLEW WEST OVER THE ATLANTIC OCEAN. At that altitude, the blue-green waters of the ocean looked serene and calm. From that height, no one can make out what goes on inside the deep waters—how the big fish feed on the small ones, how some sea creatures deceive the others for a meal. Unlike Man, the other species do not do it to fulfill their greed; their objective is to satisfy a genuine hunger. Once greed creeps into even the most genuine of intentions, the means and the results become obscure.

Ali's intentions were still untouched by any greed or narrow considerations. His love for the nation governed his actions, but the same did not hold true for others. Ali was unaware of the vicious elements present in his own party.

From a row of three seats arose a man of Ali's height and stature. He started to walk down the aisle toward the lavatory. He was carrying a small bag in his hand.

If Heidi was an expert with languages and accents, Ali was an expert in the art of disguise and distraction. He did it so efficiently and so convincingly that it was not an exaggeration to call it an art form, and Ali an artist.

Ali entered the lavatory of the plane, closed the door, and stood in front of the mirror for a few minutes. Soon, instead of just his own reflection, Ali saw his face flanked by the faces of his mother and father. After a minute, the vision changed and he saw a very pretty woman with light eyes, his wife, laughing merrily with an angelic baby girl, his lovely daughter. Their laughter shook him and he became aware of his surroundings again. What he could see now was his own sad face and his lonely eyes. Did he have tears in his eyes? He reminded himself that he was on a mission, one he had undertaken for his country.

He could not allow his thoughts to be overshadowed by the past at this stage. It was only the future that mattered, and the future promised happiness, peace, and progress for the people of his country. He wanted to bestow a stronger, freer nation upon the coming generations, a nation in which he would have liked his daughter to grow up. He was determined to secure this gift at any cost, even his own life.

He put his bag down on the basin and opened it. From a pocket inside the bag, he pulled out a razor and a bottle of hair dye. His hands were agile and moved in a well-rehearsed manner, though a little slower than usual. His thoughts still had him a little distracted.

Before leaving the lavatory, he pulled out the list from his pants pocket and drew a line through another name. He started to read the rest of the names on the list. The next one was Richard Summers, a businessman based in Montreal. The name after that was Alan Mayhew and beside it was written New York.

After Alan Mayhew, there were nineteen more to visit, and they all had very American names.

CHAPTER 11

* * *

A SMALL PRIVATE JET flew over the Atlantic late in the day. The ocean looked yellow and dark at this hour. The sun had deferred its position, allowing the night to take over the sky. The plane landed at an airport in the city of Montreal, Quebec, the second largest city in Canada. The airport was large and well organized, with one side of the terminal lined with ticket counters and self-serve kiosks. At this hour, there were not many passengers and two of the passengers who were there were standing in front of video monitors, checking their flight statuses and gate numbers.

It was already close to 11:00pm when Heidi stepped into the terminal area. Mental and physical fatigue had already started to take her over and she looked haggard and drawn. She surveyed the area for security staff and saw only four guards on duty. She spoke to one of the guards in a thick French-Canadian accent, showing her new ID. He asked her to wait. The guard stepped off to the side, pulled out his cell phone, and dialed. Heidi could not hear what the guard was saying but she was confident that he was making the call he had said he would make. She really hoped that she had gained the advantage over Ali this time, but that would really be determined by the information she would learn in the next ten to

fifteen minutes.

A few minutes later, she saw a tall, slender man walking toward her. He seemed to be in his early fifties. That must be the supervisor, thought Heidi.

As the man got closer, Heidi read the nametag on his chest: Thomas Smith, Airport Security Supervisor. He introduced himself and extended his hand. Heidi shook it. “One of my boys tells me that you are looking for the supervisor,” said Thomas. “How may I help you, miss?”

In response to the question, Heidi pulled out her ID and showed it to him. “I’m Brenda Stevens, with the CBI, and I need your help.”

Heidi was fully prepared with all the necessary documents she would need to pursue Ali because she knew that any delay could cost her valuable time and any advantage she might gain over him. The amount of preparation that she had had to do was a testament to just how skilled an adversary she had in Ali. This was the most preparation she had ever had to undertake to track down someone, but she was determined that all her effort would not be in vain.

“What can we do for you?” asked the supervisor.

In response to this question, Heidi pulled out a sharp, clear photograph of Ali and passed it to the supervisor. She gave him about ten seconds to inspect the picture and then said, “We have reasons to believe that this man, traveling under the name of John Robinson, recently arrived on a flight from London. Can you check your security tapes and confirm this for me?”

After seeing her ID, the supervisor nodded, took the picture, and motioned for Heidi to follow him. He walked back the way he had come when Heidi first saw him. He led her to an unmarked door at the left side of the terminal. There was a keypad on the wall beside the door, and the supervisor punched in a code, then turned the knob on the door and opened it.

Heidi followed him into what was clearly the airport's security office. There were several desks lining the walls, each brimming with electronic equipment, and above them were several video monitors. The supervisor walked over to one of the desks and signaled for all four of the guards in the room to gather around him. "This is Agent Stevens with the CBI," said the supervisor. "She's following a person of interest whom she believes has landed here in just the last few minutes on a flight from London. Lew and Joe, I want each of you to pull up the files on recent flights from London and cross-reference them with our security tapes from the last hour. We are looking for any person bearing even the slightest resemblance to this photograph." The supervisor held up Ali's photo. "Barry and Eric, go back to your duty."

It took around five minutes for the guards to check the security tapes recorded during the last hour. Once they finished viewing the tapes, they reported that there was no one on the tapes who bore even the slightest resemblance to the face in the photograph. Heidi and the supervisor were not satisfied with this answer and sat down together to review the same tapes themselves. When they were done, they had to reluctantly agree that their attempts to locate John Robinson had failed.

The reality was that Ali had reached Montreal and he was in the video recordings, but he was in a new set of clothes and his hair and eyes were of a different color. He looked different from the picture that Heidi was carrying and she was unable to recognize him.

"Sorry, Agent Stevens. No sign of him or anyone who looks like him," said the supervisor. "We can't say for certain, but he may have arrived here, and we've got no information on him ever leaving."

Heidi was already mentally and physically tired, and now frustration had started to creep in, too. "Shit!" she exclaimed,

pounding her fist on the desk. “This doesn’t make sense; where could he have gone? He boards a plane for Montreal but does not reach here? This is impossible!” She was getting desperate to find him.

“Is he prone to using disguises?” asked the supervisor quite casually.

“We don’t have any information on that. However, it could be... possible.” Her voice trailed off as she fell deeper into thought. A disguise? she thought. Yes, that was certainly possible, and even probable. Wasn’t that part of Ali’s training? Wouldn’t he use every skill he possessed to avoid detection while he completed his mission? She was surprised at herself for ignoring this line of thought.

“Damn it!” she said aloud. “If he’s done that, he may have given us the slip.”

Her frustration increased even more on realizing this. She had thought she might be well ahead of him in Canada, but the thought of having been outdone once again increased her frustration to the point that she began to question if she was as fully prepared to capture Ali as she had thought. This man had proven beyond any question that he was far smarter and skilled than she had believed.

“If you want to leave the picture with us, we’ll review the tapes more closely and see if we can find anyone even slightly resembling him,” offered the supervisor.

Heidi looked at her watch. “Yeah, okay. That’s fine. I have to move on to my next assignment. Call me if you find anything,” said Heidi and gave the supervisor her card. She was too tired and too frustrated to smile.

* * *

Ali sat in the back of a cab as it headed away from the airport and

toward the heart of Montreal. He'd had some concerns about getting through the airport and into a cab undetected, but his simple change of appearance had been enough to keep him invisible to the eyes he now knew were looking for him wherever he went. His mission was progressing well, all things considered, and he was now focused on his next target.

As the cab entered the downtown area, Ali looked out the window and began to note the layout of the streets and the kinds of businesses and residences that lined them. Familiarity with one's surroundings was crucial to not only completing a mission successfully but also to keeping a low profile during the mission and, if necessary, quickly eluding anyone who might be following him.

The cab pulled up in front of a cheap-looking hotel and stopped. Ali handed cash to the driver, opened the door, and got out, then bent down and reached back into the cab to retrieve his suitcase. He closed the door and waited for the cab to pull away. Then he turned toward the hotel's entrance and began to walk toward the door. When the cab disappeared around the corner, Ali turned a hundred and eighty degrees and started walking away from the hotel.

Eight blocks away was a nondescript building where Richard Summers was most likely working late into the night, as was his routine. Ali thought about how many of the people on his list were creatures of habit. They lived very busy lives and yet, somehow, they still managed to follow the same predictable routines day after day, week after week, for months at a time. This made Ali's job easier; it took out a lot of the guesswork and uncertainty while planning their elimination. He, on the other hand, had counted on his lack of predictability to survive both during the war and now.

Ali's intel was accurate; Richard Summers was hard at work in

the conference room of his firm's office. Despite the fact that he was the owner of the business and had by far the biggest office in the suite, he preferred to work at the big table in the conference room. He could spread out all his paperwork in neat stacks. He would sit at the far end of the table, with his laptop open in front of him and his dinner—usually Thai delivery or some Italian baked pasta dish accompanied by a bottle of wine—set off to the side. He also tended to leave every light in the office on, even if he was the only person there, and he sat facing the entrance to the conference room. Those last two habits were going to make it more difficult for Ali to take his prey by surprise. Still, Ali was confident that he would succeed in his task.

When Ali saw the building, he crossed the street and slowly approached the front door. Just as expected, Ali could see that every light inside was on even though it was far past the end of the business day and there was a single car in the parking lot beside the building.

Ali put his hand on the handle of the door and pulled gently. It was locked. Ali stepped into a shadow near the doorway so that he was hidden from any eyes that might happen to be looking at the building. He reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. He opened it up and held it out in front of him just enough that the light from inside the building illuminated it. On the piece of paper was sketched a floor plan of the building, with an X marking the front door and another one marking the back door. Ali saw that the conference room was much closer to the back door than to the front door and that the entrance to the conference room opened directly onto the suite's main hallway, which was easily accessible from the back door.

Ali folded the paper up, slid it back into his pocket, and began making his way to the back of the building.

When he found the back door, he gripped the knob and discovered that door locked, too. From his jacket pocket, he pulled a small penlight and clicked it on with his thumb. He shined the thin beam of light on the door and saw that although the door was fitted with a deadbolt, it was retracted; only the lock in the doorknob itself was activated. Ali reached into the same pocket again with his other hand and pulled out a thin wire. He inserted it into the lock in the knob and wiggled it forward and backward, up and down, until he felt something move inside the lock. He switched off the penlight, put it back in his pocket, and put his hand on the knob. This time, it turned and the door opened. Ali put the thin wire back into his pocket. He opened the door, stepped inside, and closed the door behind him silently. He then reached into the inside of his jacket, pulled out his gun, and slowly walked down the hallway.

Immediately, he was met with the pungent aroma of garlic and parmesan cheese. Even without the floor plan, he thought, I could find this man just by following my nose. Ali continued walking in the direction of the conference room. Every light in the hallway and every light in every room into which he could see was on. There were no shadows in which he could hide before stepping into view of his target and pulling the trigger. Once he appeared in the doorway of the conference room, he would be as exposed as his target, so he knew he needed to shoot quickly and accurately.

Ali was now six feet from the conference room and the aroma of garlic and parmesan was joined by the sound of a liquid pouring into a glass. Ali assumed it was the man's wine, and he speculated that the man might be pouring his second glass of the evening and, if so, his reflexes might be a little dulled. That could work in Ali's favor.

Now standing right beside the doorway to the conference room, Ali stopped. He checked his gun, making sure that it was ready. He

listened carefully to the man and heard him slurping as he took a sip from his wine. He heard the man set the glass down on the table. Ali wanted to wait until he thought the man's attention was focused on something, and when he heard his prey typing on his laptop keyboard, Ali waited a few seconds, took a deep breath, and stepped into the entrance to the conference room.

Ali had a direct view of his target and found him just as he had expected: seated at the far end of the table, facing the doorway, with his laptop in front of him, his dinner and half-empty wine glass off to the side, and neat stacks of papers covering the rest of the table. The man's eyes were glued to his computer screen and he was typing quickly. Ali slowly raised his gun level with the man's head. He waited for the man to look up and see him standing in the doorway. Ali hated killing a man who didn't know he was about to be killed. Ali felt it was wrong, even cowardly, to kill a man who was unaware that his death was just seconds away. Even enemies of the nation deserved to see it coming. They deserved to look their killer in the eye and have one last chance to call out to their loved ones or to their God.

Ali waited for the man to notice him and for his eyes to widen in shock or horror, something nearly all of his targets did. This one, though, remained focused on his computer.

Ali considered making an exception and just shooting this target while he typed away in complete ignorance but decided against it. Ali cleared his throat loudly and readied his finger on the trigger. The man didn't look up, didn't react at all, and continued typing. This took Ali completely by surprise. Again, he cleared his throat, louder this time.

The man looked up from his computer, clearly surprised to see someone standing there. "Who are you?" he asked, sounding sincerely curious. "Are you with the cleaning—" His words stopped

abruptly when his gaze dropped to the gun in Ali's hand. His eyes widened. "Who are you?" he demanded. "What do you want?"

"I want you to fill that glass," replied Ali.

The man shook his head slightly. "Glass? What glass? What are you talking about?"

"That one. With the wine."

The man looked at the glass and then looked back at Ali.

"Fill it up. With wine," Ali instructed. The man complied. "Now, drink it. Slowly. Savor it."

The man stared intently at Ali. He then lifted the glass to his lips and began to drink. Little by little, he tilted the glass toward his face and, little by little, the wine disappeared. When the glass was empty, the man slowly set the glass down on the table, all the while keeping his eyes on Ali.

"How was the wine?" Ali asked.

"It... It...was fine. Excellent."

"What vintage?"

"It's... It's a Fourrier Petit Vougeot 2008."

"Is that your most favorite wine?"

"Yes, it is."

"I'm very happy to hear that," said Ali. He squeezed the trigger and blood erupted from the forehead of Richard Summers. It was nearly the same color as the last glass of wine he ever drank. He sprawled back in his chair, motionless.

Ali walked over to his prey and prodded him with the barrel of the gun—he wasn't taking any chances. Another kill confirmed. Ali exited the conference room, followed the hallway to the back door, and left the building, disappearing into the shadows in the alley.

Within two hours, he was on a plane bound for New York City.

CHAPTER 12

* * *

EVERY MORNING, THE SUN FOUGHT with the cover of smog to shine over the city of New York. In today's battle, the sun had won. It shone nice and bright over the city and the citizens responded to it with even more enthusiasm and energy. It was a normal business day on the streets and in the skyscrapers. People walked with purpose and intensity on the sidewalks, and on the crowded streets, an equal number of private cars and yellow cabs moved with equal purpose. The traffic lights seemed barely able to control and coordinate the unrelenting flow of cars, trucks, and pedestrians, yet somehow they accomplished their work, and the cacophony of sounds and smells that accompanied this apparent chaos only served to make the experience one that was uniquely, characteristically New York.

Kelly sat at her huge desk, typing steadily at a silver laptop. Now and then, she would glance over at a book that lay flat on the desk. The same papers that she had showed to Mohammed the other day were scattered on the desk. Her stylish but not altogether comfortable heels sat on the floor beneath her desk. She had slid her aching feet out of them after her one and only meeting of the day. To the right side of her laptop was a plastic container with a

salad leftover from dinner the previous night and beside that was a bottle of diet cola that she got from the vending machine in the lobby.

Suddenly, she sensed a presence in her doorway and before she could look up at her visitor, the person had already entered her office. When she looked up, she saw a slick, oily-looking fellow in his thirties walking toward her desk. Kelly felt a little bit of panic begin to creep into her body, but she quickly stopped it and reestablished calm. She made a mental note to discuss unscheduled visitors with the security staff and the receptionist later. She quickly slipped on her shoes and stood up from her desk.

“May I help you?” she asked the stranger. “Whose office are you trying to find?”

“Are you Mrs. Delaney?” Omar inquired. He was now standing right in front of Kelly’s desk. Her own name from a stranger’s mouth came as a surprise to her; it was very rare that she had visitors without an appointment.

“Ms. Delaney, if you please?” said Kelly with a smile on her face. She put her hand forward and they shook hands.

“Heh-Heh,” Omar laughed slyly. “Apologies, apologies, Ms. Delaney. I have a meeting with your boss.”

“Do you mean Alan Mayhew?”

“Yes, that is correct.”

“Alan isn’t my boss; he’s my partner. He’s the senior partner here.” She stepped out from behind her desk and stood a respectful distance from Omar. “You know my name but I’m afraid I don’t know yours.”

“Omar,” he replied.

“Welcome, Mr. Omar.” Kelly paused for a few seconds and then added, “Forgive me, but that is your last name, is it not?”

Omar smiled. “Actually, it is my first name, but most people find my last name difficult to pronounce, spell, and remember, so I just go by my first name.”

Kelly smiled. “Okay, then. Well, please be seated and I will let Alan know you are here. Would you like some coffee? It’s an Iraqi blend.”

It wasn’t unusual for people to assume that Kelly was an employee. She had been with this firm for the last six years and, although she had, in fact, started out as an employee, just a year before she had been taken on as a partner. Though she was not very insistent about being referred to as a partner, when people made that mistake, she always took the opportunity to correct them.

“No, thank you.” He was surprised that this woman was able to make out his country of origin. He could not contain his surprise. “How did you...?”

“Your accent. I have a friend—an associate, actually—and he is originally from your country,” replied Kelly.

“Really? I wonder if he’s on my...list?” said Omar.

This statement caught Kelly’s attention, and her instincts as a lawyer were aroused, especially when Omar’s slimy looks and mannerisms were added to the mix. Casually, she inquired, “List?”

Omar became cautious of Kelly the moment she uttered the word “list.” He had let the word slip accidentally and she had noticed it. He knew he had to be very careful about what he said from this point on, and he had to satisfy any curiosity she might have. “It’s nothing. I was just arranging a meeting with your boss, excuse me, partner, and I had written down some notes to myself about things I need to do.”

“What’s the meeting all about, if I may ask?”

Omar gave a curt reply. “That is not your concern.” He did not

really want to offend the woman and after a few seconds added, “Forgive my bluntness, Ms. Delaney. What I mean is that it’s a private matter that will be explained at the meeting itself.” He smiled at Kelly.

“Say no more. As a lawyer, I know all about keeping information confidential,” replied Kelly in a soft yet professional tone.

“Thank you.”

Omar had taken a liking to this red-haired woman and felt free to express his intentions. Progressive and confident American women turned Omar on, and all the while he had been talking with her, he had conducted a top to bottom scan of the petite and attractive Kelly, letting his fancies fly and beginning to imagine things.

“As I’m new to your city, perhaps you’d be willing to show me around a bit. Tonight, perhaps?” he said as he stepped closer to Kelly and let out a self-conscious snicker.

Kelly felt a bit intimidated but did not let it become obvious to Omar. After all, it was not the first time that she was coming across someone like this. She took a step sideways and said, “Oh, I’m sorry, but I already have plans for the evening.”

Omar was not one to give in so easily. Well, well. What is the fun if a girl agrees at the first invitation? She wants me to persuade her, thought Omar. In a bid to make the woman agree, he again asked, “Are you sure you can’t break them, even for someone as important as I am?” He said this with a very boyish expression on his face and took a few steps closer to Kelly. He thought that it would increase his chances of getting Kelly’s attention.

This time, Kelly didn’t move; rather, she stood her ground and looked Omar straight in the eye. “I am sorry, but no,” she said firmly. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a great deal of work to do.” She pointed toward the door.

Yes, she could be calm and reserved, but that didn't stop her from standing her ground when the need arose. After all, she is a lawyer and lawyers are known for their resoluteness. Moreover, back in her childhood days, she was more or less tough and she engaged in sports or games that would otherwise be classified as boys' sport. Now, she would demonstrate that masculine side of herself.

Omar was not able to say much. He simply turned toward the door and said, "Your loss, woman. Good day."

"My pleasure," replied Kelly in a strong voice, "and you, too, have a good day."

The moment Omar left the room, Kelly dumped herself in her chair. The entire incident had left her disturbed. She leaned forward in her chair, planted her elbows on the desk, and rested her head in her hands. Who was he? she wondered. What kind of meeting had he planned with Alan? This man was an Iraqi, so would he know Mohammed, too? She again made a mental note to discuss the entry of unscheduled visitors with the receptionist.

* * *

Ali had reached New York. He decided not to go to the hotel at which he had his reservation and decided instead to check into a different hotel, one not very far from it. This second hotel looked cheap both inside and out. His room had minimal furnishings, just a single bed, a small dresser, a chair, and a table. Atop the table sat a plastic jug—presumably for the guest to fill with water—an ice bucket, and a telephone. A notepad and two pens lay beside the phone.

Ali sat on the corner of the bed. His cell phone lay near the opposite corner, where it had landed after he'd tossed it on the bed and it had bounced and flipped a couple times. He sat there thinking how his wife always wanted to visit New York and the

promises that he had made to her. She was a bubbly person who was always laughing and who loved life. His thoughts drifted to the day when he had seen her for the first time on the university campus and how he had immediately put a few poetic lines together on friendship and love. He could still recall those lines.

Suddenly, his phone beeped, indicating that he had received a message. He did not pick up the phone immediately. He got up from the bed and stood at the window, looking outside. He was still engrossed in his memories. After a few minutes, he walked back to the bed, where he picked up the phone, pushed a few buttons, and read the message.

CHAPTER 13

* * *

THE SUN WAS HANGING LOW on the skyline, indicating the approaching end of the day. It was well beyond regular working hours for most offices, but at the local FBI office, it was still as busy as it had been between nine and five. Phones were ringing constantly and every available desk was occupied. Even both conference rooms were being used simultaneously, a pretty rare occurrence.

Agent Nick Robins was busy finishing his paperwork for the previous month. There were a number of reasons why he had decided to finish the paperwork today. The most important being, Susan, his wife, was visiting her sister's place and hence there was nobody waiting for him at home tonight. Next, he was supposed to join Susan at her sister's place tomorrow night and from there they were to leave for a vacation to Philadelphia, and he did not want to be disturbed while he was away. The third reason was the least important. He had received a warning from his superiors about getting caught up on his paperwork, and it was the fifth warning. For all those reasons, he decided it was finally time to get those forms and reports filled out and submitted.

Nick was a strapping young man with rugged, handsome looks

and a deep tan that enhanced those good looks, but the stress and strain of the profession had started to leave their marks on his face. Crow's feet had started to appear at the corners of his eyes and Susan often teased him about them.

Nick's office occupied a dark, dank corner on the second floor. There was no source of natural light illuminating his office, making the overhead tube lights look all the more gloomy and dull. It was difficult to say whether his office was messier than his desk or the other way round. The cleaning staff had strict instructions not to clean his office if he was not there. The desk always covered with official papers and science fiction magazines. Anyone in the office could just walk in and pick up a magazine to read. Often, they did.

Today, Nick's head was buried deep into the reports he was trying to complete. He really detested paperwork and the only way he could complete it was to clench his teeth and swear aloud whenever he came to a point where he could not readily remember a detail, forcing him to stop and look up the information.

Two of his colleagues entered his office. "Care for a smoke?" one of them asked. Nick declined the offer, saying, "Later. Let me finish with this report first, or you know James will have my head. You carry on, spook." His colleagues joked about his dedication to finally getting the paperwork done. They were even amazed that he actually knew how to do it. They laughed on and off for a few minutes and then left his office. Uttering another swear, Nick turned his attention back to his report. He was looking forward to spending time with Susan in Philadelphia.

Evening had slipped into night but Nick was more determined than ever to finish his report. Suddenly, he heard a knock at his door. He looked up and saw a young woman with red hair standing inside his doorway. "Agent Nick Robins," she said, "I'm Heidi June."

All at once, the frustration of having to complete his report,

the dark dankness of his office, and the stressful nature of his job disappeared, and Nick suddenly felt invigorated. He rose from his chair, straightening his tie, smiled, and said, “Well, hello there, little lady. What can I do for you?” Nick noted that, as a forty-year-old, the phrase little lady sounded funny and awkward coming from his lips, but it was too late to do anything about it.

Heidi took a few steps forward and pulled out her ID card for Nick to read. The letters C-I-A were legible, even from a distance. Heidi pulled out a chair that sat on the opposite side of Nick’s desk and sat down. She looked at him and said, “Well, you can start by dropping the little lady crap.” She had already checked out the credentials of Agent Nick Robins. He was one of the best agents that the FBI had: responsive, sharp, clever, and upbeat were some of the adjectives that his superiors and colleagues used to describe him. He stood out among the other agents for his presence of mind, investigator’s sense, and sense of humor, which was undoubtedly inspired by science fiction.

Nick dropped back into his chair, made a grim face, and nodded his head. He looked at her and, standing true to his reputation, animatedly exclaimed, “Whoa, Celestial Intervention Agency, eh? What’d I do to earn a visit from you guys, Miss?”

His unusual definition of the CIA acronym caught Heidi’s attention. “Huh? Celestial what?”

Nick fluttered his eyelids, let out a short laugh, and said, “Sorry, a little joke—a Dr Who reference, you understand.”

This man’s references were beyond Heidi’s comprehension. He had a riddle behind everything he had to say. Heidi was not the one to give in so easily. She wanted to know what this man was talking about. “A what reference?” asked Heidi in an insisting tone. She had one eyebrow raised while asking this question and Nick took a note of it.

Nick had a CIA agent wondering what he was talking about. He was enjoying the fact that Heidi felt lost in his loony sci-fi talk. Once again, he tried to explain it to her. “No, not what, Who; old Brit sci-fi series. Never mind. I guess you have to be a fan to get it,” he said and threw his hands into the air. After several seconds of silence, he said, “So, what’s up, Miss Spook?”

Heidi ignored his comments altogether. Never before had she been referred to as Miss Spook. She seemed to be getting used to his way of talking, or was waiting for her chance to get even. She pushed a few papers away from the front edge of Nick’s desk, clearing a space. She had a file in her hand and now she placed it on the desk, opened it, and smiled. She leaned back in her chair, which was quite hard and uncomfortable, and said, “Got a case for you to have a look at. It’s quite interesting—take a look for yourself.” She turned the file around and pushed it toward him. She watched him closely as he picked it up.

Nick furrowed his brow and looked at the file. Inside were pictures and profiles of the murdered men from the cities of Dubai, Madrid, Rome, Paris, and London. The file also had complete lab and crime scene analysis reports for the cases. He let out a short whistle and flipped through the pages.

When he had seen all the contents, he put the file down on his desk. He sat back in his chair and rested his arms on the armrests on either side. After about twenty seconds, he leaned forward, looked straight at Heidi, and said, “Miss Spook, all this is very interesting. It seems like quite an international series of murders. But what are they to me. Please explain.”

For Nick, it was like switching channels on the television—from science fiction to adventure—and he did it so aptly that he often took others by surprise. It was not nearly so easy for Heidi, and she kept staring at him for a few seconds. “Well, actually, these murders

are none of your business; we're handling them. To be specific, we are just helping investigate them. An old friend over in Scotland Yard gave me a call a few hours ago and said NYC might be on the killer's itinerary, so I just thought..." She was smiling at Nick. In a very casual manner, she had been able to shift everything from her own shoulders to Nick's. She had very politely informed him that from here on out, he would be responsible for the case.

"And that is why you're here?" replied Nick as he got up from his chair. "What surprises me is the fact that you built up a complete file with just some basic information that your friend gave you. Extreme talent you have." He moved and stood behind his chair with its back in his hands. He started to play with the chair. Every time the chair moved, it produced a rhythmic sound. Nick had slipped on his thinking cap.

"Thank you for recognizing my talent," responded Heidi. "It is nothing more than a little interagency cooperation. It just facilitates the workflow for everyone involved. No one minds. Besides, we at the CIA would never dream of handling a domestic matter. I know you agree with me, Agent Nick," said Heidi. She smiled.

Nick snorted. "Yeah, right. Interagency cooperation. Why not? Like you said, no one minds."

Nick picked up the file from his desk and started to flip through it again hurriedly, and then he dropped it on the desk and started searching through the piles of papers covering his desk.

Heidi let out a short snicker and said, "Now, now, Agent Robins, no need to be sarcastic. Show a little gratitude. After all, I did come to you rather than make you come all the way down to Langley. Take it easy. I could have easily done that. And I'm sure you would not have liked it."

Nick continued searching through his papers. "Yeah, right. Thank you for walking up to my office." After several seconds,

Nick stopped messing with the papers on his desk and looked at Heidi. He had tried to think of an excuse why he simply could not be bothered with the case this woman had dropped in his lap, but finally he came to the distasteful conclusion that he could not think of any reasonable excuse. He leaned forward on his desk, the file under his forearms, and said, "So, what do all these people, the victims, have in common? Any clues to their connection? Something other than these papers that I should know?" He looked straight at Heidi.

She knew that she had him on track for the moment and she had to be quick. "We know they are all a part of major money laundering operation, truly international and involving big money. They have connections to groups in Russia, India, Pakistan, Jordan, and many other countries around the world. In addition, due to the UN and US sanctions, several dummy companies in Dubai handle imports and exports for Jordan. Unlimited money, unlimited power. They are all high-ups, well connected, and with ample resources. I don't know much but whatever I do know I have told you."

Nick dropped back into his chair and picked up the file again. "All this for what, drugs?"

"No, just regular stuff people need but can't get directly. It could be that drugs are also involved, but primarily it is about sugar, medicines, fruits, wheat, oil. You name it and they are involved."

"Oh, I get it. I read about it in the newspaper. They ship the goods into Dubai, repackage them, stamp them, and ship them back to Iraq—their own country." He began to mutter the word money over and over again. Suddenly, he went quiet and began to go through the file again. He broke the silence by asking, "And what makes you think they're sending their man to our neck of the woods, Miss Spook?"

"My Scotland Yard friend did some checking. Not much, but just

some basic checking. An American by the name of John Robinson left Gatwick Airport late yesterday for Quebec. Funny thing is, the Canadian authorities have no record of him ever coming into their country. They even checked out the security tapes, but no one even looking the slightest like this man reached airport.”

Nick nodded his head. “Oh, very bright. And they figure that’s Mr. Assassin’s latest alias. What, he did not like John Smith?”

“Now that one is a bit obvious, you’ll have to admit,” Heidi responded. She felt better now that she had passed on all the necessary information to Nick. She had already checked his credentials and knew he could be trusted. Now that she had spoken to him face to face, she was reassured that he was the agent to help her.

Nick reached the final page of the report. When he finished reading it, he looked up at Heidi. “Huh. So he flew into Quebec, eh? Then our Mr. John Robinson just disappears and the trail goes cold from there.”

“Uh... Well, that’s where we lost track of him,” replied Heidi. It was not easy for a CIA agent to accept that they had lost track of the person they were following. Accepting this in front of an FBI agent was all the more difficult.

Nick quickly rose to his feet and started to straighten his tie. While admiring himself in a small mirror hanging on the wall, he said, “Oh, man! You agents, you are so...classic! Screw the pooch and then expect us Feds to clean up your mess!”

Once Nick had finished straightening his tie, he turned toward Heidi and said, “One more thing. Do you actually not have any information, or do you have it but cannot share it with me? Which is it?”

Heidi shot back a hard look at Nick. Now Nick was stepping on a sensitive area with her. This was getting a bit too much for her to

take lying down and she immediately retorted, “Hey, fella! Listen, it was the Canadians who pulled a fubar so let’s stop slinging mud at each other. I went ahead and alerted the NYPD for you. We figure this is where he was headed, but that is about all I can do; it is your show from here on out. This suspect is in your territory. Over and out. If you want, I can just take the file and leave. You can start the case when he starts murdering people in your jurisdiction and...”

Nick closed the file, picked it up, and headed for the door. He was in no mood for a lecture from her.

When he got to the doorway of his office, he stopped. For a few moments, he was silent and then he said, “Yeah, okay, fine, Casper. You’ve done your duty; I’ll take it from here. You got any leads as to who his next target might be?”

“Hard to say. After all, this is New York. One of the biggest cities of the world. We have enough money, men, and women to finance any sort of operation you might want, and anyone could be a target that anyone else might want dead. There aren’t many things we know for sure.”

Nick now turned to face Heidi. “Okay, I understand that you can’t identify who the next target will be, but was there anything the previous victims had in common? An employer? Shared acquaintances? Hobbies?”

Heidi shrugged her shoulders. “Not any to my knowledge.”

Nick took some deep, audible breaths. “Why am I not surprised that Ms. Spook knows nothing?”

Heidi just shrugged her shoulders.

Nick walked out of the office with Heidi close behind him. There was a hint of a smile on her face.

CHAPTER 14

* * *

NIGHT HAD SET OVER THE CITY of New York. All seemed quiet and ready to settle down, and the moon shone beautifully, ignoring the brutal souls moving on earth. It was an unlikely time for Omar to be in his office. He had entered from the back door and decided not to switch on the lights. He pulled away the blinds, allowing the moonlight to illuminate his office. A well-equipped office in the city of New York was not easy to afford, but a man like Omar had ways of ensuring that he always had a steady supply of money for his endeavors.

Omar poured some whiskey for himself and hurriedly swallowed it, then quickly poured another shot. The immediate surge of alcohol into his blood stream made him aware of his subconscious thoughts. Kelly was still running through his thoughts. He could still smell her and recall the color of her hair. He took a deep breath and said aloud, “Ms. Delaney, Ms. Delaney. How can I get you, Ms. Delaney? Oh, the more you run from me, the more desirable you seem.”

He took a few steps and stood near the window. He was still thinking about Kelly. He was thinking about holding her on a moonlit night like tonight. He said to himself, Don't you miss me

too much, Ms. Delaney. You shall be with me soon. What about a holiday in the Bahamas?

He started to look at his hand, which she had taken in hers. He seemed to be possessed with thoughts of Kelly. But before I can take you to the Bahamas, I have lots of work to do. It should not take me long-I promise.

He poured himself another drink and put the glass on his desk. He took a key from his pocket and opened a locked drawer toward the bottom of the desk, all the while merrily humming a tune.

He removed a briefcase from the drawer and carried it over to the window. It was exactly like the briefcase Ali was using. Omar squatted on the floor below the window and opened the briefcase. He took out some basic hand tools and then set to work on the contents of the briefcase.

An hour later, the bomb in the briefcase was ready.

CHAPTER 15

* * *

THE ALARM ON ALI'S WRISTWATCH went off at six-thirty in the morning, as it did every morning. He turned it off and without wasting a single minute, he got out of bed. With military discipline, he made the bed; stretched his arms, legs, and back to make himself alert and energized. Then, he started to get ready for the day. His every movement was meticulous and well rehearsed, the result of years and years of military service.

At twenty minutes past eight, Ali came out of the bathroom with a towel tied around his waist. He had shaved and his hair was still wet. He had a stout, strong look and his broad shoulders, flat abdomen, and well-shaped calf muscles accentuated his looks. Ali always wore long-sleeve shirts because his right arm still bore scars from injuries suffered during the war.

Exactly at eight-thirty, there was a knock on the door and a hotel employee called out, "Breakfast, sir." Ali rushed toward the bathroom and turned on the shower. Ali was cautious and whenever he had to check into a hotel, he liked to keep his interaction with the staff to a minimum. From the bathroom, in a very thick New York accent, he replied, "Put it on the table, please." The night before, he had ordered an egg sandwich and coffee for breakfast.

The moment Ali heard the door close, he came out of the bathroom and locked the door to his room. He pulled a chair up to the table, sat down, and ate.

After finishing his breakfast, he checked his watch and hurried into the bathroom again. When he came out, he looked like a different person—a man ten years younger than Ali's actual age. He put on the clothes he had laid out the night before and then looked at himself in the mirror over the dresser.

Ali picked up his briefcase and exited his room, locking the door behind him. He passed the elevator and took the stairs down to the ground floor of the hotel. He walked straight out to the street and began walking, looking like any other New Yorker starting their day.

After walking a few blocks, he came to the entrance to a public park. He followed a stone path past several tall, lush trees to where it led to a public restroom. He entered through the door marked MEN. Five minutes later, he emerged through the same door, now dressed as a janitor. In his hand, he held a piece of paper on which he had written an address. When he had checked into the hotel the night before, he had asked the desk clerk for the best way to get to this particular destination, and the clerk had provided Ali with directions.

Ali followed the stone path back to the park entrance, turned right, and continued walking. After another five blocks, he crossed at an intersection and walked up to the door of the building that stood directly in front of him. He read the address written in large, white numerals and letters above the door and compared it to the address written on his piece of paper. They matched. This is it, he thought. This is where I will find Alan Mayhew's office.

He entered the building and immediately inside the door, on the left side, he found a tenant directory showing the locations

of the various offices housed in the building. He searched for his target's office. It was on the fifth floor. Ali found the nearest bank of elevators, pushed the button to call one of them, and waited. Within fifteen seconds, the door opened and he stepped inside along with several other people. It must be costing a fortune to have an office at this place, thought Ali.

The elevator reached the fifth floor and the door opened onto an ornate and a subtly decorated lobby. Right in front of the elevator stood six staff members ready to get in. Ali walked out of the elevator with a spray bottle and a dirty rag in one hand and a cloth bag in his other hand. A receptionist's desk sat right across from the door of the elevator and a long, broad hallway situated to the right led to various offices within the suite. On the wall right behind the receptionist's desk, a grandfather clock showed the time as twelve o'clock. The staff members were in a hurry to get on the elevator, and they quickly slid past Ali to board the elevator before the doors closed.

Ali headed down the hall at a regular pace, careful not to call attention to himself. At the first opportunity, he slipped into the conference room and then disappeared into a storage closet at the back of it. It was a large closet and two people could easily move inside it. He felt along the wall for a light switch, and when he felt it, he slipped his finger under it and flicked it up. When the small, bright light above him came on, Ali saw shelves full of papers, envelopes, and files all around him. Ali put the cleaning supplies on the floor and opened the cloth bag. He quickly pulled off his janitor's uniform and checked his watch. He waited in the closet.

The clock in the lobby chimed once to indicate that one o'clock had arrived, and the staff began to return from lunch. Rather than go back to their respective offices, the staff members all headed for a set of large double doors that opened into a medium-sized conference room. They entered quickly and immediately got to

work, removing paintings from the walls and folding partitions, allowing the room to nearly double in size. A mid-size folding table was converted to a large oval table, chairs were placed around the table, a fancy sideboard was put up against the wall at the far side of the room, and within just fifteen minutes the room was large enough to accommodate nearly thirty people for a meeting.

Ali was still in the storage closet when he heard the ding of the elevator. It seems they have started to arrive, he thought to himself.

Mohammed and Kelly got off the elevator. Kelly looked at Mohammed and said, “Oh, Mohammed, it’s not surprising that we’re early.”

Mohammed, without looking at her, replied, “I’ve lived long enough to learn that being early relieves one of the stress of being late, my dear. It is never wrong to be early.” He gestured toward the conference room doors. “So, what is this all about anyway? You have any idea?”

“I don’t know much. All I know is, the business that has to be discussed today is strictly hush-hush, and the top people have approved it. So, they say, Jump and I-“

“I know, you say, How high? We’ve known each other long enough that I can predict what you’re going to say next. You see, I’ve paid attention when you use your American gringo.” They both started to laugh.

“Quite right, but it’s lingo and not gringo. Don’t feel disheartened; you were close, and you’re learning the language fast.”

After a few steps more steps down the hall, Kelly spoke again. “Mohammed, you know, you really didn’t have to come along to this. I could have managed. In any case, it’s not the first time that I’m attending a meeting on such short notice.”

Mohammed, in a very casual tone, replied, “Oh, not a problem,

Kelly. When you mentioned that it was a meeting involving the Iraqi businesses, I just had to come. There is so much happening in the country now. I do not want to miss any piece of information. Even the smallest bit may be useful for us in our work.”

After a brief pause, he added, “I hope you don’t think I doubt your capability. It’s just that when you are out of the country, you feel responsible for even the smallest of things.”

By this time, they had reached the conference room and Kelly just looked at Mohammed and frowned at his last statement but said nothing.

They both entered the conference room and within a few minutes, more people began to pour in. Kelly knew some of the people in the room and she acknowledged them with a hello and a smile. Some of the people knew each other; some took the opportunity to introduce themselves to others. Soon, the noise level in the room grew as more and more people began to talk with those around them. There were now about twenty men and women gathered in the room, representing a range of ages and ethnicities. In time, they all settled around the oval table, many of them with coffee and pastries they served themselves from the sideboard. Kelly’s statement that the meeting was a hush-hush affair seemed accurate, as most of the participants seemed reserved in their demeanor.

Ali had been hearing the ding of the elevator every now and then. The next ding signaled the arrival of Omar and four bodyguards. He was carrying a briefcase in his hand, and the five men headed straight for the conference room. Omar was trying his best to look authoritative and in charge of the whole situation.

Ali checked his watch. The target should be in by now, thought Ali. It’s time for action.

Ali slightly opened the door of the storage closet. “Now, it is

just a matter of a few minutes. Soon, they all will settle down,” Ali whispered to himself.

On seeing Omar and his men enter, everybody in the room rose to their feet. Kelly immediately recognized Omar. In fact, it was not easy for her to forget him and to do away with the frown that was forming on her forehead now. She had to make an effort to greet him.

Omar saw Kelly, and he, too, frowned, though within a second a smile automatically formed on his lips. He looked at her and said, “Miss Delaney, isn’t it? How can I forget you? What are you doing here? I’m pleased to see you here but I don’t think you are supposed to be here.”

Kelly looked straight in his eyes. It was obvious that the events of the day were still on his mind. “Mr. Mayhew was called away,” she replied. “A family emergency. So, he asked me to attend the meeting in his place.”

This was the chance that Omar had been looking for. She had asked him to leave her office earlier that day and now he had an opportunity to get even. Should he also ask her to leave the meeting, saying that he insists on discussing business with Mr. Mayhew only? No, no. She is the one who has come to me, he thought. Maybe today is my day. Kelly’s appearance at the meeting was unexpected and now he would have to alter his plans slightly.

He gave her a look from head to toe and said, “This is not proper, Ms. Delaney. It is such an important meeting and such important people. I will have to deal with this later. Convey my displeasure about his absence to Mr. Mayhew. Very well, you may sit down.”

All this time, Mohammed was quietly observing Omar and with every passing second, his expression grew more concerned. He was trying hard to recollect where he had seen this face and heard this voice. Your memory cannot ditch you like this, Mohammed,

he thought. Think! Think!

Omar moved toward the head of the table and set his briefcase on it. Two of his guards stood at the door and the other two came and stood behind Omar.

Mohammed called out to Kelly in a hushed whisper. The moment she looked at him, he gestured for her to come closer to him. She moved past several people and stopped beside Mohammed. “What’s wrong, Mohammed? You look tense. Are you feeling...?”

“Kelly, we must get out of here at once!” said Mohammed. His memory had not failed him after all. He had been able to place Omar. He could remember everything about the man.

Kelly was surprised by his words and the insistent tone in his voice. “What’s wrong, Mohammed? We’ve come here to attend an important meeting, one you wanted to be a part of. Now, you’re asking me to walk out. This man is already fretting and fuming about Alan’s absence. You know I cannot do this. After all...”

“Young lady, don’t get worked up! And keep your voice down! That man who has just entered and with whom you were busy chatting—I know him! He is... He is...” As Mohammed spoke to Kelly, he kept an eye on Omar. He knew one thing for certain: he had to take Kelly away from this place. It was not a place where they should be and Omar was not the person with whom they should associate. This man was capable of anything.

Omar’s eyes moved all around the room. He had big plans for today and he needed to make sure that everything was as it was supposed to be. He had also seen Kelly talk to a man sitting in one corner of the room.

This man has very Iraqi features; he should not be here, thought Omar when he saw Mohammed. He also noticed that Mohammed and Kelly were involved in a close conversation that was not audible to the others. It was obvious from Omar’s facial expression that he

did not like this. He stepped away from the conference table and started to move through the crowd toward them.

In the storage closet, Ali set his cloth bag aside and drew out two pistols from his holsters. He was set for action.

Omar reached Mohammed and Kelly and immediately snapped, "This meeting is of critical importance. Do you understand the meaning of the phrase critical importance, Ms. Delaney? First, Mr. Mayhem does not turn up and he sends you without even contacting me or my men, and now you and this man are socializing and keeping me from starting the meeting. If your private talk is over, let us get down to some business. Now sit down!"

Mohammed and Omar exchanged looks that conveyed pure hatred for one another and knowledge of each other's unspoken thoughts.

Before Kelly could respond, Mohammed said, "You can start the meeting. We are leaving right now! Come on, Kelly." Mohammed took her hand and started to pull her toward the door, giving her no opportunity to ask anything. He had openly challenged Omar by declaring that he and Kelly were leaving, and he had said it in a voice that was loud enough to be heard by several people standing nearby.

Omar saw this man walking out of his meeting defiantly and taking with him the woman whose beauty would not let him sleep the previous night. The desirable, red-haired woman he wanted in his bed. It was too much for him to take. Omar tried to block Kelly's way. Kelly tried to push him away so she could move closer to Mohammed, but Omar would not move. Omar's men moved closer to help him as Mohammed turned back and looked directly at Omar. The look in Mohammed's eyes conveyed a strength and power that Omar did not have the courage to counter. Though he was deeply offended and angered, he decided to wait and deal with

Kelly alone. Omar signaled to his men that he did not need their assistance and they should return to their posts.

All this commotion caused confusion in the conference room. The Americans who had come for the meeting started to murmur amongst themselves. The others had no idea what they should do.

All of a sudden, the closet door flew open and Ali jumped out with his guns drawn. The sight of a tall man standing with guns drawn only added to the confusion. Women screamed, men swore, and several people dropped the items they held in their hands. Mohammed immediately reacted by pushing Kelly away from the gunman, and in the process he bumped into the table. Omar's briefcase fell on the floor and opened. A woman standing beside it looked down. Her eyes widened and she shouted, "A bomb!"

People ran in all directions, many of them trying to get to the doors connecting the conference room to the main hallway. One person tried to hide under the table while another person tried to take shelter under one of the chairs. Despite the varied responses, every person in the room kept their eyes on the door out of the room. One man tried to make a call from his cell phone. Omar saw him dialing a number and took out a pistol from his pocket. He signaled the man to drop the phone and the man obeyed.

Omar knew that he had been exposed. He signaled his men to block the door and not allow anyone to leave the room. "Ladies and gentleman," Omar shouted, "leave your phones where they are! Do not attempt to call the police or anyone else and you will not be harmed. If you do not follow my instructions, I cannot make that guarantee!" He knocked Mohammed down and pointed his gun toward him. Omar's men also had their weapons at the ready. He signaled to his men and they started to shoot randomly all around the room. People began to scream and take cover.

Ali could not make out the cause of this confusion and had no

idea whether he should attack or defend. Who was this person who had people to help him kill? And why were two different people sent for a common target? Or was he the target? All these thoughts crossed his mind. This gunfire was completely unexpected.

Suddenly, Ali heard a loud thud and pieces of wood flew out from the wall right beside where he hid. He looked at the wall and saw a bullet hole. His reflexes kicked in and he quickly dove for cover in the closet, and then looked back through the door. Ali saw a woman fall to the floor about ten feet from where he hid, blood flowing steadily from her upper chest.

Suddenly, the bomb began to beep. Hearing this, Ali rushed out of his hiding place, lifted the woman up, and threw her into the closet.

Omar aimed his pistol at Ali. Seeing this, Kelly grabbed a coffee pot that sat on the table and threw it at Omar. Hot coffee splashed across his face. "Arrgggggg!" cried Omar, dropping his gun and bringing his hands to his face. "You vile bitch! I'll kill you!"

Omar's men continued firing all around the room. A bullet hit Ali in the upper left arm. He let out a cry and spun around, beginning to return fire at Omar and his men. Mohammed had been able to get a hold of Kelly and they both grabbed Ali and moved him toward the door. Ali allowed them to guide him toward the exit, walking backwards as he continued to face Omar and his men and continued to return fire.

As people raced in all directions, Kelly, Ali, and Mohammed managed to reach the hallway. They sprinted toward the elevator.

The bomb started to beep louder and faster. Omar threw a device against the window. The sound of the glass shattering filled the room and the concussion of a loud explosion followed.

Kelly, Mohammed, and Ali reached the elevator. Kelly pushed the button desperately. In a few seconds, the door opened and the

trio hurried inside.

Mohammed looked at Kelly and said, “I must say, Kelly, you certainly give the most interesting kinds of meetings. I don’t think I would appreciate any more of such meetings.”

The three of them exchanged looks which conveyed bewilderment and relief. They were short for words—Ali inclusive.

CHAPTER 16

* * *

THE CONFERENCE ROOM was a crime scene now. In its current state, the room bore no resemblance to the immaculate and nicely appointed room it had been a few hours before. The room was filled with shattered glass, broken furniture, rubble, and dead bodies. The stench of burnt wiring and cloth permeated every corner of the tenth floor. NYPD officers marked the area with tape and moved around, sorting the rubble and looking for evidence. The NYPD had evacuated the entire floor to prevent any further injuries and to make it easier to restrict access to emergency and law enforcement personnel only.

The elevator stopped on the tenth floor and the door opened. Agent Nick Robins stepped out. Detective Brendan Travis, a handsome-looking man in his thirties who resembled a stereotypical New York detective, was standing near the elevator door and issuing instructions to his team members. The moment he saw Nick, he abruptly stopped talking and moved to stand in front of Nick to keep him from moving any farther into the hallway.

Nick looked straight at Brendan and without saying anything, flashed his FBI credentials.

Brendan had dealt with FBI people on several of his cases before, and he knew he had to stand his ground with them. “Hold it there, fella,” said Brendan, raising his hand in a stop gesture. “This is my jurisdiction.” He wasn’t about to let the FBI traipse through his crime scene while his own department’s investigators were still processing it.

Nick put the ID back in his pocket. “Take it easy, pal,” he replied, trying to cool down the situation before it heated up. “I’m not here to step on anyone’s toes. This isn’t the first time we’ve met like this; you know my style of working.”

Cooperation among various agencies wasn’t anything new for either Brendan or Nick. The NYPD, FBI, CIA, and others were supposed to work to maintain peace and order in the country, but interagency rivalries and feelings that other agencies were interfering and hampering another agency’s work was an ongoing problem, and every now and then, this issue would arise. Most of the time, such matters settled after some jostling and pushing around. Both men knew that, this time, too, it would settle down. However reluctant each man might have been about having to accommodate and cooperate with the other, both knew it would be necessary.

Nick had started to move toward the crime scene. Brendan had fallen in right beside him, matching him step for step and trying his best to deter him from reaching it. The closer Nick got to the crime scene, the more Brendan got irritated with him. “Yeah, right. Famous last words. Shall we dispense with the usual bullshit and get right to the point? What do you want, Agent Nick? Let us sort it out right away before it gets too late.”

Nick stopped walking and looked at Brendan intensely. Brendan, too, stopped walking and blocked Nick’s path. Nick wanted to give Brendan a nickname from a science fiction movie,

but refrained when he saw the detective's mood. Nick took a deep breath and said, "As an associate recently said to me, 'It is merely a little interagency cooperation, nothing more.' By the way, aren't you curious to know how I came to know that I'm supposed to be here? I didn't have a dream, Brendan."

The detective put his hands in his jacket pockets and said, "Not really. We've known that this firm works with some rather questionable individuals and organizations; that's putting it nicely. Now that a terrorist has bombed the place, I knew it wouldn't be long before one of you Feds showed up."

"You're so sure that's what this is all about and there is nothing more to it?" said Nick.

This was enough to put off Brendan. He rolled his eyes and started to move ahead toward the conference room. Nick started to follow him. "Oh, please, it's a classic case!" said Brendan. "There was one man—please note, only one man. He was armed, he shot up the place, and then he killed himself with an explosive device. At this point, we will be lucky to ID even half of the victims; for most of them, we can't even find enough pieces to put in a body bag! It's like putting together a jigsaw puzzle!"

"So that's it, huh? The case is closed?" Nick responded sarcastically. The affection that the two officers shared for each other was starting to show.

"That's what's going in my report," replied Brendan in a nonchalant tone and shrugged his shoulders. He acted as if he weren't bothered in the least about what the FBI thought.

Nick was just waiting for Brendan to utter something like this. It became easier for Nick to reply, "Then I'm sure you won't mind if I poke around a bit." Though the words suggested that Nick was asking permission, his tone made it clear to Brendan that Nick was going to review the crime scene and Brendan didn't really have a

choice in the matter.

Brendan closed his eyes for a good ten seconds and tried to keep his temper in check. He knew what Nick's course of action would be, even if he told Nick, No, you cannot poke around.

"Look, but do not touch anything! You read me, fella?" said Brendan while forcing a smile.

"Like a cheap comic book," replied Nick, with one eyebrow raised.

Brendan grunted and clenched his fists, and then he stepped away from Nick. Somehow, the FBI agents always got the upper hand on everyone else. He raised his hand and called out to one of the NYPD assistants. "Matthew, please stay with Agent Nick Robins in case he needs anything." The three of them knew it was a very polite way of saying, Keep an eye on agent Nick Robins. Matthew nodded and walked over to Nick.

Nick started to move around the room. Occasionally, he stopped walking and studied something closely, jotted something down on a notepad, and then continued walking.

When Nick reached the center of the room, he asked Matthew, "How many people were present in the room when the explosion took place?"

"The number should be around twenty-five to thirty, sir."

"Anyone believed to have escaped alive or even injured?"

"It's difficult to say with certainty, but looking at the impact of the explosion, it would be very unlikely."

"Can I get a list of the names of the people who were in the room?" asked Nick.

"Sure, sir. I will arrange it for you," said Matthew and walked away.

Nick knew the way he pretended to attach value to every word that Matthew had to say made the young man feel valued and important. Confrontation was not something that Nick enjoyed, and he usually avoided it by playing on the human factor. Getting rid of Matthew had been easy for Nick.

He made sure not to touch anything, as his friend Brendan had advised. He watched the NYPD officers work. One group of officers was using lasers to figure out the trajectory of each bullet; the others were busy collecting shell casings and shredded pieces of paper from the rubble. Two other officers were searching for body parts that had been strewn around by the impact of the explosion. When they found one, they put it in a body bag.

Nick stepped over to the window, and the pieces of glass lying on the floor caught his attention. He looked straight out the hole in the window, looked down, and then looked up. Above was a window washer's platform. He nodded his head and straightened up. He looked around for Matthew, who had still not returned with the list. He completed his inspection of the conference room and stood near a corner of the room, jotting down more information on his notepad along with some of his observations. A few minutes later, Matthew returned and handed over the list of names. Nick thanked him and asked him to inform Brendan that he was leaving. Nick walked toward the door. His gait was sprightly. It seemed that he had found something to work on.

Nick walked out into the hallway and headed directly for the elevator. When he reached it, he pressed the button. The door opened and Nick stepped in. The door closed and the elevator began to move up. Nick seemed happy with himself.

CHAPTER 17

* * *

KELLY, MOHAMMED, AND ALI had managed to run out of the building safe and sound. Mohammed asked Kelly to watch over Ali while he ran to get his car from the parking lot. Ali was barely being able to stand and the weight of him was proving a bit too much for the petite Kelly to manage. With so much confusion throughout the building, hardly anyone took notice of them leaving.

Mohammed brought his car around to where Kelly and Ali stood. He hurried out of the car and helped Kelly dump Ali into the back seat of the car. Mohammed climbed behind the wheel again as Kelly got into the passenger seat and within no time they were speeding through the city. It was very unlike Mohammed to drive fast, but the circumstances did not leave him any other option. It was essential to provide first aid to Ali as soon as possible.

Ali could hear some sounds coming from the front seat, but he could not understand what Kelly and Mohammed were discussing, as he had lost a lot of blood and was drifting in and out of consciousness. Kelly and Mohammed were not sure where they should take Ali. Going to the hospital meant that someone there—perhaps a doctor or nurse, perhaps a member of hospital security—would notify the police and Mohammed wanted to

avoid that at any cost.

He could make out that Ali was an Iraqi, and until he had spoken to Ali, he did not want to involve the police. It was not easy for him to convince Kelly that they could not take Ali to the hospital. It was to be expected. Kelly wouldn't want to take chances. As a legal practitioner, she was fully abreast of the implications of abetting a criminal or at least an unknown gunman sustaining a gunshot injury especially in the wake of recent happenings. There was a brief argument between them and, in the end, Mohammed set a course for his own home.

When Ali became conscious again, he found himself sitting on a couch. He could barely manage to keep his eyes open. With great effort, he noticed he was sitting in a nice-looking room decorated in an Iraqi style. There were blue pieces of fine porcelain displayed on a table and beautiful Iraqi rugs lying on the floor. For a minute, he thought he was imagining things. He again drifted into unconsciousness.

Mohammed asked Kelly to tend to Ali's wound while he got busy making phone calls. However good the care Mohammed and Kelly provided to Ali might be, it could not match the care that a professional could provide. Mohammed had to arrange for a doctor to see Ali.

When Mohammed hung up the phone, he seemed relieved. Arranging professional medical care for Ali had been a little easier than he had anticipated. Perhaps this was a sign of things to come.

* * *

A car stopped in the driveway of Mohammed's house. Mohammed went outside to meet the visitor and came back with an Iraqi man around fifty years of age. There was a quick introduction between Dr. Ahmed and Kelly, and the three of them got down to work immediately.

They had switched the television on so that they could check out the news reported about the explosion. This also helped them to cover up Ali's screams as they cleaned his wound.

Ali was smiling in his pain. He could see his wife and a doll-like daughter playing around him. He could see images of one particular day when he, his wife and daughter, and his best friend's family had all gone for a picnic near the sea. They were playing in the water as bright, beautiful, warm sunlight smiled down on them. The images made him smile. Occasionally, he would say something but his voice was so weak that he was barely understandable.

Once the bullet was removed and the wound disinfected and bandaged, Dr. Ahmed heaved a sigh of relief. He looked at Mohammed and said, "You will have to take very good care of this man. He has lost a lot of blood."

"Thank you, Dr. Ahmed," replied Mohammed, "and I am sorry to have bothered you like this."

"Anything for the nation, Mohammed. I have given him only a local anesthetic. It should not be long before Ali regains consciousness."

Later, Mohammed and Dr. Ahmed exchanged a few tense words in Arabic, and all the while, Mohammed was observing Kelly. He could tell that she was growing restless. He knew that he would have to answer a whole lot of questions the moment Dr. Ahmed left.

Kelly did not understand what Dr. Ahmed and Mohammed were discussing; however, she could surely make out that Dr. Ahmed was very distressed by the entire incident. Before leaving, he explained to both of them how and when to give the medicine that he had left for Ali and said he would visit again the next day.

Kelly was seeing this kind of thing for the first time and was in shock. She had never thought that her profession could expose her

to an incident like this, one in which she had been forced to run for her life from live gunfire or tend to another human being with a bullet wound. Her first instinct was to call the police and to get Ali to a hospital, but neither Mohammed nor Dr. Ahmed would tell her why those things could not be done.

Ali was in extreme pain but looked better since receiving care, though he still looked extremely pale.

Kelly and Mohammed had done all they could for Ali for the time being, and despite the emotional and mental stress of fleeing for their lives from the attack, they were safe now and they had begun to calm down. Now, it was time to think and to discuss. Kelly paced back and forth along the length of the room. She wanted answers and there was no one else except Mohammed to provide her with those answers. She looked at him and asked, “Mohammed, what the hell is going on here? Who was that person at the office, and how did you know him? And what were you and Dr. Ahmed talking about?” She was desperate for answers, and she wouldn’t allow Mohammed to begin before she landed another question.

Mohammed was older than Kelly and more experienced not only in terms of life but also in terms of exposure to a rougher existence. Kelly had been born and brought up in the US. She had no idea what it meant to grow up in a war-torn country. Reading about a revolution is completely different from living through one. Mohammed had experienced upheaval, violence, poverty, and oppression in his home country and understood them all well. All the exposure and experience had made him a calm and composed person.

Mohammed looked at Kelly and said, “Kelly! Kelly! Slow down! One question at a time! I can understand how you feel. I recognized that man at the office. I had come across him a few years ago—I

think I was in Madrid at that time—and I chanced to see him at work...if you can use the word work for what he did in those days. He doesn't seem to have changed.”

Mohammed's answers did not satisfy her; in fact, they increased her hunger for the truth. Kelly was still pacing across the room. Her mind was trying to fit the pieces of the puzzle together. She ran her hands through her hair. Holding her sore neck with one hand, she waved the other freely in air. Unsure whether it was a question or a statement, she looked at Mohammed and said, “He is... He is a killer, am I right?”

Ali's unconsciousness broke temporarily and he faintly heard Kelly's last sentence. Even before Mohammed could say anything, Ali spoke in a weak voice. “He's a Supreme Party assassin, and he was sent here to set me up.” That should be enough to calm her for the time being. At least, let the pot call the kettle black. He himself could pass easily for an assassin too. In fact, he was. But that fact could wait for another time.

Mohammed and Kelly were surprised to hear Ali's voice as they were not expecting him to regain consciousness so quickly. They both turned toward him. Mohammed got up from his seat and sat next to Ali on the couch. He said, “Ah, Ali, my friend. I see you are coming around. Good.”

Ali spoke again. “Yes...ah—” He tried to move but could not and let out a short cry in pain.

“Easy, brother, easy! Tell me if I can do something for you,” said Mohammed.

After a pause of a few seconds, Ali replied, “I am good. I'm alive, so nothing can be better. Ah...Mohammed, isn't it? And...Kelly Delaney. I vaguely recall a less than formal introduction as we were fleeing the conference room. First, thanks to both of you; you saved my life. Someday, Ali will pay you back for this favor.”

At least, he was in his right senses today. He now knows something too; an assassin has been sent to set him up. The events in the conference room had told him that he was the main target of the attack. If so, his life which had been mortgaged to the Party Leader and his country would be needed to seek revenge. However, he kept wondering how a Supreme Party assassin would be sent to eliminate him. His subconscious told him he was being betrayed by the Party, but he would dismiss any of such thoughts, opining that they had much respect and love for him, and for the work he had done for them. The Party can't do any of that, he reasoned. Whatever the case, he needed to know who the assassin was and he needed to know who sent him. He wasn't afraid to die; after all, he had survived lots of war and had witnessed a number of near death experiences. Moreover, there was nothing else to lose as he had already lost his family. But then, he wouldn't entertain a betrayal from the party either. So for now, he needed that life and he was just too thankful to Kelly and Mohammed for saving him.

Kelly was standing right in front of Ali. She said, "Yes, not my finest moment, but I tend to get stressed when I'm running for my very life. Now, what's this Supreme Party you spoke of?"

Ali did not answer. Kelly looked at Mohammed and exclaimed, "Please, will somebody tell me what is happening around here?" She stood in front of them like a teacher demanding to know the cause of mischief in her classroom. It was getting difficult for her to control her anxiety and she was not ready to give Ali and Mohammed time for a casual chat. She wanted answers—now. After all, she had just escaped an attempt on her life.

Mohammed had a professional relationship with Kelly going back years and Ali really was not in any condition to say much, so it fell to Mohammed to answer Kelly's questions.

"It is high time that I told you everything," said Mohammed

and he saw Kelly's brow rise. He looked off in the distance and was silent for several seconds. He tried to figure out how to convey what he had to say in a way that someone like Kelly, with absolutely no knowledge or frame of reference, could understand. Finally, he spoke. "The Supreme Party was first created in Iraq to support the revolution and to make sure the National Army, in any situation, could not change the regime."

"Oh, you mean it was designed to prevent a coup, right?" asked Kelly. "It was a force to take care of the army?"

"Exactly," replied Mohammed, nodding his head. "They were, and are, very popular in Iraq, even today, because they led the fight with Iraq for a good eight years. The members did many brave things. They showed their gallantry by not getting any support from other countries. They were completely on their own."

When Mohammed spoke of the Supreme Party, a feeling of pride reflected in his eyes, and his voice was full with conviction, sincerity, and satisfaction. His love for his country and its people was evident in every word he spoke.

"Wow, that's amazing that Iraq, a small country, and its people were on their own. No support, no help, considering that given same situation, other countries would normally rally support from neighboring countries Iraq had help from more than thirty Arab and European countries," said Kelly. She was impressed to hear what Mohammed had to tell her about his country and its people. She had always taken Iraq to be a small, war-torn country ruled by religious fundamentalists. She understood the pride that he felt for his country. Kelly saluted Mohammed with two fingers of her right hand. "All this gives me goose bumps!"

Ali looked straight at Mohammed and spoke again. "And they started that war! How do you know so much?" Except for the fact that Kelly and Mohammed had saved Ali's life—a life he had already

committed to his country—he had no reasons to trust them. “How does this man sitting in the city of New York in the United States of America know so much about my country and our struggle?” Just by keeping a few Iraqi artifacts, one does not become a nationalist, thought Ali.

Mohammed did not offer a verbal reply to what Ali had asked; instead, he reached into his shirt, took out his old Iraqi Army ID tags, and held them up and smiled at Ali. With a great amount of effort, Ali, too, reached into his shirt and pulled out his own Army ID tags. Kelly realized she was not in the company of two ordinary men but rather two old-timers, war veterans bound by a common past, common roots, and a common origin. An unspoken bond formed between the two men.

After a few minutes of silence, Mohammed said, “I served in the war, and most of the main leaders of the Supreme Party were killed in the war, or badly injured, and one by one they started dying off. In time, all of the main security of the country came under the control of the intelligence service. The intelligence service killed many people from the opposition, mostly in Europe. Anyone in Iraq was either killed or put in prison for a long time. This continued for many years.

In time, the country became more open to the world and got out of the first Gulf War. Gradually, the Supreme Leader changed some of the main leaders of the Supreme Party, as they’re officially under her control.”

“Ah, and I bet these new leaders had no appreciation for the efforts of their predecessors and the people who had given up everything they had to serve the country,” said Kelly. “In contrast, the motivation for the new leaders was greed.” Kelly looked at Ali and Mohammed. She saw that Ali had again slipped off into sleep.

Mohammed nodded his head and Kelly knew that what she

had understood about the Supreme Party and the revolution was correct. “Yes,” he continued, “the new generals who got control of the Supreme Party had very pessimistic views toward Western countries, and the educated, middle-class people of Iraq. In reality, they manipulated the common person to think against the United States and opening up to the world. Anybody who would question the reasoning and the ways of the organization was done away with quickly. Put simply, they wanted to change the regime. They wanted to control everything, and they maneuvered things in such a manner that their control over the country started to increase with every passing day. Politics, trade, army, press, and television—they wanted to control everything.”

“So the government creates something to ensure its survival and is caught in its own trap. The creation eventually turns to feed on its creator. That’s nothing new, Mohammed. It’s happened in so many countries, so many times, all around the world.”

Mohammed stood up from the couch and stretched his back. The morning’s events had left him feeling drained and tired. He walked into the kitchen, took a glass from a cupboard, and filled it from the faucet over the sink. He walked back into the room where Kelly stood. “Very true. But twelve years ago, a new president was elected. He was open-minded and tried to give the people a lot more freedom. He thought progressively about the country. The Supreme Party started to push the Leader, saying that this would lead to a change in the regime. At the same time, they started to get more power and control of the Supreme Leader’s office and coerced many honest, law-abiding citizens to carry out their orders.”

“Normal people? What were these normal people supposed to do? What did they want them to do?”

“Protesting, rioting, and such other things,” said Mohammed, “thereby showing the Supreme Leader that normal people were

doing things that were inappropriate and harmful for the country. In the next eight years or so, they created many problems for the open-minded president, and more than eighty percent of his team members were sent to the worst prisons in the country on one pretext or the other. They made him believe that his people were the ones who were creating problems for him.”

Ali was awake at the moment and listening to the conversation taking place between Mohammed and Kelly.

All this information made Kelly feel excited and prompted her to show her understanding. “Let me guess. These normal people were made to confess that the United States and other Western countries, including Israel, were out to destroy the country and had hired these people to change the regime.” She seemed to be somewhat relieved.

Ali and Mohammed looked at each other. Mohammed could not contain his surprise now. “Yes! How did you...?” His raised eyebrows indicated his surprise.

Kelly let out a short snicker. “I’ve seen enough movies and documentaries to know that oppressive governments love to blame the West for everything. Foreign hand! External agencies!”

“I see. Well, all of these things made the Supreme Party more important, and their role increased more and more in everything. Unlimited power and money define the Supreme Party of today. They also did not cooperate or work with the National Intelligence Service. They would rather have their own intelligence team, and their own prisons that nobody knows about. They control and run a parallel government, a parallel economy, a parallel administration. They run a set-up within a set-up.”

“Now why does that sound familiar? How were they able to do all this? Didn’t someone know? Nobody stopped things from becoming this bad? What were the people of Iraq doing all this

while? Didn't the Supreme Party face any opposition?"

Mohammed looked at Ali and continued explaining, "All it took was the Supreme Leader's support. Within a few years, many talented, specialized, and educated people left the country and migrated to Western countries. For most of them, it was getting difficult to continue in their own country, and for some it was more lucrative to be out of Iraq. Along with them, lots of money left the country and made big opportunities for the United Arab Emirates. Iraq's loss has been the UAE's gain."

Kelly rolled her eyes. "Oh, you mean Dubai? I've heard of it; a small but very wealthy place full of gold and oil."

Mohammed smiled and continued. "Yes, it's the closest city in another country that has a place for Iraqi people to go to and get a home easily. It is only two hours away but it is another country, another government."

Ali spoke. "Yes, and they made that small city one of the richest ever, with foreign money. Iraqi money! My country's money!"

"Why and how did so much money end up there?" asked Kelly.

Mohammed smiled. "Well, most products are not taken into Iraq directly; they first go to Dubai and are then re-exported to Iraq. So thousands of Iraqi companies are established in Dubai with Iraqi money."

Kelly had understood everything that Mohammed had been trying to explain until now. It was a lesson on world politics, economy, and human psychology. She thought for a few seconds and then said, "It's like with Cuba. US companies can't deal with it directly, so they have to go through a third party."

"Exactly! Actually, there are two reasons for this situation. First, there are lots of rules and problems in dealing with Iraqi customs, so people prefer to first drop their products in Dubai and then slip

them under the table to bring them into Iraq.”

“Just like so many other countries. I guess things are the same the world over.”

“Yes,” replied Mohammed. “The second reason is like you said—sanctions. There are a lot of sanctions by the UN and US against Iraq, and traders bring items to Dubai and then re-export them to Iraq.” Mohammed not only had knowledge of the politics of his country but also was well versed with the economy and world issues. He understood the close relationship between money and power, economy and politics.

Kelly understood everything that Ali and Mohammed had told her about their country; however, neither of them had answered her initial question. Why were they attacked? She looked at Ali and Mohammed and asked, “So how does all of that fit in with what happened to us today?”

“That still remains unanswered,” acknowledged Mohammed, “but I can tell you this. A few years ago, the Supreme Party decided to take on a more direct role in controlling the government. They were tired of driving from the back seat. They decided to make less trouble for themselves by making sure their own political nominees were elected. If they were the ones who were doing everything, managing everything, then why not do it openly?”

Kelly eyes widened. “And now their boy is up for re-election, right?”

Mohammed nodded. “Yes, and they are obviously working to make sure he wins, to...cover their bases. Is that the phrase?” Mohammed looked at Kelly and smiled.

“Yes, I think so. It depends on what they are doing here in New York.”

Mohammed went quiet for a while. The talk of the last few

minutes had sent him into introspection. He had actually begun to wonder where his country was and where it was headed. The uncertainty of the future did worry even patriots like him at times. People like Omar in the US meant major trouble.

Mohammed continued speaking. “Well, when the people with big money started to migrate from Iraq to other countries, especially Dubai, they brought their huge investments in construction and real estate in that country. They also started to send their family members to other countries. More than half of these people are the same people who have good connections and special relationships with, or family relations to, government managers and other influential people. Or they have millions of dollars of loans without any collateral because of who they are.”

Ali looked at Mohammed in disbelief. The story that he knew was different. This guy is feeding utter lies to this innocent lady, thought Ali.

“This Supreme Party group figures that if they send this assassin to remove a few key people who control that money, they can then install their own people. That way, no matter how the election turns out, they control everything! In addition—”

“No, no!” interrupted Ali. “It is a lie! All of it! I was sent to destroy the enemies of the nation!” His facial veins had propped up, and his scar was now more obvious. He had gotten up from the couch with great effort and now stood in front of it. Whatever Mohammed had to say about the current Supreme Party made Ali feel so agitated that he could not stop himself from speaking.

Ali’s reaction came as a surprise to Kelly. Until now, she was thinking that Omar was the assassin, but what Ali had to say was a different story. She looked at him and said, “What?! You were sent? Are you... Are you the killer?! Then why was Omar sent? And you were not the one who was shooting at people.” She seemed a little

lost. All these were becoming difficult to stomach. And the thought of being with a killer was something she wouldn't condone.

While Kelly was speaking, a news update on the television caught Mohammed's attention. It dealt with the attack. He grabbed the remote and raised the volume. Kelly and Ali fell silent the moment he did. The three of them glued their eyes to the screen. A reporter related the details of the terrorist attack at Kelly's office. The news also gave out a detailed report on Ali, including his name, photograph, how and when he arrived in New York, and the hotel where he stayed.

On seeing the news, Ali flopped back on the couch. He held his head in his hands and Mohammed began to shake his head in disbelief. He turned the volume down again.

With disbelief evident in his voice, Ali spoke again. "How could your American press know so much about me? It is...impossible. Only—" He did not want to speak aloud what he was thinking. Now, he was the one who was seeking answers to the questions cropping up in his mind.

Mohammed looked at Ali. In a very soft voice, he said, "Only the Supreme Party knew all of that about you, right?" He did not want to disturb Ali by what he had to say because he knew that his comment could upset him; however, he also knew who in the organization was capable of leaking so much information about Ali so quickly, since he was familiar with a very different face of the Supreme Party.

Mohammed's one statement had cleared the mist in Ali's mind, and the truth was staring him right in the face. Ali said, "They have betrayed me. The mission, all of it, it was all a fake. They meant for me to die in that attack; the bomb was set up for me. They wanted to kill me!"

Ali was feeling used and betrayed. The plot was becoming

clearer. He just couldn't imagine that the Supreme Party would want to do away with him; not after all these years of service—as loyal as he was. Now, this is one thing he wouldn't entertain. After he had killed that much people? With the police all over his trail? Was it Ammar? Who the hell? So the bomb was really meant for me. He was depressed. In a low voice, he kept repeating, "Meant for me."

Mohammed was thinking, but Kelly's voice brought him out of his thoughts. "Him? We all were the target of that bomb! We need to call the police or—"

"No!" Ali shouted, springing to his feet. "No authorities at all! It is out of question! Out of question!"

Mohammed thought the same way as Ali. "I'm forced to agree with him, Kelly," he said. "We need to stay out of sight for a while until we can sort this out. We have no way of knowing who we can trust. First, we need to get to the bottom of the matter."

Kelly was still not convinced. "But someone tried to kill us, and when you people know who those people are—"

"Kelly, please try and understand," said Mohammed, stepping closer to Kelly with his hands spread. "We are dealing with ordinary people over here. The Supreme Party has their loyalists all around. They play their games on a level that people like you and I cannot even imagine."

Mohammed had his own reasons for refusing to take the matter to the police. He had been through all this before. He knew it was only luck that they were standing there alive. They had seen the people who had come to kill. They had escaped for the time being, but there was no guarantee that they were safe from another attack.

"And besides," added Ali, "for right now, they think we're dead. We can use that to our advantage to find out where this person Omar is, and who he is working with and working for. You,

Mohammed. You know something about him. I need to know all that you know.” The aggression and hostility that Ali felt for Omar came through in his voice. Ali, clearly fatigued by his exertion, flopped back on the couch. He desperately needed to rest again.

“Why not, my friend, but all in good time. Right now, you need rest and care.” Mohammed helped him to put his feet up on the couch. “You cannot afford to exert yourself now. We will talk later.”

Ali smiled weakly at Mohammed and Kelly. He wasn’t happy, but he wasn’t too sad either. Things might not have gone well of late, but he was alive and he now had persons he could call friends, who might eventually help him out with his new quest. He smiled again. He knew that he would not wake up to an empty room.

CHAPTER 18

* * *

FOR THE NEXT FEW DAYS, Mohammed and Kelly took good care of Ali. Kelly, on her part was skeptical for a self-acclaimed killer was with them. But then, she helped in no small way. Life first, she had always believed. It was the ideology of life first that had made her render help to the poor Iraqis children, and place them in foster homes. For Ali, she did likewise and Mohammed had on many occasions thanked her for her help and understanding. Their care helped Ali to recover from the injury much faster than expected. Even Dr. Ahmed was surprised at how quickly Ali healed.

Ali was a man who had been deprived of company for a long time. He had lived a solitary life since after the war, and now, he is being attended to by Kelly and then Mohammed. True, he was not used to the company he was receiving, but somehow, he liked it. And it pained him that he didn't know why. Was he no longer in control? Within the past few days, he had killed more than a dozen persons and was very much invincible, but here he was, feeling helpless, and being looked after by persons he knew nothing about. What a life! he thought. Needless to say, he was truly enjoying the company of Mohammed and Kelly but he often thought about his past. As for his future, he was unsure what it held for him.

A sense of a shared mission was developing between Mohammed and Ali, though on different levels. Mohammed helped Ali to understand the real picture that existed in their country today and the true nature of the Establishment there. Ali felt guilt for having allied with the wrong people, the true enemies of his country, and his conversations with Mohammed helped him to deal with his thoughts and feelings. With time, growing trust flowed between the two, and Ali came to look to Mohammed as a guide or maybe, a brother, but not a master.

Well, for Kelly, she had become Ali's nurse. She helped take care of Ali's wounds and clean them. She did the bandages, and also untied them when necessary. She had observed more the scar and even wondered more what kind of man Ali was. But in truth, save for the fact that the man he was attending to was very much unknown to her, she had developed a liking for their guest. He was a much older Iraqi but then she wouldn't mind. Ali was strong, well-built and handsome and was far better than Omar.

It had only been a few days. And Kelly was feeling so close to Ali. She herself was puzzled. She had lived all the years by herself, with no deep likeness for any man, so why was Ali becoming so dominant in her mind? Why now? True, it's been many months since she had any close companionship with anyone, but she didn't think she needed all those. For her, her career was more important. With the way things were going of late, she thought she was going nuts.

It was another morning. Mohammed was away. The rising sun slung its rays past the window blinds. Ali was still in the sitting room. Kelly came inside and she was carrying a small bowl of fruits on one hand and a bottled soft drink on the other hand. She put them down beside Ali.

"Here, you will need these," she said as she sunk on an adjacent

sofa. Ali made a face, and then sat up. He reached for the bowl, and grabbed a sizeable orange.

“Thanks.”

Kelly watched him. This is the time, she thought. “So,” she began, “You are an Iraqi and are on a mission, right?”

“Yes. I would like to think that I was on a mission,” Ali said trying in vain to give a smile.

“I see. You are a terrorist? You said you were sent to kill.”

“No, I am no terrorist. If I was one, you will long be dead.” He gave a short chuckle and picked another fruit from the bowl. “I am only a patriot. I love my country and detest the sufferings of the commons. The thing is, until now, my mission was to eliminate the assumed enemies of my country. And—” He paused, lost in thoughts. “And I was most successful at it. The mission was almost complete.” He dropped an orange into the bowl and sighed.

“Almost complete?” Kelly asked, as her eyes froze in their sockets. “You have killed persons? You are a killer? How many? Two?” Ali said nothing.

“Three. Four. Five. Ten...?” she asked visibly puzzled. Still, Ali didn’t answer.

“Aha, I am beginning to understand.” She kept quiet, probably rummaging through her thoughts.

Ali was observing her, and noting for what would seem the fourth time, the beauty and fullness of the lady before him. Now, she was his antagonist. Ali was looking at her, but she had still said nothing for what had seemed like eternity to him. He was about to break the silence.

“Try to under—“

“Understand what?! You are a patriot, and so? Does that mean

you killing everybody? That's very bad man. You are lost. Go find yourself!" The door slammed, and Kelly was out.

All the while, Ali was looking at her. It's been ages since any lady talked to him that way. Did his wife talk to him that way even? He didn't think so. And here was Kelly, talking to him like a piece of trash. But something was making him at ease. He wasn't worried. He had agreed that he had a soft spot for Kelly so he had to keep his calm or better put, his calm kept itself. After all, Kelly had been nursing him all the while and she had only said what she feels is the right thing—and maybe, just maybe, she was correct. As far it was a duty to his nation, Ali was in. He didn't Care for the wealth of the Supreme Party. He was only concerned with the welfare of his countrymen. It was one sure avenue to please Allah, he believed.

* * *

Mohammed had been out all day. Whether he was on the watch or whether he had gone to buy a few things, Kelly couldn't tell. The sun had begun to set and its lights were turning to orange. In a short while, the mountains would eat the sun.

All the while, Kelly was engrossed in her thoughts. Her demeanor was calm at this time. She was wondering what kind of man Ali was. He said he was a killer but it was Omar who was trying to kill them all in the conference room. But he served in his country's army. And he said he was being patriotic. In his words, he said that he was eliminating the enemies of the state—his country. She sighed. He even said that he was ready to give his life for his country and all those was service to his nation and to God. Is he a good man gone bad? And Mohammed seemed to be at ease with him, too. Incredible!

While she would condemn Ali acts, she also saw the bravery in him. And top of that, she didn't like that she was caught in between making a rational decision and a likeness for a stranger. Was it

likeness or was it lust? Well, if Ali survived the coming weeks, it would be clear to her. She shook her head. I am probably going insane, she thought.

A car drove in. It was Mohammed's. Kelly stayed put. She wouldn't want to be disturbed by another Iraqi. Mohammed came close to observe that Kelly was absorbed in her thoughts or at least, feeling unconcerned.

"Hey, redhead, what's the matter?" Mohammed inquired trying to make her ease up. "Relax, the cops are not on our trail. Or is it—"

"Exactly, it's him. I can't believe he has killed dozens, not one, not two, dozens, and he calls it loyalty to his country—your country. Loyalty indeed."

"Aha, just as I was expecting." He scratched his head, and then looked at Kelly. "Well, I understand your fears and concerns. But if you see it that he was fooled by those who sent him, then, it might begin to make sense to you."

"Fooled?" Kelly asked, unsatisfied.

"Yes, See Kelly, as far as I know, no country loves to have enemies who hinder their growth—no country, even yours. Your country has the CIA, FBI, cops, and that's what they do; they fish out the enemies of the state. Ali thought he was doing the same. Given the situations, you might do the likewise. You would stay and watch your countrymen, the commons, die for no just cause? Dear, you are a lawyer. You will be forced to act. Ali is a patriot, and he too like you, seeks the wellbeing of his countrymen. So when he was asked to offer his service, he gladly did, though in a non-democratic manner. All of those whom he had killed were bad men, criminals. He didn't know that the leaders of the Supreme Party were actually using his services to clean up their shady deals. He is not a killer in the sense that you are thinking and he is certainly not a terrorist.

And those who he had killed were actually involved in illegal activities. Talk of money laundering! So, he might be a killer, but he certainly is a good man. You can see that they have also made an attempt on his life too.” Mohammed hoped his message had found Kelly well.

“Money laundering? Well, maybe I didn’t consider all those. But he has to stop. I think he should.”

“I hope so too,” Mohammed breathed.

* * *

The events of the previous day had an effect on Kelly, and her thought pattern was re-oriented. Even though it was difficult for her, she was beginning to see Ali in a different light. She respected the love he had for his country, but more so, felt pity for him. Again, was it pity? Or did it have something to do with likeness? The future would again tell. She talked to Ali, and advised him. Whatever he decided to do with the advice was in his court.

The following days proved to Kelly and Ali that they shared something more in common. They seemed to have gotten over their differences and were now enjoying each other’s company. As for Ali, he knew that there were inherent dangers in being fond of a lady, especially when the dangers hadn’t yet been quenched. He made a mental note of this. He had to be extra careful he thought, even as it couldn’t be ascertained whether Omar was dead or alive. But for now, He was enjoying the company of Kelly and of course, she too, had been good to him.

The bond began to strengthen. Kelly and Ali were spending a lot of time together and an affinity had developed between the two. Kelly would often help Ali to exercise and flex his muscles. Often, during such sessions, Ali would become aware of Kelly’s petite and sensuous body. Many times, Kelly had caught him gazing at her. On one such occasion, when Kelly was helping Ali to exercise his

injured arm, she noticed him looking at her lips. The moment her face came close to his, he just put his lips on hers. He made her sit in his lap and they entangled in a long and dreamy kiss. They broke it off when Mohammed entered the room.

The relationship was definitely something more than friendship, but neither was sure of the romantic angle and would simply dismiss such incidents as impulse. If Mohammed would tease them about it, they would reject the idea that their feelings for each other were anything serious, and the threesome would laugh about it. These occasional incidents had definitely made Kelly and Ali realize the lack of a romantic interest in their respective lives. Ali had never thought that he was still capable of having romantic feelings for a woman. After his wife's death, it had been years since he had kissed a woman. It was not an everyday matter for him to interact with women. For Kelly, the drive to advance her career was the main reason she had never made dating a priority in her life. Now and then, she had been involved with men but never were these relationships very serious.

Ali and Mohammed often had in-depth conversations about their country, the Establishment, and the army. Mohammed updated him on the current scenario and helped him to understand the true nature of the current Establishment. He helped him to see and understand its true position. These conversations helped to clear the smoke screen for him. Mohammed always tried to persuade Ali to quit the path of violence and work for his country by moving on the path of peace. He would tell Ali that this would, in turn, bring peace to him.

The attempt on Ali's life by his own people had left him feeling depressed and disillusioned. The conversations with Mohammed helped him to understand what he wanted for himself, his country, its people, and the people who had betrayed him and played him for a fool. He wanted revenge for his nation. He had resolved to

himself that he would take revenge from the people who had betrayed his country. It was the resolve of a seasoned, hardened army man.

CHAPTER 19

* * *

NICK WAS IN HIS DARK and stuffy office, talking to someone on the phone. He had just uttered the words, “Oh, he’s alive, all right. Good!” when he heard a knock on his door. Without waiting for him to say anything, Brendan walked in and sat down in the visitor’s chair. He leaned back and put his feet up on the desk. Unlike the other day, Brendan had an air of smugness and arrogance about him today.

Nick said goodbye to the person on the other end of the line and hung up the phone. He observed Brendan making himself comfortable but he did not utter a single word. Nick stood up behind his desk, which was as messy today as on any other day. There was a collection of pictures spread across the desk. Unlike most days, today the pictures were covering the sci-fi magazines. A small television on a low table in one of the corners of the office was tuned to a 24-hour news channel. The aura of the room and Nick’s somber face indicated that he was in a no-nonsense mood today. Star Trek and sci-fi talk had taken a back seat for the moment and, for now at least, he was a dedicated, professional, and focused FBI agent.

They got down to discussing business straightaway. They both

wanted this meeting to be over as soon as possible. In a very casual tone, Brendan said, “Agent Nick. You called me all the way down here to talk about some nonsense on that terrorist case?”

Nick remained silent. He gathered up all the pictures lying on his desk and tossed them toward Brendan. The detective caught them with his left hand but did not look at them. Expressionless, Nick said, “Look, flatfoot, I’m doing this as a courtesy. It’s clearly a favor.” He stressed the words courtesy and favor.

Nick’s tone made Brendan look straight at the FBI agent. Brendan drew in a breath and prepared to respond, but Nick spoke first. “I can call a press conference today and release this info anytime on my own—and make you look like a jerk—but I’d prefer not to. The press would love to hound you after that and so would your...” Nick left it to Brendan to finish the sentence on his own. It was clear from Brendan’s attitude that Nick’s interest in the case was considered to be interference and, in turn, Brendan’s attitude was putting Nick off.

Brendan was not one to take things lying down. Today, he was in a mood to attack rather than defend. “Yeah, right! But I’m sure you won’t do that,” and let out a short snicker. “What if you’re wrong? Then you will be the jerk and not me. Besides, if you’re right, you wouldn’t want your boy to know you’re onto him, now would you? The bird just might fly away, eh?” Brendan formed his hands into the shape of a flying bird. “So, where’s your proof?”

The ice between them was not melting nor did there seem any chance of that happening soon; however, it wasn’t as if both of them weren’t trying, each was approaching the issue from different point of view. Nick put his hands in his trouser pockets, inhaled deeply, and responded in a calm, level voice. “Okay, number one. The glass fragments inside the conference room. That tells me that there were two blasts, not one.” Nick’s statement had a definitive

tone.

It wasn't easy for Brendan to accept what Nick had to say. The theory that Nick was suggesting was different from the theory on which he had been working until now. Accepting Nick's theory also meant accepting the fact that he wasn't on the right track. That wouldn't be an easy thing for Brendan.

"You say two blasts?" Brendan asked in a voice conveying surprise and ridicule. "And your proof is glass fragments. Okay, what else?"

Nick was a very different person today. All Brendan's attempts to agitate him were proving futile. It was as if Nick's main reason for the meeting was to share information with Brendan, nothing more. In a very composed voice, he replied, "Yeah, our man blew the window out first then jumped before the main blast made mincemeat out of the victims. He had planned it like this. My sources tell me that he is alive and out in the open."

"Jumped? Alive? Are you nuts? We didn't find a splatter on the sidewalk! I hope you remember the blast took place on the tenth floor."

"Nor would you," Nick replied in a haughty voice, "because he landed on the window washer's platform and then rode it up to the roof. Our man is a pro, Brendan."

Brendan's eyes were wide now. "Window washer's platform?" he echoed and followed that with a short, humorless chuckle. "You truly are a loony tune! You expect me to believe that a man could hit that little platform...and live? Ha!" This theory had never occurred to Brendan. Part of his mind had to admit that it did make sense, yet to the rest of his mind the theory was unacceptable because he had not seen any window washer's platform and he had not found remnants of any kind of device in the rubble. Brendan looked at Nick and concluded the FBI agent had to be high on drugs if he

believed all the things he was saying and was expecting Brendan to believe them, too. No one could have escaped alive from that tenth-floor conference room. This man is definitely under the influence of some drug, thought Brendan. Either that or he's nuts. Literally out of his mind!

Nick continued sharing the information that he had gathered. "In addition, the window washers were not supposed to be working that day, yet someone lowered and raised the platform. Can you suggest anyone else who could have done that?" Nick still seemed to be hoping for some cooperation from Brendan.

Brendan had started to realize the inadequacy of his investigation; however, bringing himself to admit this to Nick was a different matter altogether. In response to his growing doubts about his own investigation, his pride began to defend itself with even more arrogance. "And how did you learn that little tidbit, Mr. Fed? What, the controls for the platform have some sort of recorder on them?"

Nick remained completely at ease despite Brendan's tone. As a seasoned investigator, he understood that such questions helped a person to realize the fallacies and inconsistencies of their own theory. In a professional tone, Nick replied, "No, I spoke to a secretary in the building across the street. She saw the platform up earlier that morning, then down later, and then up again after the blast. I employed simple, basic police work. You should try it some time." Nick forced a smile.

He had been able to get even with Brendan in just one shot. Brendan didn't say much after that, other than to comment, "Yeah, right. Very interesting but hardly proof. Still, what do you want?"

"Keep an APB out for this fellow, Ali, but do it quietly," said Nick. "This file contains all the details about him. If he did survive, I want to nail him before he hops the next plane for home!"

Instructions from a Fed guy. Brendan wasn't happy about that.

He scratched his chin, cleaned the wax from his ear, and sat up straight. He smiled to himself because his thinking that Nick wouldn't go to the press was right.

With a great amount of difficulty, Brendan replied, "Yeah. Okay. I'll take care of it. But that's it. Anything more, you are on your own. Clear?"

"Yeah, fine. Thank you for your...efforts. And if you think it appropriate, keep me updated on anything new happening in this case."

Brendan rose from the chair, and with the same arrogance with which he had caught hold of the pictures, he tossed them back across Nick's desk and headed for the door as if he were late for something. "Whatever!" he said. Nick looked over at the TV as another report on Ali came in. He began to chew his lip as he watched the report, lost in his thoughts.

CHAPTER 20

* * *

OMAR AND HIS GROUP occupied one of the rooms of the Hotel Park View in New York City. It was one of the best hotels in the city, and the richly furnished room was spacious, luxurious, and boasted all of the amenities a guest could desire, including wall-to-wall carpeting, a full-kitchen, a full bar, a steam room, an LCD TV, a laptop, and a king-size bed. The windows looked out over Central Park. This hotel was one of the places where the city's rich and famous liked to be seen.

Omar had suffered some injuries in the incident earlier that day; however, he seemed to enjoy the pain he was experiencing. There were no amenities unavailable to him in this posh hotel room, and that included beautiful women with whom to share his whiskey and his bed.

Omar was sitting on the bed, stripped to the waist, with bandages taped over his ribs. Three scantily dressed women were attending to him. One was sitting right beside him on the bed, the second one was giving him a foot massage, and the third one was pouring drinks for everyone. Omar kissed the woman sitting next to him. She smiled and he smiled back and the pain in his ribs dulled a little. The woman at the bar picked up a silver tray with

several glasses on it and walked toward Omar. When she got to the bed, she stopped. Omar turned his head toward her and she handed him his glass. He took it and motioned for her to bend down. When she did, he gave her a long kiss on the lips, and then he ran his empty hand down her bare leg.

He rose from the bed with great effort as the pain hit him fully. He winced. One of the women helped him slip into a robe. He walked to one of large windows that looked out over the park and stood there sipping his drink. After a minute, he turned away from the window and took slow steps toward a hand-carved mahogany desk on top of which sat a laptop. “Which one of you can help me to get this machine started?”

The girl who had been massaging his foot walked over to the desk and started up the computer for him. The machine beeped and a few lights on the front of it flashed and pulsed. She pulled out the chair that sat in front of the desk and Omar sat down.

The laptop was equipped with a microphone, speakers, and a webcam. The moment the screen lit up, Omar addressed the women. “Alright, sexy ladies. Remember the drill—get out of sight and shut up!” The three women began to giggle and then headed toward a corner of the room where the webcam could not see them. Omar, unable to turn to watch them, called after them flirtatiously, “Just wait until I am well enough to catch you!” The three women giggled even louder.

A window popped up on the screen indicating that a video conference was about to begin. Omar clicked on the window and a new window popped up. It contained an image of Ammar. He was in the characteristic Supreme Party uniform.

“Omar, report,” instructed Ammar.

Smugly, Omar replied, “Haven’t you seen the news reports on television?” He didn’t feel himself to be anything less than a warrior

today, and he had his injuries to prove his accomplishment. He had made sure not tie his robe so that the bandages were visible to Ammar. According to Omar, whatever the Establishment was doing for him was well deserved. He had worked hard to earn it.

“Yes, I did see it,” Ammar replied, “but that’s the American press. They are so easily manipulated. I want to hear it from you. How did it go? Give me the details. You have been out of touch for days!”

Omar looked back at the women who, in turn, smiled at him.

Omar made a face to show that he was uncomfortable because of the pain. “I was...recovering from my efforts. As for the mission, it did not go exactly as planned.” His voice trailed away. He didn’t want to let Ammar dwell on his failure for very long, so Omar immediately added, “There was a man there. He knew me! He raised the alarm, and...” Omar paused for a few seconds. “Things did not go well after that. I lost my team, but we did manage to eliminate all of the targets.” He was conscious of his failure but there was no regret in his voice. He knew that Ammar wouldn’t be happy about this news and he could create problems for Omar.

“What you have to tell is no different from what the news channels have to say,” replied Ammar. He went quiet for about twenty seconds and then demanded, “What of Ali? Did he truly die in the blast? Tell me.”

Answering this was not easy for Omar, and he wanted to avoid answering the question at all costs. He knew it was essential for them to get rid of Ali. He also knew there was no way he get away without giving Ammar an answer. “I am... I am...not sure,” replied Omar with slight hesitation in his voice.

Ammar’s face registered both surprise and frustration. “You are what, Omar? Not sure? What do you mean by that? You better get sure and it better be soon! If he is dead, I want his ashes; if he is alive, I want his body. Is that clear? Do you hear me, Omar?”

Omar didn't like being talked to like this, especially when beautiful women were around. He wanted the call to end as soon as possible. He simply replied, "Yes. I will handle it as soon as possible."

Ammar was still not satisfied. "Check with our friend."

"That special contact you gave me? The phone number?" Omar wanted to confirm that he understood what Ammar meant.

"Yes. I'm sure our friend can be relied upon," replied Ammar in a curt, authoritative voice. Omar could read between the lines. Ammar was telling Omar that contacting their friend was not an option; it was an order.

"Can be relied on to sell out his own mother, if the price is right!" replied Omar and laughed. He wanted to lighten the mood.

Ammar's expression remained serious. The thought that Ali could still be alive worried Ammar tremendously. An unsuccessful attempt on his life meant that Ali could become a whistle blower. If he were caught by the American authorities, things could quickly get out of hand. This would not only change the position of the Establishment inside the country but also on an international level. Already, there were people who were conspiring against the Establishment. They could not afford to add one more to this group.

"True," said Ammar, "but that is only a corrupt American, one who is useful for you and the mission. Their weakness is our strength. We buy them only because they are ready to sell themselves. The point is, our friend can be a valuable resource for you. Go ahead and use it. We pay them to work for us!"

"Yes, sir. Don't worry; Ali is as good as dead!" Omar was feeling tense, but he had to make an effort to hide this fact and sound confident in front of Ammar.

Omar signed off from the video conference and turned his whole body so he could look at the women. He heaved a sigh of relief. He had been able to fool Ammar once again, or at least pacify him for the moment. He got up from the chair, spread his arms wide, and said to the women, “Now then, ladies. Shall we continue?” He was already feeling much better and seemed ready for a rendezvous. The women smiled and giggled and moved toward him.

CHAPTER 21

* * *

ALI WAS RECOVERING FAST from his injuries and still had the list given to him by Ammar. He would often take it out and read the names of people he had eliminated. He had made no contact with the American authorities or with the Establishment. One would nail him as a terrorist and the other would nail him dead. Sometimes, he thought about what he had been through and how he had been used, but most of the time he focused on the happiness he had with his newfound friends. Still, revenge on the traitors often occupied his mind, though the specifics on how and when to have his revenge were still to be determined.

Mohammed often talked about his dreams of getting back home. He also often spoke to Ali about leaving the path of violence and leading a life of peace. Ali, too, wanted to get back to his country, but he hadn't completely forgone the idea of revenge. Ali was waiting for the right opportunity.

Kelly hadn't made any contact with her workplace since the attack, and she was actually enjoying the time away. Thoughts about her job and coworkers and when to return to them often bothered her, but with Ali continuing to recover, those thoughts took a back seat every time.

One day, Mohammed walked over to the TV and switched it on. He looked worried. He tuned in CNN, which was broadcasting news about the series of murders that had taken place in various parts of the city during the last twenty-four hours. The report gave details about the killings and showed images of the areas in which they had taken place. The first victim, an American, was killed during the daytime on Queens Street. The second victim was also an American and had been shot in a very upscale apartment in central Manhattan at night. The third victim, another American, was shot at his ranch-style house in a nice, quiet neighborhood the next day. The locations of the crimes, noted the reporter, indicated that all three victims seemed to be affluent and well-off.

After the video clips, the news reporter continued:

The victims are suspected to have had links with Iraqi companies. The companies for which they worked are suspected of playing a major role in the shadow economy running in that country. The modus operandi was the same as the killings that occurred a few days earlier. The NYPD is in full operating mode to find out whether it was the work of a single person or a group of people. Enquiries are being made and statements being recorded. NYPD is likely to issue a sketch of the suspected assassin or assassins very shortly.

Next, the report showed the reporter interviewing people on the street to get their reactions and opinions. Many expressed resentment against the law-and-order machinery. Citizens were demanding action and demanding to know what was being done to control the rising crime rate in the city.

The news enraged Ali to no end. In a fit of rage, he started to throw bottles and books across the room. His anger was justified. His own people, who were still using his name and photo as a scapegoat for carrying out the killings, had cheated him. He had

started to think about getting back home for a peaceful life free of violence, but this one news report had closed the doors on that future. He was stuck in a situation from which he could not see any way out.

Mohammed stood off at one side of the room and watched Ali. Sadness was written large on his face. He could see himself in Ali. He could see his anger in Ali's anger. He was not feeling any less helpless than Ali was feeling then.

Once Ali felt worn out, he flopped down on the couch and breathed hard. The television was still on. Mohammed picked up a book that lay at his feet and walked up to the shelf to put it back. He stopped in front of Ali and, looking at him, asked in a very composed voice, "So, are you all through, my friend, or would you care to smash up a few more of my things?"

Mohammed's comment brought Ali back to reality. He knew what he was doing was wrong and felt embarrassed by his behavior, but he was still infuriated. He dropped his head into his hands and said, "I'm sorry, old man, I..."

"They are but things, my friend," Mohammed replied, "and I know you needed to, as the Americans say, vent. Now please, rest, and then we'll..."

Even before Mohammed could complete his sentence, Ali said, "You have been telling me to get ready to go back home. Now what? I have no home now! They have taken all that I had away from me! Do you realize that all doors are closed for me now? They are pushing me to live a life of anonymity, secrecy, and fear!"

Mohammed turned up the TV as a report on a rally that was taking place in Iraq came on. Young students were protesting against the people currently in power. It was a silent march being conducted peacefully. The video in the report showed the police breaking up the rally, beating protesters and arresting them.

Mohammed saw all this as a clear violation of human rights.

“Tell me, Ali. Have they taken this away from you?” asked Mohammed, pointing at the TV screen. “Remember all that the revolution truly stands for. Remember the people, the simple ordinary people, of our homeland. Look at them. This is what the Supreme Party is doing to them. You yourself know that our people do not merely live in Iraq.” Mohammed attempted to raise Ali’s morale. He understood very well that Ali was feeling depressed and upset about what was happening. He saw that a man of action was feeling helpless.

“So what should I do?” asked Ali. “Simply move to Dubai or France? No, Iraq is my home and not to live there would be like not breathing. I must figure out a way of getting back.” Ali rose to his feet and began pacing back and forth in the room frantically.

Kelly entered the room with a tray of food and some medical supplies but stopped in her tracks upon seeing the mess Ali had created. “My goodness, you make me think of my home, Ali. Such passion!” She had overheard everything while working in the kitchen.

“Your home?” said Ali. “This is your home! A-M-E-R-I-C-A, Kelly! You are in your own country.”

Kelly gestured at the couch. Ali pulled off his shirt, walked back to the couch, and lay down on it. Kelly walked over to the couch, too, and placed her tray down on the table beside it. She picked up a pair of rubber gloves from the tray, slipped them onto her hands, sat down on the couch beside Ali, and started to unwrap the old dressing on his arm.

Mohammed started to pick up more of the items Ali had thrown around the room and put them back where they belonged. In an attempt to distract Ali’s mind, he said, “You have much to learn about America, Ali. It is a very diverse and sprawling country.

Never have I seen such people as these Americans. They are a mass of contradictions.”

Kelly smiled at the comment. “Yes, we are that. Puritanical, yet free-spirited; open-minded, yet dogmatic. And... Oh, you get what I am trying to say. As for me, my home is Cape Cod, and I’ve never known another place so beautiful. When I despair, I just think of my home and I’m renewed.” By this time, she had finished changing Ali’s dressing. While she was still gathering up the medical supplies, Ali sat up. He looked at her and thanked her for her care.

Mohammed and Kelly hadn’t been successful in keeping him from thinking along these lines as he started to beat his fist on the table beside the couch and chant, “Home! Home! Home!” Mohammed again attempted to soothe Ali’s mind. He signaled Ali to sit next to him on the couch and said, “What is it, my friend? Tell me what is going on in your mind?”

“An idea is presenting itself to me. The way that we are not sure if Omar is alive or if he died in the blast is the same way that they cannot be sure that they killed me at the meeting.” Determination had returned to his voice.

“What?” asked Kelly. “You’re kidding, right? That office looks like a jigsaw puzzle, only with a couple of pieces missing! Why would you even think that?” Ali’s statements and reactions had started to make her feel uneasy, and she wanted to drop the matter.

“Because the Supreme Party will!” answered Ali, excitement rising in his voice. “They do not leave things to chance—nothing. They will insist that Omar or someone else make sure that I am, that we are, dead. If I don’t go out looking for them, they will definitely come looking for me!”

Mohammed was quietly observing Ali and listening to the conversation that was taking place between the two. He could

anticipate where Ali's thoughts were headed. After all, Ali was not the first one that Mohammed had dealt with.

"So what's that got to do with going home?" asked Kelly. Agitation was creeping into her voice because all her attempts to reason with Ali were failing. Whatever Kelly said helped Ali to clear his thoughts and become more aware of what exactly he wanted to do. Now, he was standing in front of a window. The sunrays shining in through the open window made his light-brown eyes gleam. He said, "Omar will be meticulous; he'll visit the homes of all of the people who were present at the meeting."

Ali's comment made Kelly jump to her feet. The thought that crossed her mind was, Oh Jesus! It is still not over. Her eyes darted from Mohammed to Ali and back to Mohammed. "Oh my God! Which means he'll be coming here soon, and my place, too!"

Ali slowly started to walk around the room. His gait indicated that he was thinking. Without looking at Kelly, he said, "No, neither of you were on the list."

The answer did not satisfy the lawyer in Kelly. "But we were both there, Ali, and Omar saw both of us. So, he'll certainly come looking for us."

Kelly's statement again set Ali to thinking. "I didn't think of that, but you're right," said Ali, though his face did not give any indication to what more was going on his mind. After saying nothing for a half a minute, he said in a very soft yet very determined voice, "So, I'll be ready for him when he gets here."

Mohammed could not just sit there and be a silent spectator. He had to stop Ali from once again moving on the path of violence. He got up from the couch, walked over to Ali, and put his hand on Ali's shoulder. "My friend," he began, "don't continue down that path. It leads only to destruction. If what you say is true—and I fear it is—come with me, and we'll get you out of here."

Ali turned toward Mohammed, looked him straight in the

eye, and said, "If you want, I'll leave, but that won't stop him from coming...and me preparing for him." Ali's voice reflected determination and conviction.

The lawyer still had some unanswered questions. Kelly again chipped in, "Wait a minute, boys. How can we even be sure he survived the blast? I did some checking. As far as anyone is concerned, especially the authorities, we're all dead. Little more than bits and pieces in body bags!"

Ali looked at Kelly and then at Mohammed. With his gaze fixed at Mohammed he said, "From what Mohammed has told me of this man, Omar, he had everything planned down to the smallest detail. Which means he had his escape route planned." In the last few days, Mohammed had earned the place of a friend and a guide in Ali's mind. Now, Ali was trying to assess what Mohammed was thinking. Not that any disagreement from Mohammed would deter him at this stage, but his approval would definitely encourage him.

"But how can you be so sure he's alive?" asked Kelly again.

"I can't be sure," replied Ali. "However, I have been trained never to underestimate an opponent, and Mohammed would agree with that. You do that, and you wind up dead!"

Mohammed knew that he had lost the battle. Ali had made up his mind and now nothing could stop him. Mohammed took a deep breath and stood facing the window, looking out to the street. He had failed in deterring Ali from following the path of violence.

Ali looked at Mohammed and then at Kelly. His eyes conveyed the strength of his willpower. He turned and started to walk toward the door. On reaching the door, he again turned and gave a small bow to Mohammed. "I thank you, both of you, for your help. You have my gratitude for the rest of my life, and I will never forget what you have done for me." Ali opened the door, walked out, and closed the door behind him. Kelly saw him go and it pained her heart.

CHAPTER 22

* * *

THAT NIGHT, KELLY did not stay at Mohammed's place but decided to go back to her own. It was a well-furnished apartment that definitely reflected the design preferences of a woman. The broad windows in the living room offered a spectacular view of the city. The colored lights from the billboards across the street reflected brightly off the building, and much of the light shone into the apartment.

While the elevator took her to her floor, Kelly thought about the last fifteen hours and how her life had changed. She thought about walking into her own place, about sleeping in her own bed; however, she felt a lack of enthusiasm. Something was holding her back. It just did not seem like a homecoming.

When the elevator stopped and the doors opened, Kelly stepped out and walked along the hallway until she came to her door. She put the key in the door, turned the knob, and stepped inside. She stepped on a pile of letters, bills, and envelopes that lay on the floor, directly beneath her mail slot. She collected them all and put them on the table that stood against the wall in the foyer. She decided not to switch on the lights. The light coming in from the windows allowed her to see well enough to move around. She locked the

door and then, one by one, she walked into all the rooms. She was the only person there.

When she was finished, she went into the kitchen and put her coffee pot on the stove, turned on the burner beneath it, and then went to stand near one of the windows. She stood there for some while, looking at the flickering billboards. She walked back to the kitchen, turned off the stove, poured coffee into a large mug, held it in both hands, and went back to the window. Suddenly, her hand rose to her face, as if wiping a tear from her cheek. Her mind was preoccupied with thoughts of Ali.

CHAPTER 23

* * *

UNLIKE MOST OTHER DAYS, today Nick sat working at a beautiful antique desk in a clean, well-lit, spacious office several doors away from his own office. The desk was neat and uncluttered, with all papers arranged in stacks. Financial reports, letters, and handwritten notes all had an assigned place on his desk.

He was engrossed in his work, scribbling notes on a piece of paper and then sifting through reports to find the information he needed. He turned the paper on which he was writing right and then left and again began to jot down more notes. After a few more minutes, he collected all the papers that contained handwritten notes and started to read them. He pulled a fresh piece of paper from one of his desk drawers and started to jot down some of the most important points he had uncovered. Once he was finished, he read the whole paper again and smiled. It was a big, broad smile.

CHAPTER 24

* * *

AS THE EARLY MORNING sun was peeping through the windows, Ali was sifting through his gear. He was searching for something and was pulling out everything from his bag and throwing it on the bed in the hotel room he had acquired the night before. He had not smiled since he left Mohammed's house; in fact, he had been frowning more and more. After he had emptied nearly everything from his bag, he pulled out a crumpled piece of paper. It was the same paper that Ammar had given him. He read the paper again.

All of a sudden, he heard a creaking sound from outside his room. He froze for a few seconds and then started to scan his weapons. He picked up a gun, then dropped it and picked up a large knife instead. He stealthily moved behind the door.

After a few seconds, there was a soft rap on the door. Ali did not respond. After several seconds, there was another rap on the door, and Ali heard a soft, husky voice calling his name. Why would a person who has come to kill me rap on the door and call out my name? Ali thought. It cannot be anyone from the hotel staff. They do not know me as Ali. However, he had been trained not to take chances, and he continued to wait for the person outside to make

the first move. The doorknob turned and he held his breath. The door opened slightly, and a shadow became visible on the floor of the room. Ali waited behind the door for the shadow to move farther into the room.

Soon, Ali saw a figure in silhouette. When the figure had moved a few feet beyond the door, Ali quickly stepped up behind the figure, put his arm around the person's neck, and held the blade of his knife to the person's throat. On feeling the knife, the mysterious figure tried to scream, but Ali quickly cupped his hand over the person's mouth, silencing the sound to a whisper. He grabbed the shadow by the upper arm, flipped it on the bed, and threw himself on top of it. The shadow let out a scream. It was a familiar voice.

Ali scrambled to get up off the figure and threw his knife to the floor. Putting his hand on his forehead, he said, "Kelly! What are you doing here? What if..."

All this had scared the wits out of Kelly. She was on her knees on the bed and repeated, "Ali, it's me! It's me!"

Ali was shocked to find Kelly in his room. He didn't expect her to track him down. Kelly looked at Ali and said, "Oh thank God! Sheesh! My life flashed before me, and trust me, I did not like the ending!" Her hysterical reaction made Ali smile. She was shaking. He sat on the bed next to her and put his arm around her shoulder.

"Cool it, Kelly. It's okay now. Just relax. Should I get you a glass of water?"

The moment he felt that Kelly had relaxed and was feeling better, he got up and poured a glass of water for her. Handing over the glass to her, he asked, "Now, do you mind telling me how on earth you found me?"

Kelly held the glass of water with both hands as she sipped it. She lowered the glass and said, "I... You babbled a lot while you were half asleep at Mohammed's house, and you often mentioned

the Hotel Sand, so I thought I might find you here. It was a lucky guess.” Her voice was still faltering and she stopped to sip more water. “It wasn’t hard to find, and I...decided I wanted to help.”

All this was coming as a surprise to Ali. He took it that Kelly had come to stop him. “Help me? Knowing who and what I am? Kelly I cannot go back and—”

“In your bouts of unconsciousness, and even when you weren’t, you used to babble a lot,” said Kelly, who literally had to look up to make eye contact with Ali. “Over the last day or so, I have come... I have come to... To believe that you are a good person. Others have used you to their advantage. I know a lot about that, and I want to help you.” Though she was clear in her thoughts that she wanted to help Ali, the words were coming out haphazardly. Kelly wasn’t sure if she hadn’t recovered from the shock yet or if there was another reason.

While Kelly was speaking, another creaking sound came from outside the room. Ali spun and turned to face the door. “Damn! You have been followed, Kelly!” he said in a whisper and then darted toward the door.

Now it was Kelly’s turn to calm Ali’s mind. “Put away your paranoia, Ali. This is a hotel. There are people moving up and down the halls all the time. It could be just another guest going to his room.”

Ali signaled her to speak softly and to stand next to him. Though Kelly tried her best to sound relaxed, Ali’s reaction to the sound outside made her feel her heart beating in her mouth. Ali said in a hushed voice, “Yes, it could be anyone and this could also mean that it is one of them. I have stayed alive because I have always been cautious.”

Kelly stood close behind Ali, holding tightly onto his arm. The creaking sound grew louder and then receded into the distance.

Ali and Kelly looked at each other and began to relax. Kelly let go of Ali's arm. Kelly could feel a current running through her body by standing this close to Ali once again.

"Ali, what happened to make you so..." asked Kelly, all the while gazing at Ali. Her gaze was searching for answers beyond what her questions were seeking.

Ali moved toward the bed and sat down. "Paranoia, suspicion, evil. Oh so many events bound up into one single life. Strange, the threads that form the weave that is the tapestry of a human soul." He avoided looking at Kelly while he spoke these words.

"You're a poet, Ali," said Kelly in a playful voice. Ali smiled and looked at her. "That wasn't meant to be a question, was it, eh?"

The way Ali said it made Kelly smile. She took a few steps toward the bed and stopped. Her head was tilted and her hands were in the back pockets of her jeans. She was looking at him intently. "Well, it wasn't supposed to be a question, and I have looked into your eyes. You have the soul of a poet."

Ali was fiddling with the weapons lying on the bed. Without looking up, he said, "Oh, Kelly. That was another life, another world, back when I was studying at the university."

"What happened?" she asked. For Kelly it was an opportunity to know Ali better. He seemed to be in a mood to speak about himself today. If he wanted to speak, she wanted to hear. She wanted to know everything about him, and she was sure of what she wanted. Ali's statement was just the beginning of a bare the heart session between them. Ali had found friends after years without any, and he had experienced losing them several hours before. Kelly probed in a soft manner and Ali responded, sharing all the information about his life. He was happy to have her back with him.

Ali was fiddling with his weapons and said, "The war. Oh, you people know it as the first Gulf War. After Saddam attacked Kuwait,

the US was so determined to drive his forces out of there. We had to prevail; we had to protect our nation and our pride.” Ali went quiet after making this statement. Images of his city, Baghdad, as well as the university, the war, the house where he grew up, his family, the day his daughter was born, his best friend, all flashed in front of his eyes.

Ali signaled for Kelly to sit next to him. He needed to feel someone near and wanted to speak from his heart. “Kelly, I was born and brought up in Baghdad, the capital city of Iraq. Our house was on the western side of the city. It was a modest home. I attended the university for my higher education. I used to write poetry in those days. Our culture is very rich when it comes to literature and art. I was married at the time when the war started and I loved Fatima very much. The day my daughter was born, I was on top of the world. Fatima gave me a doll.” He paused and Kelly noticed that he was smiling.

“I still remember everything, Kelly. People marching through the streets, holding signs with slogans and singing patriotic songs. When I decided to join the army, my parents were very happy. For us, it is an honor to lay down our lives for the country.

One day, after the evening meal and the evening prayers, a Jeep stopped outside our house, and it was time for me to go for my duty. I kissed my daughter and my wife, took the blessings of my parents, and left. I remember clearly—I felt so proud that day.” Ali went quiet. The smile seemed to be fading. Ali was entangled in a web of memories and he was nostalgic. The years had in no way faded his memory. He still remembered everything so clearly. The water in his eyes had not been able to wash away the color of the past. In fact, the past had cast its dark shadow on his future, which was the present today.

“But, I made a fatal mistake that day,” continued Ali. “I thought

the war would be confined to the battlefield and once people like me would be back from the battlefield, we would be able to live normal lives. I should have known better but..." He drew a deep breath.

Kelly was still sitting next to Ali on the bed. She was facing him and could very clearly make out the tears and the pain in his eyes. "Yes, from my study of history, I know that wars are not always contained only to the battlefields," said Kelly.

Kelly's statement came as a surprise to Ali. "History? What do you know of history? I thought you Americans couldn't remember anything beyond your moon landing!" said Ali, smiling. It was an attempt to lighten the mood. He could make out that his frame of mind was having an effect on the playful Kelly.

Kelly frowned at Ali and said, "Hey man! Not all of us are as shallow as a child's wading pool! You better keep that in mind."

"Oh! Nice imagery. And here I thought I was the only poet among us. You intend to beat me at this?" asked Ali.

Kelly laughed and got up from the bed. "Thank you, Mr. Ali. I guess you did not know it, but in the Cape Cod area of New England, where I am from, we tend to have a fondness for history. I think it has to do with growing up among the relics of our fight for independence."

"Ah yes, such drive to be free is inherent in all people, irrespective of their nationality," Ali replied.

"So true!" agreed Kelly. After a pause she said, "So what happened during the war? Was your... I mean, was your family also...?"

Ali's reply was only one word. "Yes." It was a short reply but it conveyed a lot of pain. Kelly's question made Ali think of the past again.

After a minute of silence, he said, "An old beggar used to sit at

the corner of our street. When I came back from the battlefield, he told me everything.” He was quiet for a few seconds. “Kelly, he said that it was on a pleasant day. Children were playing outside in the street. Suddenly, there were planes flying overhead and the wailing of bombs all around. People ran here and there for cover. The bombing brought down all the houses on the street. This old beggar was one of the few who managed to survive the bombing. My father was coming out of the house with my daughter when a wall fell on them.”

After another pause, he added, “When I left for my duty, it was a happy house in which people lived, children played, and the stove was lit every day. When I came back, there was nothing but rubble. After that, defending my nation and fighting for my people became my one and only calling.”

“Sounds like an awfully lonely way for you to live,” said Kelly. “Don’t you think you are merely existing, Ali? You cannot carry on like this.” Her voice was very soft.

Ali let out a short, sad laugh. “No, Kelly. No, it has made me strong like steel. When you disconnect, when you do not let anyone come near you, you are not hurt. You don’t feel the pain.” He lowered his gaze, but Kelly could see the tears in his eyes. Ali was surprised with himself for having opened his heart to Kelly like this. He was surprised because he had tears in his eyes in front of a woman. Still, he felt much better after talking to Kelly. He felt light, as if a burden had been lifted off his chest. Things hadn’t been easy for Ali; he had been used against his own country. His own people had betrayed him and people who were not his own people were supporting him, and though they were not his people, they did think like him.

Kelly moved closer to Ali and touched his hair with her hand. Softly, she said, “And you think you can never again know peace?”

Love?. That's an empty life.”

Ali had his eyes closed. Kelly put her hand on his cheek and he flinched away. There was so much that he was running away from. Ali took Kelly's hand in his and said, “Kelly, I have nothing to give you. I don't think you... I've been trying to...”

Kelly did not speak a single word. She bent forward and gently put her cheek next to his. Ali took a deep breath and held it for a moment. She put her lips on his and they were entangled in a long, hungry kiss. Ali embraced her firmly and Kelly responded in kind. Ali's hands traveled inside her T-shirt and Kelly began to unbutton his shirt. Within no time, the two were out of their clothes and expressing their love for each other. Ali had touched a woman's body after more years than he could remember. Handling a woman's warm body was infinitely different from handling the cold metal of weapons. It did not take long for Ali to make the switch. From Kelly's responses, it was obvious that he was still as skilled with his body in bed as he was with his weapons in the field.

CHAPTER 25

* * *

THE PREVIOUS NIGHT'S passion had had its effect on Ali and the disciplined military man woke up late by half an hour. When he opened his eyes, he found Kelly sleeping on his arm. He gazed at her for some time and kissed her on the forehead before getting out of bed. His movements woke up Kelly. Ali went into the washroom and Kelly continued to lie in bed, relishing the moments of love and the afterglow of sex. She was happy.

The Hotel Sand stood in a rather nasty-looking neighborhood. The streets were filthy and grubby. Piles of garbage lay around and stray dogs sifted through them. In the late hours of the morning, cars were parked haphazardly along the road. Drug dealers and prostitutes were moving on the sidewalks and in the streets in search of customers, while others with more respectable employment were just then coming home after working their graveyard shifts. Small groups of ragged-looking teenagers were loitering in front of the all-night convenience store, the twenty-four-hour laundry mat; and on the street corner, eyeing people as they passed by.

Three police cars turned onto the street that ran in front of the hotel. Their lights and sirens were not on. They pulled into an area marked FIRE LANE-NO PARKING. The more obvious criminal

elements started to walk away; some of them even ran. Six FBI agents got out of the three cars hurriedly and headed for the entrance to the hotel. Agent Nick Robins led the contingent.

Ali came out of the bathroom dressed and Kelly continued to laze in bed. Ali stood beside the bed and looked at Kelly. Her naked shoulders and tender arms visible outside the covers looked inviting. Ali fought the temptation to get back into bed beside her. “I thank you for this, but...it will not change my mind about—”

“What the-?” Kelly sat up in bed, pulling the covers over herself. She not only felt disturbed but also rather offended by what Ali had to say. “What, you think I slept with you to try and convince you not to go after that scumbag, Omar?”

“It would not be the first time that sex was used in such a fashion,” responded Ali. “You women seem to think that we men can only do two things—fight and fuck. Wasn’t there a famous play that revolved around that theme?” His voice was nonchalant as he buttoned his shirt.

“Yes, a Greek play. *Lysistrata*. I’m amazed to hear you mention it. After all, don’t Iraqis have a considerable distaste for the Greeks?” She wanted to react to his accusation, but her sixth sense told her not to do it.

Ali smiled and uttered a little laugh. He looked at her and said, “What, just because Alexander plundered our empire? It has been centuries. No hard feelings now.”

Kelly got up from the bed with the covers wrapped around her. She picked up her clothes from the floor and walked to the bathroom. As Ali watched, she discarded the covers at the door of the bathroom and went inside.

From inside the bathroom, Ali heard Kelly call out, “Yeah, okay, but that does not alter the fact that my feelings for you run deeper than mere...lust. Now what remains to be seen is whether you

feel the same or differently.” There was sarcasm in her voice. She understood what Ali had been through in the last few years, and especially in the last few days. It would take some time to restore his faith in humanity and his openness to being loved.

“We shall see,” called back Ali. Suddenly, he heard a creaking sound come from the hallway. He was silent and still. The sound came again and this time the source seemed to be nearer. Ali concentrated on the sounds, interpreting them and gaining information from them, as his years of training and experience had taught him to do. He picked up a pistol from the nightstand beside the bed and moved toward the door. He again heard the same sound. This time, the sound seemed even closer. Ali opened the door of the bathroom and signaled Kelly to walk out of the bathroom quietly and quickly. He held her hand in his left hand, grabbed his bag with his right hand, and pulled Kelly toward the window. He whispered, “We’re going right now!” and lifted the window open with his right hand.

Kelly looked confused. She couldn’t understand what was happening, and her eyes were darting from the door to Ali and back to the door. “What’s going on? It’s just someone passing through the hallway.”

Ali put a finger on her lips. “Someone’s approaching the door,” he whispered, “and is trying to do it stealthily. Now, that is not nothing! We are in danger and I’m not taking any chances, especially with you around!” He went quiet. Kelly immediately shot a look at him and smiled. His concern for her made her feel good.

The moment Ali had climbed out of the window onto the fire escape, a powerful force hit the door with a tremendous thud that echoed through the room. The door cracked near the doorknob and the deadbolt lock on the interior side, but did not open. Again, the sound of something powerful hitting the door filled the room.

Kelly scrambled through the window with Ali's help. Just as her second foot touched the fire escape, another thud echoed through the room. The door splintered and flew open, nearly coming off its hinges, and Nick and the rest of the FBI team burst into the room.

Nick ran to the window and pointed his pistol at Ali and Kelly. "Freeze!" he shouted. Ali had pushed Kelly ahead of him and they were rushing down the fire escape. For a moment, Ali turned and looked at Nick. Nick turned away from the window and shouted instructions to the rest of the team. "Mason, Richards, and McClowsky—get down to the ground floor! Phillips, Cornelius, and Jamison—follow me!" Nick darted over to the window and deftly climbed through without using his hands. Three agents followed right behind him, and the four men followed Ali and Kelly down the fire escape.

People staying in the adjoining rooms and in the rooms above and below Ali and Kelly's room appeared in their windows to see what was happening. Several people on the street below stopped and looked up and asked each other what was happening.

Ali and Kelly reached the second floor, with Nick and the other agents in hot pursuit. "Stop!" said Ali and grabbed Kelly's arm. She looked back at him confused. Ali smashed a windowpane with his bare hand and then used his bag to break away most of the jagged shards that remained. He signaled Kelly to jump through the broken window. "Why go back inside? Somebody will be in the room!"

Ali ignored her and instead grabbed her by the shoulder and literally shoved her inside. "No questions. Just do as I say!"

The room was no different from the one in which they had spent the night. It contained basic furniture, including a bed, a dresser, and a chair. The room was occupied by a hooker and her customer. The hooker was dressed in a Catholic schoolgirl uniform and was

bent over the lap of the man. He was spanking her bare bottom and scolding her loudly, and she was crying. Every time the man hit her, the hooker's cries got louder. The customer had been startled by the sound of breaking glass and immediately stopped what he was doing. Now, he watched with wide eye and dropped jaw as two strangers climbed into the room through the shattered window. Finally, the customer managed to ask, "Hey, what's going on here?!" The hooker turned her head and looked up at her customer, asking, "What's the matter, baby? Am I not crying enough? You want me to cry louder?"

Ali looked at the two with confusion evident on his face. "What the hell--?"

His reaction was so genuine and amusing that even through fear and adrenaline were surging through Kelly's mind and body, she felt a smile form on her lips. "Uh, I will explain about this sort of thing later, Ali. Right now, let's keep moving!"

"Hey, for groups I charge extra," said the hooker boldly. She smiled at Ali and Kelly.

Ali did not even give her a second look. He grabbed Kelly's hand and ran for the door, pulling Kelly behind him. They had just stepped through the door when Nick and three agents came in through the window. Seeing them, the man leapt to his feet, throwing the hooker off his lap and onto the floor. The hooker's foot caught the leg of a nearby table, tipping it over on top of her. Nick tried to hurdle the table but he tripped over it and fell to the ground, as did the three agents who were following so closely behind him that they couldn't help but trip over Nick.

Ali saw a chance to put more distance between him and Kelly and the agents. He stopped in his tracks, unzipped his bag, and reached it. He pulled out a small canister with a black ring sticking up from the top. He brought the canister to his mouth, caught the

black ring between his teeth, pulled it out, and spit it onto the floor. Thick, white smoke began to pour from the canister. Ali tossed at just inside the doorway of the room, then took hold of Kelly's hand again and began to run. As he and Kelly disappeared down the hallway, the hotel room quickly filled with smoke.

Unfazed by all the commotion, the hooker simply looked up at her customer and said, "Relax baby. Two of those guys are regulars."

CHAPTER 26

* * *

ALI AND KELLY FOLLOWED the hallway, passing door after door. Ali knew they had to get to the street but he wasn't sure how to get there. Suddenly, a white sign suspended from the ceiling caught his eye. It read STAIRS in bold, black letters and an arrow pointed to the left. Ali headed straight for the sign and when he reached it, he said to Kelly, "Here! Down the stairs!" Ali turned and descended the steps two at a time. Kelly tried to do the same but lost her footing and began to fall. She reached out and grabbed the railing and managed to steady herself and kept moving.

In a few seconds, they were at the bottom of the stairway. Ali stopped abruptly just long enough to look left and right and assess their options. Down the corridor to the left, he saw a wooden door propped open with a chair, and he could see the alley behind the hotel. "This way!" said Ali and started running toward the open door. Kelly followed right behind him.

They reached the alley of the hotel and once again, Ali stopped to look around. The back wall of the hotel was dirty and crumbling, and two windows that appeared to open into the kitchen and a storage room respectively were broken. Two dumpsters and several grungy, dented trashcans lined the wall, and two homeless people

sat slumped in front of the trashcans. They appeared to be sleeping off a recent binge.

After stopping for just a couple seconds, Ali ran toward the far end of the alley. When he reached a pile of trash that lay on the ground near the wall, he stopped, bent down, and began searching through the pile. “What are you doing?” demanded Kelly. “We’ve got to keep moving!” Ali pointed up and then kept searching through the trash pile. Kelly looked up and saw a wire strung between the back wall of the hotel and the back wall of a building that sat several hundred feet below the level of the Hotel Sand and about half a block away.

“What is that?” asked Kelly.

“Zip line,” answered Ali, still looking through the trash.

“A what? A what line?”

Ali didn’t answer. Instead, he pulled a brick-sized object out of the pile and dusted it off with his hand. He hurried over to a wheeled dumpster nearby. “Come here and help me push!” he called to Kelly and began to push the dumpster. She ran to his side and began to push, too. When the dumpster was right underneath the wire connecting the two buildings, Ali said, “Stop!” He placed the device on top of the dumpster and then climbed up onto the container. He picked up the device, reached up over his head, and attached it to the wire. “Give me your hand!” he instructed and Kelly reached up. Ali grabbed her hand and pulled her up. Kelly braced one of her feet against the side of the dumpster and pushed up. She rose two feet from the ground before her footing slipped and she fell back to the ground. Ali knelt down on the dumpster and grabbed the waist of Kelly’s jeans with his right hand while taking hold of her elbow with his left hand. “On the count of three!” he said. “One... Two... Three!” He pulled up on Kelly’s jeans and on her arm. She planted her right foot against the side of the dumpster

as firmly as she could and this time it held. She put every ounce of strength she had into her right leg and before she knew it, she was standing beside Ali on top of the dumpster. He reached up and took hold of a small handle on the device. He looked at Kelly and ordered, "Hold onto me! Do it now!"

Kelly wrapped her arms around his chest and locked her fingers and her legs around his waist. "Oh, I don't think I'm going to like this! I've never done this before!"

"Just trust me!" said Ali, and with those words, he pushed off with his legs, and they quickly gained speed as they raced along the zip line across the alley and toward the building below.

Kelly let out a scream.

"Shut up!" insisted Ali. "You are attracting too much attention!" After what seemed to Kelly like two minutes but was actually no more than ten seconds, they had traveled nearly the entire length of the zip line. As they neared the second building, Ali let go of the line. They dropped about ten feet to the pavement below and tumbled for a short distance. Ali immediately got to his feet, picked up his bag, opened it, and pulled out a large knife. He began running, building up speed quickly, and when he was just below the zip line, he leapt up and swung the knife at the zip line, severing it with one deft cut.

Kelly was shaken up by the rough landing and it took her several seconds before she got her bearings and realized that, aside from some bruises, she was uninjured.

Ali ran back to where Kelly sat on the pavement. He reached down and grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet. "We have to keep moving!" he said and pulled her behind him as he headed toward the corner of the building.

Nick was looking out of the window of the hooker's hotel room, searching desperately for any signs to tell him where Ali and Kelly had gone. The smoke grenade that Ali had dropped in the room had stopped the agents cold; only in the last few minutes had the haze cleared enough for them to find their way around the room.

Nick continued looking out the window. "What the fuck?" he said aloud, the frustration strong in his voice. "Where the fuck did they go?" He dropped his head, feeling defeated, and his eyes fell on the zip line dangling from the side of the hotel a few stories below the window. His eyes grew wide. "Damn it! His voice was loud enough to fill the room. "Oh, he's good!"

Nick turned away from the window. "Everyone down to the street and then spread out!" he ordered his men. "They must have a car nearby!" He ran toward the door and his men fell in behind him. At the same time that the agents hurried into the hallway, a rental car raced down a side street and turned onto an avenue that would carry it out of the neighborhood. Ali and Kelly had escaped.

CHAPTER 27

* * *

ONCE AGAIN, THE HOTEL and the streets surrounding it were inundated with activity. FBI men moved in and out of the hotel. An agent stood in a corner of the hotel lobby, asking questions of the reception desk manager. The waiter who was supposed to be servicing Ali and Kelly's room waited anxiously for his turn to be questioned. Both the room in which Ali and Kelly had stayed and the hooker's room were now cordoned off with yellow police tape, and the rooms were being thoroughly searched and dusted for fingerprints.

Nick was standing near the window of Ali and Kelly's room. He was trying his best to concentrate on some papers in his hand. The frown had not left his forehead since the time he had realized that Ali had escaped. He was very fidgety, restless, and snappy when asked questions by his team members and crime scene investigators. Occasionally, he looked out the window for a few seconds and then returned his eyes to the papers. A slight paunch, resulting from years of grabbing quick, convenient, cheap meals wherever he could and washing them down with countless cups of strong coffee with powdered creamer and lots of sugar, was more visible than usual over his belt today. Until now, Ali had been

able to outsmart Nick, and he was missing his prey by fractions of seconds. Nick was very displeased with himself, but this continual failure also further strengthened his resolve to succeed.

Nick did not realize when Heidi appeared in the doorway. She stood there for a few seconds observing him before knocking on the door. He didn't respond. She cleared her throat. Nick looked up and his eye registered his surprise. "Shit! My luck is actually getting worse! Good lord, woman! I have known cats that were not as quiet as you are. How do you do that?"

Heidi was not at all surprised to hear Nick talk like this. In fact, when she had first appeared in the doorway and observed him, the way he stood quietly near the window concerned her. She just smiled at Nick and said, "Hey, you seem to have forgotten. You said it yourself—I'm a spook."

"Yeah, I do remember saying that. I also remember you saying that you do not handle domestic matters. So why are you here?" His frown was still on his forehead.

"Is that any way to talk, Agent Nick Robins?" After several seconds passed without Nick offering a response, she said, "I was just in the neighborhood and thought I'd drop in and say hello."

"The East River's not far. Why don't you go drop in down there?" suggested Nick, raising his eyebrows.

Nick looked straight at Heidi and she found his reactions a little amusing. She walked up to Nick and stood right in front of him with her hands in her pockets. "Well, someone sure broke into the wrong side of the hotel room, so to speak," said Heidi. She made an effort to suppress a smile, and she was mostly successful.

Nick took a step closer to Heidi, waved the pages in her face, and said, "Someone does not like being made a fool of. Certainly not as many times as I've been lately." He crossed his arms over his chest and looked out the window again. He wanted to discuss the matter

with Heidi—he was sure that she would have some information about Ali—but he also found her presence intrusive.

“Oh, that would be multiple times, eh? What’s the matter? Did Ali outsmart you?” Heidi’s tone was half sarcastic and half sympathetic.

Nick did not look at Heidi. “I underestimated him,” he replied. “I will not make that mistake again, I promise. First, he goes down the fire escape, so we think he’s heading for the street and we divide our forces. Then he heads to the back of the building, where he has a zip line all set up. He and his girl get far away from the hotel in a matter of seconds and then it appeared that they had taken off in a car they had stashed nearby. A rental car. The thing is, while it was Ali’s rental car, he wasn’t the one driving it.”

Heidi said nothing and continued to listen to Nick relate the timeline of the recent events. “The smart ass paid some homeless junkie to go on a little joyride,” continued Nick. “By the time we caught the junkie, Ali and his girl were long gone.”

“Wow! Smart guy!” said Heidi. “He really had everything covered. Pre-thought, pre-planned.” All at once, something that Nick had been saying caught Heidi’s attention and she asked, “Wait, what girl? When did a girl come into the picture? And who is she?”

It was a surprise for Nick that there was something about which he had information but Heidi did not; however, it was still not sufficient to cheer him up, and he continued speaking in the same somber tone. “I didn’t get a really good look at her, but I’m fairly sure it was Kelly Delaney,” said Nick quite casually.

“Ah, the lady who led you here!” Heidi exclaimed. Kelly’s name did not come as a surprise for Heidi; she already had information on her. However, her having the information that Kelly led Nick to Ali definitely did come as a surprise to Nick. He looked at Heidi and kept staring at her for a few seconds. Finally, he said, “What?”

How'd you know about that? What, you got a tail on me, too?"

Heidi shifted on her nimble feet. She would have done anything to avoid answering the question, but she knew if she were going to derive information from Nick, she would have to answer a few of his questions. She looked around the room to avoid making eye contact with Nick and said, "Not entirely. You were seen entering and leaving her condominium, but beyond that, I had no intel on you. How did you figure it out?"

Nick held up a page in Kelly's handwriting. The page had many random doodles scribbled on it. While passing the paper to Heidi to see, he said, "Never underestimate the power of the subconscious mind. Kelly drew these while sitting at her desk sometime over the past week, and I was able to piece it together and come up with the name of this establishment."

"Sharp, Agent Robins. Very sharp. Ever thought of a change in profession?" She smiled at Nick but only got a stare back. Nick was not in any mood to joke around.

"No thanks. But, tell me, what do you know about a man named Omar?" he asked straightforwardly. He was sure Heidi knew something.

Heidi swallowed hard as a look of concern flashed across her face. Though she recovered quickly from it, Nick noticed the look on her face and it became fixed in his photographic memory. Heidi looked at Nick and said, "Never heard of him. Why do you ask? Isn't Ali your target?"

"That has to do with the other instance of me being made a fool of." He held up another set of pages. These contained text written in Arabic. "According to these, Ali was set up by an assassin named Omar." Nick made sure to look at Heidi when he made this statement. He wanted to see what her face might reveal.

Heidi let out a snort. "Yeah, right. And, of course, you can

believe Ali because...why exactly?" She wanted to know where Nick was going with this.

"I have two reasons—these are written in Arabic, and these are notes to himself about just what exactly he wants to do to this Omar fellow when he finds him. Now, Ali and Omar are pitted against each other. Trust me, there is far too much emotion in these notes to be a mere plant for us to find."

"You read Arabic?" asked Heidi with surprise.

Nick snapped his fingers smartly and a nice-looking woman in her mid-twenties stepped into the room. The woman had jet-black hair and eyes the color of coal. Her nose was pierced with a ring that made her look very attractive.

Nick swept his right hand toward the woman and replied, "No, but my assistant does."

The assistant smiled at Heidi and said rather boastfully, "I speak it, too. These days, reading and speaking both Persian and Arabic languages are practically essential for conducting proper police work."

Heidi looked at the woman head to toe. She nodded her head, her face grim, and said, "True."

Heidi turned back to Nick and asked, "And what is the second reason?" She was impatient to know what Nick was thinking and the reasons influencing his thoughts.

"Following the bombing, the news was full of reports on Ali, very detailed reports. Isn't that surprising?"

"And you find that suspicious?" asked Heidi.

"As far as I know, the days of great reporters like Cronkite and Murrow are gone. When the news is full of stories about pop stars and movie receipts, I find it hard to believe that any modern-day reporter has the ability to put together such a report in so timely a

fashion.”

“Oh, so you feel all the information was a put-up job meant to divert our, I mean your, attention from the real target?”

“Exactly,” he replied. For a minute, he felt excited to hear his thoughts spoken aloud.

“So, how do you plan on finding this Omar fellow?” probed Heidi.

Nick suddenly became aware that Heidi was very tactfully taking all his information from him. He shot a look at her and said, “Hey, Ms. Spook, that’s my business. After all, as you say, domestic matters are not your concern. See ya!” Nick started to walk out of the room and his assistant followed close behind.

Heidi expected this response from Nick, but she was disappointed that it had happened when he was so close to divulging the information she wanted. She knew he was smart enough not to divulge all the information, and she felt lucky to have gotten as much information as she had from him.

Once Nick had left the crime scene with his assistant, Heidi started to move about the room, studying it with an expert eye. She hovered around the room as an eagle hovered over its prey. There was conviction in her movements, a conviction to find something more, something extra that Nick would have overlooked. She picked up a few scraps of paper and looked them over. Some she threw back and the others she put in her pocket. She flipped back the covers of the bed. On seeing signs of recent sexual activity, she smiled and said in a low voice only she could hear, “Interesting, very romantically interesting this story is going to become.”

CHAPTER 28

* * *

ALI AND KELLY WERE in a clean, nondescript car moving toward Long Island. While Ali drove, Kelly's left arm was perched on his right shoulder. Ali had shoved the bag onto the back seat of the car, where it was lying disheveled. Kelly turned her head and looked at it often. Ali knew that she wanted to know what was in the bag, but he would not tell and she would not ask. She knew that she had opted for a path that was dangerous and company that could be fatal, yet she wanted to continue because she was with him. She felt no remorse, at least not for the moment, and she was a person who lived life in the present and not the future. They were in a hurry but at ease with each other. There were no pretences in their relationship. Kelly straightened her arm and brushed aside a dried leaf from his shoulder.

“So, how do you plan to find this Omar guy?” asked Kelly.

Ali turned his head to look at her briefly, then turned back to face the oncoming road. “I still have the list of all the people who attended the meeting, and I've checked on the homes of the people who survived. Omar has already been to their places to...say hello. The only person who still hasn't received a visit is our dear friend Mohammed.”

“Okay, but there’s a flaw in the statement. Mohammed was not on the list,” countered Kelly.

Ali was ready to address this point. “Agreed, he was not on the list, but he, like you, showed up at the meeting, and Omar saw you both together. If Mohammed remembers meeting Omar in Madrid, Omar might remember meeting Mohammed. If so, he is sure to find Mohammed’s address and pay him a visit right away. Omar’s plan faltered because of Mohammed and for him to find out Mohammed’s address would be very easy.”

Kelly looked at the back seat of the car and said, “So, you’re going back to Mohammed’s house, armed to the teeth?”

Ali smiled. “Should I interpret that to mean being prepared for any contingency? Then yes, I am armed to the teeth!”

Kelly looked at the back seat again. “What’s in the bags? Guns? From where did you manage to get all that shit?”

Kelly’s comment invited a short snort from Ali. Without removing his eyes from the road, he said, “Please. In your country, guns are available on the corner of every street. The common people here are better armed than the army in my country! Guns in your country—very easy to get.” After pausing for about twenty seconds, he added, “I am surprised that you could make out that those are weapons in the bag. Good work for a girl, eh?”

Kelly agreed with Ali’s comments on the availability of weapons in her country. She decided to ignore his comments about her knowledge of weapons and after a brief pause, she said, “I do not understand. Why Mohammed’s place and not my place?”

Ali had already thought about this. In fact, since the day of the bombing, he had been thinking about Omar and Omar alone. He wanted to understand Omar’s way of working, his way of thinking, so that he could outsmart him at his own game. He didn’t want his opponent to catch him unaware at any point. “I’m betting

that Omar will think what I would think if the situation were reversed—that one Iraqi would take in another. Omar is thinking that I should be at Mohammed’s place since we belong to the same country and the same cause. The day of the bombing, we ran out of the building together. If I’m thinking like Omar then I’m thinking that Mohammed and I should be together, helping each other. Omar will come looking for me at Mohammed’s place. He would think of targeting two people in one visit. There cannot be a better deal for him than this.”

CHAPTER 29

* * *

A CAR STOPPED IN THE STREET outside Mohammed's house and Omar emerged with two men. Omar and his men stood outside the house, observing the vicinity and making note of the proximity of the other houses, possible hiding places, and intersecting streets.

Inside the house, Mohammed was moving about the living room. After a few minutes, he unrolled a carpet and prepared for his prayers. The moment Mohammed sat down for his prayers, Omar felt for the weapon in his pocket. He did not want to take any chances. He looked at his men and they, too, checked their weapons. He signaled to his men and the trio started to walk toward the front door.

* * *

Kelly and Ali were driving toward Mohammed's house. After knowing that Omar had visited the house of each person who had attended the meeting, and knowing that Mohammed was the only one left who had not received a visit from Omar, they were in a hurry to reach his place. Ali had his foot heavy on the gas while still being careful not to invite undue attention. When they came to an intersection where the light was red, Ali stopped the car and

immediately Ali started to drum his fingers on the steering wheel.

Kelly was feeling restless, too. “Ali, what do you think he would do to Mohammed?” asked Kelly. Ali chose not to reply and started to fiddle with the car radio. Kelly did not press for an answer immediately. Once the radio was on, Ali said, “As you Americans would say, he will liquidate him.”

Kelly went pale and goose bumps rose all over her body. For her, Mohammed had always been more than a business associate; he had been a friend with whom a deep mutual affection had developed over a period of time as a result of a shared understanding and common goal. She had known for a while that Mohammed was in danger just by being associated with her and Ali, but hearing Ali actually say it aloud made it so much more real to her.

* * *

Omar and his men stood at the front door of Mohammed’s house. He again fingered his weapon and then signaled to his men, who started to walk toward the back of the house. He peeked in through the window beside the door and snorted mockingly. Omar backed up a few steps and then lunged forward, kicking the door as hard as he could with his foot. The door flew open with a loud crack as splintered wood and plaster flew into the air, scattering across the floor inside. Omar bolted through the doorway with his gun raised. He headed straight into the living room but to his dismay, Mohammed was nowhere to be found. This agitated Omar and he continued looking around as his usual cool demeanor was rapidly giving way to visible frustration.

“Come on, old man! Come out! You can’t hide for long! You know I will get you! I know you were not supposed to be at the meeting!”

Omar moved to the other room and again shouted, “I have not come here for you! Just tell me where to find Ali, and I will let you

live! Otherwise, I promise you a slow and painful death!”

Omar moved through the house, looking for Mohammed. Omar heard a sound from the backyard and he darted toward the back of the house. When he came to a sliding glass door, he grabbed the handle and opened the door swiftly, nearly knocking it off its track. He stepped out onto a stone patio and looked around but saw no one. His attempts to find Mohammed were failing and his frustration and anger were increasing. He went back inside the house, grabbed a picture off the closest wall, and threw it across the room, where it shattered against a bookcase. He grabbed a vase off a nearby table and threw it against a window, shattering both. First Mohammed had caused Omar to fail in his mission in the conference room, and now he was causing Omar to fail in finding Ali.

Ali pulled his car up in front of Mohammed’s house and jammed on the brakes. The tires squealed and the car quickly came to a halt. Ali jumped out of the car and ran toward the front door, but then he stopped midway. Kelly was right behind him. “Ali, what’s the matter?”

“Stay there! The door is standing open. It would not be safe for you to come any farther. I suspect trouble. Omar seems to have gotten here before us.”

Kelly was in no mood to miss the action. She was equally worried about Mohammed and wanted to do everything possible to make sure he was okay. Ali continued moving toward the door and she continued to follow him. Ali again asked her to stay near the car, giving her a stern look that meant that he expected her to do exactly as he said.

Ali ran toward the house with a gun in his hand. As he neared the doorway, he saw the splintered door and grew even more concerned. He ran inside and directly into the living room. He

found it empty.

Suddenly, he heard footsteps near the window behind him. He spun and took aim. He was surprised to see Kelly standing outside. He shouted at her to get back to the car. Kelly was waving her hands frantically and speaking with great emotion but he could not understand what she was saying. She doing nothing but distracting him and he didn't have time for her games. He glared at her and gestured for her to go back to the car. As he looked at her through the window, he noticed the reflection of someone moving behind him. It was Omar.

Ali saw Omar taking aim at his head. Ali ducked down and immediately spun around and fired. Omar bent down and escaped the bullet by a few inches. Omar again took aim and shot back at Ali. The window behind Ali shattered and Kelly screamed. Her scream scared Ali and he began to run out of the house and toward the front yard to see if she was hurt; however, Omar began firing recklessly at Ali, who dodged every shot and darted for cover behind a wall. Within seconds, bullet holes lined the walls and shattered glass, vases, and decorative items lay broken on the floor and shelves.

The fact that Mohammed was nowhere to be seen worried Ali, but he also knew that he was safe, at least for now, because Omar was still in the house and focused on him.

On hearing the gunshots, Omar's two men entered the living room. Omar pointed at Ali's hiding place and the men began shooting at it. Ali shot back at one and he fell on the ground. The exchange of fire continued and Ali was able to shoot down the other man, too.

Now, Omar was the only one left to be dealt with. Ali had exhausted his supply of bullets. He grabbed a snow globe and threw it at Omar. The globe shattered across his face and his nose

started to bleed. Ali charged at Omar with bare hands and knocked his gun away. Omar looked around, but his gun was nowhere to be found. Now, without his weapon, Omar felt incapacitated but he continued to fight. He had come here to finish off Ali and nothing could stop him from doing it.

“Fool, you allowed your emotions to cloud your judgment!” shouted Omar. He threw a glass vase at Ali, but his target darted out of the way. “Not once, but many a times! Such errors are rarely forgiven by the Establishment!”

“Then I shall thank Allah for making me an emotional being!” Ali yelled back.

Omar grabbed a heavy floor lamp made of stone and hit Ali on the head. Ali went down and Omar lunged forward with the intent of finishing him for good.

Seeing Ali go down to the floor and Omar lunging toward him, Kelly jumped on Omar’s back. She shouted to Ali to get out of the room. Kelly clawed at Omar’s face with her fingernails. She scratched him badly and he growled in pain. “You vile bitch!” he screamed. In this fight, he had forgotten his lust for Kelly.

Ali, on seeing Kelly fighting with Omar, tried to get to his feet. Omar kicked Ali in the crotch and he cringed in pain and dropped to his knees again. Omar slammed Kelly against the wall behind them and then reached behind him and grabbed her by the throat in an attempt to choke her.

“Say goodbye, you bitch!” said Omar through clenched teeth. It was hard for him to control Kelly as she frantically tried to fight him off with her hands and legs.

Suddenly, there was a crashing sound and a tile fell from the ceiling, nearly missing Omar. He looked up and saw Mohammed swinging down from the light fixture that hung from the ceiling overhead. Mohammed crashed into Kelly and Omar, and the three

of them tumbled to the floor. Omar rolled away from the others, got to his feet, and bolted out through the front door.

Ali had managed to come to his senses and tried to give chase, running out through the front door and looking around. His eyes carefully scanned the area around the house. He saw Omar across the road, standing beside a car.

Suddenly, Omar knelt down next to the car and raised an object to his shoulder. Ali stared at it for a few seconds, not sure what he was seeing. Then he realized. Omar was aiming a shoulder-fired missile directly at him! Ali heard a loud Whoosh! The missile zipped toward him. He dove for the ground. The missile hit Ali's rental car and it disappeared inside a fireball. The explosion sent a shockwave through the air and the ground and Ali blacked out from the sheer force of the explosion.

Ali wasn't sure how long he was out but when he regained consciousness, the smoke had begun to clear. Omar was nowhere to be seen. Ali walked unsteadily back to Mohammed's house. When he walked into the living room, Mohammed was giving a glass of water to Kelly.

CHAPTER 30

* * *

ALI ENTERED THE LIVING ROOM and dumped himself on the couch. The ordeal had left him drained. Killing an unwary victim was one thing, but dealing with an experienced warrior like Omar was far more difficult. He had not completely regained his strength after the bullet injury. An ordeal like today's not only required Ali to be physically alert but also mentally alert, too. He was chasing Omar and running away from him at the same time.

Mohammed called out to Ali but he did not respond. Mohammed approached him and realized that Ali was unconscious. Mohammed said that he would get a wet towel for Ali, but since Kelly was feeling better, she offered to do it and headed for the kitchen. When she returned with it, she sat on the couch next to Ali and began to wipe his face. After a few seconds, Ali sat up startled and slapped Kelly on the face. He quickly got to his feet and started to look outside through the window.

Kelly was shocked to see this kind of a reaction from Ali. She had no idea why he had hit her. She put her hand on her cheek and exclaimed, "Ow! What the hell was that for?"

"I told you to stay with the car! I slapped you because you

disobeyed me. Once again, Death stood staring at us. Do that again, and I will be the one to shoot you! You get it, woman?”

Ali looked at Mohammed and asked, “How long was I out?”

“Just a few minutes,” replied Mohammed. He, too, was surprised to see Ali behave like this.

Ali started to pace the room restlessly. He again looked at Mohammed and said, “I need to go. The police will be on their way any minute. What can we do about the dead bodies? I don’t want you to be in trouble for helping me.”

Mohammed again attempted to dissuade Ali from following the path that he had chosen for himself. “My friend, please reconsider this course of action. It will only lead to your death. Try to understand—human life is precious and not meant to be wasted for such ordeals. You are meant for—”

Ali cut him short. “No matter what I decide to do, I must leave. Now!”

Mohammed let out a loud sigh. All his efforts to dissuade Ali were going to waste, and it pained him to see Ali waste his life like this. Mohammed put his hands in his pockets and fished out a set of keys. He tossed them to Ali, “My car is in the back. Take it.”

Ali had called Mohammed his friend—he had proved himself to Mohammed—and now it was Mohammed’s turn to do the same.

The sound of police sirens screamed in the distance and with every passing second, the sounds were moving closer. Mohammed hurried to the back door of the house, opened it, and indicated to Ali to leave immediately. He did not approve of the path that Ali had chosen but he also understood that his friend was not wrong. Their own people had hardly left any choice for them.

Ali was moved by Mohammed’s actions. He hurried over to the back door and hugged Mohammed. “Thank you, my friend. I

shall...think about what you've said." He started to run toward the car parked in the backyard. Kelly started to run after Ali.

A bright-red mid-size car stood parked in a narrow alley. Ali had to find his way under and around the clothesline to reach the car. Ali ran to the driver's side and Kelly ran toward the other side.

"Get away!" Ali roared at Kelly. "You cannot come along and I mean it this time. You stay here with Mohammed."

Kelly was not about to give up that easily. In an adamant voice, she said, "I'm coming with you!"

Ali was not used to being accompanied by a woman like this and neither was he used to being stopped by a woman like this. A woman had nothing to do in a mission like this. "No, you are not. You nearly got me killed. I am not one to repeat a mistake like that."

The sound of sirens grew louder and the tension between Kelly and Ali heightened. Kelly was a headstrong girl. She knew the importance of what the words information and bargain meant. While opening the passenger door, she stopped and asked, "Oh, and do you know where to look for this Omar character? You want me to believe that you know where to find him." Kelly wore an expression of sarcastic wonder.

Ali hadn't expected this matter to come up. He had no answer to this question and could do nothing else except grind his teeth. "Do you know where to find him?" he asked.

"I got these out of his pocket," she said, holding up some sheets of paper. "If you want to find him, you need me. So decide quickly; the cops will be here any second." She stood with her arms folded across her chest.

Ali slammed his fist onto the hood of the car. He hit the unlock button and on the key ring, opened the door, and climbed into the car. Kelly opened the passenger door and got in, too. The engine

roared to life and Ali drove off down the alley toward the main road.

It was a fine old car and Mohammed had kept it very clean. The car reached the main road and Ali merged into the main flow of traffic. Kelly sat next to him, feeling proud of her achievement. Once again, she had managed to have her way with Ali.

The sound of the sirens had faded behind them and Ali was feeling less worried about the police following him. He could not contain his eagerness any longer, and he asked Kelly to tell him what she had found in Omar's papers.

Being with Ali was not enough for Kelly; she knew that Ali would dispense with her the moment he had the information that he required. She wanted to be doubly sure that he would not play games with her. "Your word first. You are taking me with you," Kelly said. She looked him intently, waiting for his answer.

"Your word that you'll do as you're told!" replied Ali. Kelly grumbled on hearing this. She was not used to taking instructions. "All right," she said.

Ali was happy to have her word. "Fine. Good. Done. Now, what have you got for me? Out with it."

Kelly held out the papers and Ali snatched them away. He tried to read them while driving but with his attention diverted, he nearly rear-ended the car in front of them.

Ali could not make out anything written on the papers. He looked at Kelly and remarked, "What's all this then? It is...nonsense! You have tricked me just to come along. I'm—"

"Would you give them to me?" asked Kelly, though the way she said it made it sound like a statement. She held her hand out. "Now you are the one who is going to get us killed. You concentrate on driving and leave the papers to me." Kelly grabbed the papers and

started to sift through the pages.

“All right, explain them to me!” said Ali.

The way Ali was driving made it difficult for Kelly to read, so she had to focus her full attention on the papers. After a few minutes, she said, “Okay, I do not understand all of it, but there’s this: Lax ten twenty-six,” said Kelly.

“Lax ten twenty-six?” echoed Ali. “What does that mean? Lax means to be careless or slipshod—and he is neither! And why would he put a number with that? What does all this mean? I cannot figure out anything!” Ali was all worked up.

“No, L-A-X! It’s code for Los Angeles Airport!” replied Kelly with her eyes popping out with excitement.

Ali relaxed at the news. “Ah, then the number is a flight number, yes?”

“Correct,” said Kelly.

“So the next step is that we go to the airport and—”

“Are you fucking nuts? Ali, your picture is all over the TV, in every airport, bus station, you name it, in the city and they have you there. You show up at JFK, and you’re busted!” reminded Kelly.

“I take it that’s slang for shot or arrested,” said Ali.

“Yes.”

“Okay, then what do you suggest? What should we do? Give me an alternative.”

Kelly replied, “We are sitting in the alternative.”

Ali was shocked to hear the suggestion and was silent for nearly half a minute. After thinking about the alternatives and realizing that there was no other, he said, “All right. So, how many hours is it to this place known as Lost Angels?”

It took Kelly a moment to realize that Ali was referring to

Los Angeles as Lost Angeles. She looked at him with a surprised expression. “Hours? Try days! Moreover, it is Los Angeles. It is over on the West Coast, and we are on the East Coast, about three thousand miles away,” informed Kelly.

Neither one of them had any idea what to say next. It seemed they both knew the score: there was no alternative except to drive from one end of the country to the other, a distance that would not be easy to cover quickly, even if they drove all night.

Ali broke the silence. “Days, eh? No, we need to get there faster. We do not have that much time. Can we drive all night?”

“Well...I guess so,” answered Kelly. “We can trade off.”

Ali asked her whether she knew where this LAX was, to which Kelly replied that she had an idea but was not sure. She also mentioned that they needed to move onto the interstate as soon as possible.

Ali kept driving and after a few miles, a sign for the interstate came into view and Kelly gestured for him to take the car up the entrance ramp. Ali looked at Kelly, confused. “It’s our national highway system,” she explained. “It connects all of the states.”

Ali’s face lit up on hearing this. He would not have to completely rely on the directional sense of a woman; he would surely find road signs on the highway. “Ah! Will there be signs for Lost Angeles all throughout?”

Kelly could not help but smile and corrected him. “It is not Lost Angeles; it is Los Angeles. There would be signs, but not so soon. Look for signs for Pennsylvania, and I’ll see if Mohammed’s got a map around here.”

Ali started to concentrate on the road signs and Kelly started to root around the car looking for a map. She came across a GPS and turned it on. She looked at Ali and said, “We have something better

than a map! We've struck gold! Mohammed has a GPS in his car."

Ali was happy to hear this. "Excellent! Turn it on and punch in the place we want to get to."

Kelly started to work with the GPS and the moment she finished entering the name of the place they wanted to reach, a recorded voice instructed them to get into the right lane ahead. Kelly and Ali both exchanged a look, smiled at each other, and Ali turned the steering, taking the car into the right lane. The moment the car settled into the lane, Ali said, "It feels odd to take instructions from a machine. I always feel apprehensive about trusting a machine."

Kelly replied, "Isn't your gun a machine and don't you trust it? What is the problem with trusting the GPS? In any case, at the moment, it is a blessing and I advise that we do as it says."

CHAPTER 31

* * *

ALI AND KELLY HAD BEEN DRIVING for eight hours when the night started to fall. They took turns driving so that one of them to get some rest without having to stop the car. Ali had been driving for the last two hours, and Kelly had dozed off in the passenger seat some while ago.

A little ahead, Ali could see an exit off the interstate. The GPS indicated that the left-hand exit would take them into the city of Cleveland. To reach Los Angeles, they needed to keep going straight on the road they were on now.

Ali's eyes fell on the gas gauge and he realized that they needed to refuel. He hated the idea of having to stop for anything—any pause in driving would put them that much farther from Omar. Still, Ali understood that gas was essential to continuing their trip, and the last thing he should do was risk their mission because of his stubbornness.

After traveling a few miles, he could see some lights. He let out a short prayer, wishing the lights belonged to a gas station. His prayers were heard. A lighted gas station sign suddenly came into view. Ali thanked Allah and turned the car toward the station.

The slowing down of the car woke Kelly from her nap, but she was too groggy to say or do anything. Ali parked the car, switched off the engine, and got out of the car. He opened the fuel door and unscrewed the gas cap, letting it hang down against the side of the car by the thin, plastic cord that connected it to the mouth of the gas tank. He slid a pay-as-you-go gas card through the scanner on the front of the pump, waited for the pump to beep, selected the cheapest grade of gas, and started to pump the gas. As he stood there squeezing the handle on the hose, he happened to look inside the convenience store that stood less than twenty feet away from the pump. Through a window, he saw that the clerk was watching the news on a small TV, and Ali saw his face appear on the screen. This didn't come as a surprise to him; he and Kelly had already discussed this possibility. He turned his back toward the window and continued to pump gas. The moment the tank was full, he hurriedly replaced the gas cap, closed the fuel door, got back in the car, started the engine, and slipped out of the station. By the time the car was back on the interstate, Kelly had gone back to sleep.

Ali found Kelly sleeping on the seat next to him very desirable. He felt tempted to look at her lips repeatedly. He switched off the radio so that Kelly could sleep as comfortably as possible. He touched her hair lightly, afraid that he might wake her up. Ali raised his hand to caress her cheek. The moment he got his fingers near her mouth, she bit his hand. Ali was startled and embarrassed at the same time. She had been awake for some while and enjoying his touch as much as he was enjoying touching her. They laughed like young teenage lovers and began talking after that.

Another few hours and they reached the center of the country. The sun had begun to shine in the eastern sky and the clear skies had started to appear. They were on Interstate 70 and Kelly was driving. They saw the drive-thru of a McDonald's and she drove the car right up to the large menu and intercom where orders were

placed. They had skipped their dinner and were feeling gluttonous, even in the early hours of the day. They ordered eight burgers, four fries, an iced coffee, and a Coke. They wanted to stock up on food for the coming day. Kelly continued to drive while Ali relished his breakfast. He seemed mystified by all the food in his hands. Once he had had his fill, he opted to drive while Kelly ate.

They reached the bridge crossing over the mighty Mississippi River. Ali looked at the great flow of water beneath them. Kelly looked at Ali and said, "If it would have been any other day, I would have loved to stop here for a little while and take a few photographs." Ali smiled at Kelly and asked her if she was fond of photography. "Not much, but I do like to try my hand at times. I am using a professional camera," replied Kelly quite casually and started to look at the road ahead.

* * *

Fatigue had started to take them over but they refused to take an extended break; however, they did stop on the side of the highway, but for no more than fifteen minutes. They stretched, straightened their backs, and moved on. They chatted about their respective countries and cultures. Ali teased Kelly about her habit of snoring, which irritated Kelly a lot. There was a lot of uncertainty in the future for both of them. The thought of a future together never crossed the mind of either of them. They were trying their best to make the most of whatever they had in the present.

CHAPTER 32

* * *

THEY DROVE ON INTERSTATE HIGHWAY 70 throughout the day. Noon led into the evening, and the evening led into the night. They were lucky the car did not overheat. The clear skies with the moon and the stars shining bright were just perfect for a romantic drive. By this time, it had become a monotonous task for them. Often, they could feel the vibes from each other, but romance was nowhere near the mind of Kelly or Ali.

Ali saw some trucks and trailers parked on the roadside and he said to Kelly, “I think we are approaching a gas station. We should get some.” Just after a few hundred feet, they saw a glowing sign that read GAS STATION and a little farther away, they saw a sign that read DINER AND MOTEL. These two signs and the buildings to which they referred were the only evidence of civilization around, save for what looked like a small town farther ahead. As far as the eye could see, they were surrounded by open fields of crops, and the sound of the wind rustling through them alternated between loud and soft.

Ali steered the car toward the gas station, and the moment he stopped the car, Kelly got out. She stretched and started to rub her behind. While Ali started to pump the gas, she walked around a

little and she heard and felt her knees crack after having been bent for so many miles. After a few minutes, she caught Ali's eye. He had finished pumping the gas and was now cleaning the windshield of the car. Kelly pointed toward the motel. Ali shook his head. She again pointed toward the motel sign.

"Is this really necessary? What on earth makes you think we have that much time?"

Kelly stood with her hands on her waist and started to twist from the waist up. Cracking and popping sounds came from her back, which was feeling stiff from sitting in the car. Having done that a few times, she started to bend and touch her feet with her hands. She repeated this motion several times and then stood stooping over the car window. Without looking at Ali, she said, "Ali, a car needs gas, and humans need food and rest!" She stressed the words food and rest. Even before Ali could say anything, she continued. "Now, come on. A few hours off the road won't kill you. Let's just take it easy for a few hours."

"It just might kill me...and you, too!" Ali shot back. "Now you better get in and the moment I finish washing the windshield, we are getting back on the road." He did not like what Kelly was suggesting at all.

"No way am I going to sit in this car for the next few hours," objected Kelly. She was standing up straight now and had crossed her arms over her chest defiantly. "My ass cannot take sitting in that car for another minute! It is numb; I have lost all feeling down there. Thirty-five hours is not a short period. Be human, Ali." There was an agitation in her voice and her comments reminded Ali that they had been driving for nearly thirty-five hours and all along not even once had the woman complained about anything.

Ali gave her a sympathetic look laced with a bit of playful suggestiveness. "I suppose it would be a pity to...damage

something so...delightful. Very well, we rest," said Ali with a smile. He signaled for her to sit down and she shook her head. "Just till I park the car. You have my word," insisted Ali. Kelly smiled, opened the car door, and sat down.

"Why thank you, sir. It is a pleasure to know that you appreciate my...assets!" said Kelly.

Kelly was studying the lights ahead and the traffic that was moving on the road. She looked at Ali and said, "Hey, looks like a town over there. How about we hit the stores tomorrow morning before we leave and get a few essential things?"

This came as a surprise to Ali. Women! She is thinking of shopping when we are on a mission like this! I knew she would do something to delay us, thought Ali. He could not contain his surprise and said, "I just can't understand, why is it that women always want to go shopping? Be it any kind of place, any kind—"

"Hey, I'm not talking about going on a big shopping spree kind of thing, just enough to get basic supplies. A change of clothes, a toothbrush—my mouth tastes like the bottom of a bird cage—a comb. Oh, and some deodorant, especially for you, my dear sir, would be really nice."

Ali shrugged his shoulders. Her reasoning was logical; he couldn't say otherwise. "Easy, Miss, easy. Very well. We shall do as you say."

Ali finished washing the windshield and then got back behind the wheel. A silence prevailed between the two for a minute. Ali was looking at the fields. Finally, he spoke. "Kelly, there is one thing that I have been thinking of saying to you. I have traveled everywhere but never have I seen such abundance. Everything that I heard of your country is true. It is a land of milk and honey. Your great rivers, your fields... You people have so much."

"Yes," replied Kelly. "It's a pity that people here don't seem to

appreciate all that we have. We are so busy in fighting for what we do not have that we tend to ignore what we already have. I've found that travel always broadens one's horizons and allows you to see your homeland for what it truly is. It helps you to see a different world altogether."

"Still the dreamy, romantic poet. Yet, I see the truth in your words. Wasn't there a British poet who wrote something about that?"

"T.S. Eliot, and he was born in America!"

"Oh, let me think," said Ali. "It goes something like, 'We shall never cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started, and know the place for the first time.'" Ali's knowledge of T.S. Elliot was not a surprise for Kelly. She was already aware that he had gone to college and was interested in poetry.

Ali took a deep breath and said, "Perhaps I shall return home after this and truly know the place." For a minute, Kelly felt that Ali would invite her to see his country with him.

Ali turned the key in the ignition, put his foot on the gas, and eased the car back onto the road. Once out of the gas station, Ali said, "Come on, we will get a room at the motel. You go ahead and register, and use this card." He took a bundle of credit cards out of a storage compartment in the console, picked out one in particular, and handed it to Kelly.

"What's this?" asked Kelly with surprise. "I have mine; I'll use it."

Ali stopped the car in the parking lot of the motel and said, "It is a credit card for one of my covers. You can't use your card; I'm sure the Feds or CIA boys are tracking it. They must have issued an alert on your cards. They are showing my face in the news repeatedly. They know my face but they don't know this name on the card."

CHAPTER 33

* * *

ALI GAVE SOME MORE INSTRUCTIONS to Kelly and after a brief discussion, Ali parked the car on the asphalt parking lot. It was a simple and a basic roadside motel consisting of two buildings, one housing the office and the other, a much longer building, housing all the rooms. Their car was the third one in the parking. Ali sat in the car while Kelly got out of the car and walked up to the office. Ali knew that Kelly would manage, but he was still apprehensive. Once Kelly reached the office, Ali got out of the car. He put his left foot against the car and rested his back on it, with his back to the office.

After a few minutes, Kelly emerged from the office and stopped at the edge of the porch. She whistled. When Ali turned around, she signaled to him to follow her as she started to walk toward the room. Ali hurried toward her, catching up in no time. She handed the room key to him. Ali looked all around them as he turned the key in the lock. No one else was around. Ali opened the door and they both stepped inside.

It was a simple, basic room furnished with a bed, dresser, table, nightstand, and two chairs. The moment they entered the room, Kelly dumped herself on the bed. Lying back on one of the pillows,

she said, “Oh, man. First thing I’m doing is getting a shower!”

Ali carefully locked the door from inside and moved toward the window. He looked out to see if anyone was watching the room. Kelly saw this and her frustration spiked. “Ali, what are you doing?” she asked in a voice that was just short of a shout. “For Pete’s sake! Don’t tell me that you think we’re being followed! I think you’ve gone paranoid and need...” Her words faded away. She realized that it was her fatigue talking. Ali was just trying to keep them safe. She knew that and she appreciated it. She knew she just needed to calm down.

Ali was unfazed by what Kelly had said. He continued to look out the window, studying the layout of the property. “Being cautious is why I’ve lived as long as I have. You can see me because I have been cautious.”

Kelly got up from the bed and walked toward the bathroom. “Fine. You stand guard while I hit the showers.”

Ali turned his attention to their room, scanning every inch of it and taking notes about the resources they could use to escape or defend themselves in the need arose. Satisfied that he and Kelly were secure for now, he dropped into one of the chairs, put his head back, and closed his eyes.

Kelly unfastened her jeans and let them drop to the motel room floor, then reached behind her neck, grabbed the back of her T-shirt, and pulled it up over her head. She tossed it behind her and it landed on the bed. Ali’s eyes were nearly closed but he could still see Kelly as she walked into the bathroom and closed the door. Soon, Ali heard the shower start to run.

Ali got up from his chair after a few minutes, picked up the room key from where he’d laid it on the dresser, and left the room, locking it from the outside.

The amenities in the bathroom were nothing lavish, but Kelly

found a small bar of soap, a small bottle of shampoo, and a set of clean towels. She lavished herself with the soap and shampoo, and the fragrance of both encouraged her to relax and let all her fatigue and tension wash away down the drain with the water.

After a full half hour, she came out of the washroom, wrapped in a bath towel and carrying a smaller towel in her hand. Ali was nowhere to be found. Kelly called out for him in the hope of getting some response but got none. She saw the door was locked. She pulled a chair out from the table, sat down, put her feet up on the table, and began to dry her hair with the other towel.

A key turned in the lock and Kelly startled awake. She hadn't realized that she had dozed off. Before she could react, Ali walked into the room. He was carrying a large duffel bag.

"You scared me, man!" Kelly said in a slightly groggy voice. "Where'd you disappear to?"

Ali put the bag on the bed and replied, "I had to make some purchases. I have got some take-away food and stuff to munch."

"At this hour?"

"It was important to the mission," Ali replied in a very casual voice, and emptied the contents of the bag on the bed. What Kelly saw was an assortment of weapons. On seeing the quantity and variety of weapons, Kelly jumped to her feet. "Whoa! More guns? Where'd you get them? Ali, tell me one thing. How many do you need to kill one man?"

Ali started to check the weapons and said, "When it comes to a man like Omar...a lot! Besides, he is not my only target; I also want the men behind him—the ones who gave him his orders. As for these, they were easy enough to find. You Americans, you make guns so easy to get."

"How about if we put the guns aside? Just for a while. What do

say, huh?”

Ali looked up and asked Kelly, “What do you have in mind?”

Kelly said nothing and simply dropped the towel wrapped around her body and stood in front of him with a naughty smile. “Does this tell you what’s on my mind, or do I have to be more explicit?”

Ali got up from the bed and put his arms around her. He kissed her gently on the lips. His hands traveled all over her body. His fingers had a scintillating effect on her and it was as if she were dancing in his arms. Her wet hair hanging over her shoulders made her look all the more desirable to Ali, and his hunger for her body took him over. His kisses became furious. He paused just long enough to say, “I never did get that deodorant to put on.” Kelly pulled back from him, frowned, and replied, “Forget it” then put her lips back on his. Ali held her tightly and fell back on the bed, landing her on top of him. She was so light on him and he loved the feeling. He rolled and came over her and got lost in her.

An hour later, having exhausted their energies, they sat naked in bed, talking and munching on the food that Ali had bought earlier. When they finished eating, they piled the trash on the nightstand beside the bed. Now, Ali was holding Kelly’s hand and was playing with her fingers. They were so nimble and he thought that he could play with them all his life. He looked at her and could see only her lips. He started to play with her lips and after a few seconds, he started to kiss her again. Kelly responded with the same hunger and once again, they explored each other’s bodies. Giving in to their natural instincts was a beautiful experience for both of them.

The moon rose above the area, and trucks and cars moved on the highway all night. Kelly and Ali were tired after intimacy and slept deeply and peacefully.

CHAPTER 34

* * *

THE NEXT MORNING, THE ALARM on Ali's wristwatch beeped at exactly 6:30 a.m. He didn't feel like getting up, which was very unlike him. He turned and saw Kelly lying next to him. Seeing her so close to him brought a smile to his face, and he continued to gaze at her. He began to caress her hair, which woke her up. Waking up to his touch, she coiled closer to him. He again looked at his watch and said, "Kelly, it is time to wake up. We still have a long distance to cover." She hummed her agreement and sat up in bed. He came out of the bed and walked toward the bathroom.

They had no choice but to get dressed in the same clothes they wore the day before. Ali was the first one ready to step out of the room but before he did, he peeked his head out and looked around cautiously.

Five minutes later, Kelly walked out of the room. Ali was already standing near the car. He looked at his watch. It was nearly nine o'clock. He signaled her to hurry up. Their car was the only one in the parking lot.

When they were both in the car, Ali guided it back on the main road and headed toward the town. In a few minutes, they reached

the town and headed straight for a clothing store. Ali parked the car and both he and Kelly entered the store. Hurriedly, they bought a new set of clothes for themselves, using one of the many credit cards that Ali had. He also bought a cowboy hat for himself. Kelly asked one of the sales clerks if there were a drugstore nearby. The sales clerk told her there was one just a few hundred yards away, just past the next traffic light. They walked back to their car, loaded in their purchases, and then climbed in. Ali headed for the drugstore.

This time, Ali stayed in the car, his new cowboy hat atop his head, while Kelly went into the drugstore. Ali had handed her a different credit card to use. The first things she picked up were a toothbrush for herself and deodorant for Ali. She also picked up some cookies, chips, and a box of assorted chocolates. From her previous day's experience, she knew it was wise to be fully supplied. Ali was a man with an inexhaustible reserve of energy; on the other hand, she was a petite woman used to a very different lifestyle. She paid using the credit card, thanked the guy at the cash register, and walked out.

While Kelly was away shopping, Ali had started to sift through the pages that Kelly had pulled out from Omar's pocket. Some of names in these pages were not there on his own page. He had instructions only for the people in New York, but this list covered people in Los Angeles also.

Kelly came out of the store and silently got into the car. Ali switched on the ignition and swiftly drove away. Within no time, they were back on Interstate 70, leaving the town behind them and heading toward Los Angeles. Ali was well rested for the ordeal that lay ahead. Last night, he had the opportunity to enjoy everything that a man needs for a normal life—food, rest, and companionship. The effects of the previous night showed on his face.

Ali handed over a piece of paper to Kelly and asked her to study

it. After, reading the paper, she said, “Huh. Looks like another name. It looks like ‘Williams,’ right?”

“What is the other name?” asked Ali. “It is Eckerd, I think.”

“Yes. It sounds like a company’s name, a law firm, a—”

“Yes, lawyers! I was told that there were a number of American lawyers handling the accounts for the Supreme Party. Therefore, if Omar is going to Los Angeles, it must be to meet with the lawyers!”

“Is he going to kill them, too?” she asked innocently.

“I...don’t know. Cannot say anything with certainty. I was told that only the people in New York were to be eliminated. He could just be going there to meet with them. Either way, it is our only lead and we have to make the best of it. Once we reach there, things will become clear.”

After a brief silence, he asked Kelly if she could locate the office on the GPS, and she replied that she could but would require the complete address. She suggested that she look at the pages she’d taken from Omar and see what she can find. “Don’t worry,” she added. “If I don’t find anything in the papers, I will call up my contacts for information.” Kelly got to work. After a minute, she finished with one set of papers and, finding no address, she picked up another set. Ali pushed down on the accelerator, determined to make up for lost time.

Kelly was silent as she searched Omar’s papers and Ali got lost in his thoughts. As he thought about all that had happened since their mission had begun, not even for a single minute had he regretted bringing Kelly along. He just hoped that he continued to feel that way when they reached Los Angeles.

CHAPTER 35

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IT WAS NEARLY ONE O’CLOCK on a Monday afternoon and the FBI building was bustling with activity. Mondays were usually very busy and today was no exception. Nick was in his office, the photographs of the crime scene were scattered all over his desk, and he was standing behind his chair. He was staring at the photographs and lost in his thoughts about the incidents that had occurred during the last few days. There was a theory going around his mind and he had succeeded in putting together many pieces of the puzzle. Still, some pieces were missing and he was desperate to solve the puzzle. He sat down in his chair and started to scribble on a piece of paper.

The phone on his desk rang and Nick started to count the rings. Exactly on the fifth ring, he grabbed up the receiver. “Hello? Yep.” Nick was silent as he listened carefully to the person on the other end. Nick nodded continuously. After listening for minute, he shouted, “What the-?! Kansas?! Oh shit, just what I need, a trip to the heartland. Okay, get me on the first flight out... No, get a jet warmed up and contact the FBI office nearest the scene; I don’t want to be wandering for hours, trying to find this fucking place. Let’s make it quick!”

He put the phone down and started to pace. The phone call had left him restless. He wanted to be out in the field as soon as possible. He had never considered himself an especially good desk jockey, as evidenced by his tremendous procrastination in getting his reports done in a timely manner. Some agents were perfectly at home behind their desk, hidden away in a dull office that was practically indistinguishable from the offices on either side of it. But not Nick. He felt at home only when he was in the field; when he was live on the scene and in the middle of the action. He was much better at putting the pieces of a case together when he could study the actual location, examine the actual evidence, and speak with witnesses directly. Sometimes, he did get a chance to work like that. Just as often, though, he was kept in his office to pour over reports and photographs and statements and expected to solve cases by staring at stacks of paperwork, endless pages of information that soon began to look identical. Well, this case offered him an excuse to get out into the field and he damn well was going to make the most of it.

After twenty minutes, the phone on his desk rang again. He took the call, hung up after a few seconds, and left the office immediately.

CHAPTER 36

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AFTER NICK LANDED AT THE AIRPORT in Kansas, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed a number. When the call connected, the voice on the other side informed Nick that Agent Alan Derrick was at the airport to receive him. He would be waiting for Nick in a departmental car in the parking lot. The voice on the other side passed Agent Alan's phone number to Nick. Nick literally ran out of the terminal and through the lobby, and when he saw a yellow sign with a black arrow pointing toward the parking lot, he followed it toward an exit.

Outside, Nick stopped and looked around. He saw several cars. FBI department cars were usually black or gray, and Nick saw several that fit that description. Suddenly, some movement caught Nick's eye. A man in a dark suit was standing beside a black sedan parked about thirty feet away. The man held his hand high above his head and waved it back and forth. Nick looked closely and saw a badge in the man's hand. Nick hurried toward him.

When Nick approached the man, the man extended his hand. Nick shook the man's hand and they introduced themselves. Agent Alan Derrick climbed behind the wheel of the sedan, and Nick got into the passenger side. He asked Alan to take him straight to the

motel where the local FBI office had set up a command center. “It is a thirty-minute run from the airport,” informed Alan while driving the car out of the parking lot and onto the highway in what seemed to Nick like a matter of seconds. Alan was deft with his steering and acceleration, and Nick speculated that the agent’s driving could beat that of any professional racer. They exchanged some basic information about themselves on their way to the motel.

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True to his word, Alan pulled the car into the motel parking lot well within thirty minutes from the time they left the airport parking lot. The two of them went straight into the motel office. Nick flashed his ID card to the manager and then began a brief conversation with him. Nick enquired if any other staff members had interacted with the persons who had spent the night in that room. Nick then asked the manager to show them the room. The manager took a key off a board behind the counter and started walking toward the building that housed the rooms. When the three men reached the room, the manager opened the room and all of them walked in. Nick looked through the messy room as Alan stood off to a side with the manager.

Nick walked into the bathroom and then called out to the manager, “So, how often do you clean these rooms?” The manager looked at the other agent and replied very casually, “You’re kidding, right?” and let out a snicker.

Nick emerged from the bathroom and stood next to the bed. He smiled at the manager’s reply. It made Nick feel better to know that he was seeing the room as it had been left. “It figures. I can make out that I have asked a wrong question. But I am pleased to hear your reply.”

Nick walked out of the room, checked the corridor outside, and came back into the room. He was on the lookout for an opportunity

to inspect the manager's desk and records, though he had a feeling that the manager would not have fiddled with the register and would give him the records if he asked for them.

Alan flipped back the covers on the bed and raised his eyebrows. "Look at the sheets," said Alan. "Does that mean what I think it means?"

"Agent Alan, you get a gold star," answered Nick. "Looks like they had a good ol' time."

Nick pulled out a picture of Kelly and showed it to the manager. "Was this the lady who checked in, along with the man?"

"Oh yeah, she was with him. Oh, what a sweet piece of ass she was, too! I would have loved to offer her some room service," the manager said through a lecherous smile, "but then I saw the dude in the car. He seemed quite well built, so I figured I'd better not make a move. I don't understand—"

Nick shot a sharp look and stopped the manager in mid-sentence. The manager was trying to get overfriendly, and Nick figured he was probably enjoying all the attention that he and his motel were getting. "Did you get a good look at the guy?" Nick asked. "Can you tell us something about him?"

The manager thought for several seconds. "Naw, he never came into the reception area, and outside it was too dark."

There were some old newspapers lying on the table and Nick started to flip through them. Without looking at the manager, he asked, "You see them do or say anything while they were here?"

"Naw, just stayed the night and then got back on the highway, heading west. But if I remember correctly, I did see them swing over to Hadley first."

Nick looked at Alan, with a question in his eyes. "Hadley is the little town just down the road," explained Alan. "Limited

population, not big enough for anyone to get lost but big enough to meet all their needs.”

Nick started to pace around the room. He wanted to understand Ali so that he could beat him at his own game. “A town... Huh. Shopping... They must have needed some things,” Nick said, thinking aloud. “After all, they were in the car for two whole days. They’d need food.” He wasn’t sure whether he should go to Hadley and try to find someone who saw Ali and Kelly there. The thought that loomed biggest in his mind was their destination. “Where are they headed? It’s definitely not Hadley.”

Suddenly, the manager spoke up. “Hey, now that you mention that, they must have gone out at least once last night! When they left, the man was carrying a duffel bag that they didn’t have when they checked in. It seemed heavy.”

The manager’s words rang a bell in Nick’s mind. “They go out one night before leaving, leave with a duffel bag, head towards the town,” said Nick while pacing the room. He looked at Alan and asked, “Hey, you got any CIs in this area? I’m sure you have some.”

The agent promptly replied, “There’s a gun dealer who’s known to make many deals under the table. He’s usually good for some information. If you want, we can find him right away.”

“That should be perfect. Let’s find him now!” said Nick, looking at Alan.

“And you,” said Nick to the manager in a no nonsense voice. “I want a copy of the credit card they used to pay for the room and I want it immediately.” The manager was feeling very important, for if he had not mentioned the town of Hadley, how would this information have become known?

Nick started to walk out of the room, with the manager following close behind him.

CHAPTER 37

* * *

WITH ALAN BEHIND THE WHEEL, they reach Hadley very quickly. After having met the informant in the town, Nick asked Alan to drive him back to the airport as soon as possible. Nick called the pilot of the jet on their way to the airport and issued him instructions to get ready to fly.

The minute Alan jammed on the brakes at the airport entrance, he looked at Nick and said, “Twenty-eight minutes.” The two men got out of the car and shook hands. Nick thanked Alan and he in turn wished Nick luck for the case. Nick sprinted through the airport lobby toward the jet.

The pilot was ready for takeoff when Nick entered the airplane and the moment he took his seat, the plane taxied onto the runway. It was a modest corporate jet, outfitted to be an FBI mobile command center. Being the top investigative agency of the country, the FBI was well equipped and prepared for all kinds of contingencies.

Nick was sitting at a table and was studying a series of different documents. He held up two different pages and his eyes went back and forth between the two. He kept staring at the papers for a

minute or more. He put the papers back on the table and turned his gaze to the sky outside the window. Son-of-a-bitch! he thought. I'll get you soon.

CHAPTER 38

* * *

AFTER DRIVING THE ENTIRE DAY, Ali and Kelly reached Los Angeles late at night. Without wasting any time, they started to look for the office of Williams & Eckard, Attorneys at Law. They found the office in a two-story building on one of the main streets of the city. A sign in front of the building indicated the office was on the ground floor.

Kelly looked at the other buildings that surrounded them. “The area seems to be expensive; this means that they’re doing well.”

Ali smiled. “Even you maintain a good office on an expensive street. You must also be making big money. In any case, from this particular mission, I have very well come to know how lawyers make money. Kelly, do you also make your money the same way?”

“I would only say one thing—you are a jealous man, Mr. Ali.” They both grinned.

They parked the car a short distance from the building but remained inside the car, observing the building for some time.

After waiting for half an hour, Kelly started to get restless. “Okay, we have found the office.” She looked at her watch. “It’s quite a bit past normal business hours so I’m sure that everybody must have

already left. Let's go and look for a hotel. I—"

"We are not going anywhere," said Ali, looking at her sharply.

"Another night in the car? This is not acceptable!" She tried to argue with Ali in the hope that she would be able to persuade him to check into a hotel for the night. After all, she was not used to the rigors of such a life. In fact, she had never before traveled so much distance by road. Being born in the US, in an era when comfort is an integral part of life, travel by air is something taken for granted. Ali did not listen to anything that she had to say and completely ignored her. Finally, she gave in. "You are a crazy man," said Kelly and lowered herself in her seat.

* * *

It was early in the morning and the sun had just started to peep out when Kelly woke up to the sound of a car horn. Her head was in his lap. She yawned, stretched her arms, and continued to lie in the same position. Ali was still staring at the building.

"So, any movement yet?" asked Kelly.

Ali's reply was a monosyllable. "No."

"You could have woken me up in a better manner. Are you devoid of all imagination?" asked Kelly.

Ali decided to ignore her comment altogether.

Kelly looked at Ali. "Did you get any sleep last night?"

"No."

"Are you always this articulate?"

He looked at her. He was enjoying this question session. While she was asleep in the seat next to him, he felt like waking her up and asking her to talk to him. Now that she had woken up, he did not want this question hour session to end.

Again, he replied, "No."

Kelly got irritated and she sat up straight in her seat. She was all worked up now. She turned toward Ali, who was smiling now, and asked, “What exactly are we waiting for here? We have spent the entire night in the car, staring at that building. Do you think Omar is going to show up here?”

“Let’s take up your questions one by one. We are waiting for some movement to take place in the building. Second, not we, but I, have spent the entire night staring at the building; someone else was busy sleeping. Third, with regard to Omar turning up here today, no, I would never be so lucky.” He smiled at her. He was expecting her to react at his answer, but what he got in return was just a stare. Still smiling, he said, “What I’m waiting for is one of the lawyers, or one of their staff members, to show up. Last night, I saw no one come out, but we may have arrived too late for that.” Kelly was feeling agitated and he seemed to be thoroughly enjoying it.

“Yeah,” replied Kelly. She turned to look out the car window. After a few seconds, she said, “Although...” Her tone was contemplative and it caught Ali’s attention immediately.

“What?” he asked.

“Ah... Did you notice those two Bimmers in the parking lot?” asked Kelly, pointing toward the cars. Ali did not get what she was trying to say.

“Two what? Do you mind talking to me in a language that I can easily understand?”

“BMW’s! There! Very highly priced cars. They were there when we parked, and they are still there. Unless those lawyers live in their offices, I think something is going on here. Well, it seems someone didn’t notice them, eh.” This time Kelly smiled at Ali.

He cursed himself for not noticing the cars earlier. He wondered if the fast pace of the cross-country drive and the sleep deprivation has begun to effect his trained powers of observation, which were

usually excellent. He got out of the car and hurried along the sidewalk toward the office. Kelly followed him. He approached the building and started to scan it with an expert's eye. Through a window, he saw two men sitting in an office. He moved toward the front door but did not open it. He studied it intently as Kelly came up behind him. A flash of light came from a nearby rooftop, but neither one of them paid any attention to it.

Kelly was waiting for Ali to go in. When he didn't open the door, she asked, "What's the matter? Why aren't you going in?" She didn't wait for a reply and answered. "Oh, I get it, being cautious, eh?"

"Yes," answered Ali and continued to look inside the room. He took a gun from his pocket and handing it to her. "Can you handle this?" Kelly took the gun from Ali. Holding it her right hand, she said, "I've got ten generations of Irish fighters in my genes. I could shoot even before I could drive. You would like to see a sample of my talent?"

"That's good, but stop boasting and come on." Ali opened the door. He stepped in the office and Kelly followed. It was a modest little room with a small but neat desk, probably for the receptionist. The only things on the desk were a telephone, a pen stand, some stationery items, and a note pad.

Ali whispered to Kelly, "It is surprising, the office is open but no one is inside." Kelly nodded in approval.

Ali started to move around in the room, looking for anything that could prove helpful, while Kelly began to scan the receptionist's desk. She found all drawers locked. A very meticulous receptionist, thought Kelly.

Ali caught Kelly's attention with his hand and raised his eyebrows to ask her if she had found anything. She mouthed back at him that the drawers were locked.

Ali took some deep breaths and Kelly looked at him puzzled.

Ali again took a few quick, deep breaths and said, “Burned papers. I can smell burned papers. Kelly, I have this feeling that we are too late.” His comment startled Kelly a bit and she looked at him.

“But I cannot see any burnt papers around,” said Kelly.

Ali started to head for an open door. He peeked in and found that it opened into a large, plush room. It was a richly furnished office and confirmed what Kelly had said about the lawyers—”doing well.” Kelly followed him into the other room.

There were two men sitting in the office. Both men were sitting opposite each other at a worktable. They had been propped up in such a way that it wasn’t easy to tell that they were not alive. Dave Williams, the senior partner, was sitting behind the desk and had caught a bullet right in his chest. Greg Eckard, the other partner, had taken a bullet to his head. Ashes were scattered all over the floor and in a wastebasket. The file cabinets were open and empty. Surprisingly, there was not a single paper on the worktable.

The moment Kelly made out that both men were not alive, she turned her face away. “Oh God, that is horrible!” was the only thing that she was able to say. She went pale for a few minutes and kept feeling like she was going to vomit. It was a very disturbing sight for someone like Kelly, who, unlike Ali, was not so accustomed to violence and death.

“You all right?” asked Ali quite casually. “It would be better if you wait in the other room until I inspect everything. I don’t think you can take all this.”

The sight of the two dead men brought back to Ali’s mind all the killings that he had done under the wrongful belief that he was doing them for the good of his nation. Kelly’s coughing brought him out of his thoughts. “No, I’m fine,” replied Kelly. “Let’s carry on with what we are doing. I haven’t come so far by car to sit in the other room.” She continued inspecting the room, determined to be

as much help to Ali as she could.

Ali cautiously moved about the room, scanning it, looking for anything unusual or out of place. He had put his weapon back in his pocket. He turned his attention to the two bodies. He took a few deep breaths and said, “He was here yesterday. He stood next to this man,” said Ali, pointing at Dave Williams, “shot him first and then the other. Kelly, don’t touch anything with your hands. The soot will very easily take our fingerprints. Be extra careful.”

It was not easy for Kelly, the skeptic, to accept his theory without reasons. What was Ali’s evidence? What did he see that could tell him this information and make him so sure? She questioned Ali. “How can you tell all that?”

“The powder burn on the side of his head and the rate of decomposition of the bodies tells me all this.”

“But you didn’t examine the bodies!” she exclaimed. “You didn’t even touch them! How can you comment on the decomposition rate?”

Ali tapped his nose. “Actually, I don’t have to. I have been on enough battlefields to be able to tell at a glance—or a sniff—how old a body is. Experience matters.”

“Understood, but how do you know the order of the killings?”

“Common sense. It is how I would have done it. Kill the man closest first so that he cannot jump on you. The other man will get to his feet to run or to fight back. The moment he does this, his full body is exposed and thus makes himself a better target. Your aim would be a sure shot in that case; you have more area to shoot at.”

“Something like the story of David and Goliath,” said Kelly. She moved around the worktable and stood next to Dave. Ali dumped the wastebasket out and started to sift through the ashes with a pen.

Kelly looked at Dave Williams' body and said, "Cold. So very, very cold. One word that can be used to describe all this. Gruesome. I don't understand how people can do such things! She looked at Ali sifting through the ashes of burnt paper and said, "I don't think you'll find anything there. Everything must have burnt out by now."

Ali looked back at her. "Maybe not everything burned; maybe there's a clue in here to help us. We have to rule out the possibility."

Kelly noticed that Dave had his right hand in his pocket. Picking up two pens from the desk, she used them like tongs to tug his hand out of the pocket. In his hand, he was clutching a cell phone. "Huh, now what do you suppose he was doing with this?"

Kelly's remark made Ali look up. He continued sifting through the ashes and replied, "Maybe trying to call for help."

The two of them had got so engrossed in their investigations that they forgot that the police were on their trail. The moment they heard a sound of sirens, they remembered that they were wanted and their photographs were on news channels all over the country. Ali left everything as it was and bolted toward the window. On seeing Ali jump like this, Kelly said, "Maybe they're not coming here. You're being apprehensive for no reasons at all."

Ali replied, "How many times will I have to tell you, I don't like to leave anything to chance. Come on, we are leaving right now! Hurry up and no arguments. I am alive because I am cautious." Ali raced for the door and Kelly ran after him.

CHAPTER 39

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ALI SWORE ALOUD WHEN HE saw four police cars coming toward the building that housed the lawyers' office. He immediately calculated that there should be around eight officers to deal with now and more force would be ready to respond if the call went out for backup. "Act quickly. What to do with Kelly?" said Ali aloud to himself. He had to make sure that Kelly escaped safely.

Ali and Kelly had hardly reached the door when they realized that the police officers were approaching the door. Ali was in the lead and he pushed Kelly back into the lobby. He asked her to run away, saying that it was a trap and they had been set up. Kelly was reluctant to go but Ali was not ready to listen to any arguments. "Go on and get out of here!" he shouted at her. "It is a trap! Under no circumstances do you shoot at the police. If you feel you will be caught, make sure that the weapon is not found on you. Understood?"

Ali was like a commander issuing instructions to his army. The ability to think clearly, even at the moment of crisis, was something that had no doubt kept Ali alive in many, many dangerous situations. He didn't wait for an answer from Kelly. He turned and fired at the door leading to the first floor. He kicked the door open and ran up

the stairs. The commander expected his soldiers to follow orders, even if there was only one soldier.

By the time the police had entered the building and spread all through it, Kelly had managed to find the back door and ran out into the street behind the building. Two metal trashcans stood like sentries on either side of the doorway. The street wrapped around the building and opened into a parking lot for the building's tenants and visitors. That's where the two BMWs stood, still waiting for owners who would never return.

Remembering the instructions of the commander, she dumped her weapon in one of the trashcans. She was desperate to stay with Ali and was ready to take any risk for him. "One attempt, Kelly," she said aloud to herself. She darted toward the cars, staying low all the time, and the moment she reached the driver's side of one of the cars, she stood upright and started to walk toward the backside of the building, acting as if she had just parked her car. Four officers had moved inside the building and the other four were covering it from the outside, two on the front and two on the back. When the officers on the back appeared with their guns drawn, she looked startled and scared. One of the officers shouted, "Freeze, ma'am! You cannot go in! Stay away from the building!"

Kelly acted as if she had no idea what was going on and said, "Why, officer? What's going on?"

The other officer spoke, "You are advised to stay by your car, ma'am; there's a killer inside!"

The word killer cut through Kelly. She had not expected to hear such a strong word for Ali; at least, not now that she had understood well Ali's plight. She took a few steps back toward the car. There was reluctance in her steps. She wanted to help Ali but was not able to do anything for him. His life was in danger. She saw other police officers moving inside the building. She ran toward a

trashcan, grabbed the lid, and hurled it toward one of the windows on the ground floor. The glass shattered and the sound caught the attention of the police officers. She ran back and stood next to her car.

Ali saw Kelly though and thought, Wow, Kelly! You cannot stay without doing something!

Kelly started to move toward the other side of the car and then started to walk toward the street, soon reaching the place where Ali had parked their own car.

Meanwhile, sound of gunshots and glass breaking erupted from the building intermittently. The longer it took, the more apprehensive she grew about Ali. She was desperate and would do anything to ensure Ali's safe escape.

The police sirens, followed by all the noise and gunshots, were enough to attract the attention of people in this otherwise quiet neighborhood. An hour had passed and more people were coming and going on the roads. Cars had slowly started to pour into the parking lot. An increasing number of people were gathering around the building, wanting to find out what was happening.

Kelly stood next to her car, waiting for some positive sign from Ali or an opportunity to get into the building. All of a sudden, the people standing on the roadside saw the glass of a second floor window shatter and a man fly out.

Kelly could see that the man was Ali. She ran toward him, but Ali signaled her to stop where she was. She protested, but Ali in a very strict voice directed her to stay. Even in this state, the strength of his voice did not falter. As much as she wanted to go to him, she knew enough that if he said, "stay away," he meant it and she had better do as he said.

Kelly stood there staring at Ali. Kelly was torn. She could not think of anything that could make her stay. She turned and headed

for the car. Ali tried to get on his feet, but fell down. He was badly wounded and with great effort, he got up again and started to limp. He started to walk in the opposite from Kelly.

Meanwhile, two officers appeared at the broken window and two more came out of the main door. They ran to seize Ali. The rest of the officers who were inside the building also came out running. Two of the officers began moving the crowd farther away, even as the people saw an injured Ali being searched and cuffed.

Sitting in the car, Kelly saw Ali being taken away in an ambulance. Her heart ached to see him like this—a pillar of strength and a fountain of truth and commitment being labeled a killer. She could do nothing but watch. She pulled out a bottle of water and took a big sip to quench her parched lips and throat. She had to act but she also needed time to think. She thought about calling Mohammed but dispelled the thought, unwilling to put him in danger.

Kelly continued to sit in the car and after a few minutes, she pulled the lawyer's cell phone from her pocket. She didn't know what to do with it and continued to look at it.

CHAPTER 40

* * *

OMAR WAS WATCHING EVERYTHING that happened with Ali and in the street from the rooftop of an adjacent building. Two Arab-looking men flanked him. He was disappointed to see Ali still alive. “It appears that these LA cops cannot be relied on to get anything right, not even a simple execution, yet they talk of excellence and ridding the world of unwarranted elements!” said Omar, shaking his head.

Everything had gone as planned by Omar except for the fact that Ali was still alive. He had thought that, along with these two American lawyers, he would be able to get rid of Ali, too. Two shots were supposed to kill three people. He had never desired to kill Kelly; he had other plans for her. Ali was right when he had said to Kelly that they had been set up.

One of the Arab men sought instructions from him about how they should proceed in these changed circumstances. Omar did not appreciate the question and stared at the man. He was clearly frustrated on seeing Ali alive. “Thick-skinned animal! I cannot take him lightly!” yelled Omar.

Ali was proving difficult to get rid of, and Omar had not

expected this. Ali was proving a hindrance, and a thorny one at that. He wanted his reward and Ali was keeping him away from it. He had answers to give. Failed plans were not accepted well by the higher-ups in the Establishment. He had already seen Ammar's displeasure during the video conference on learning that Ali might still be alive. Another failure of Omar to eliminate Ali would very likely prove much worse for him.

After giving a thought to the question asked, he replied, "Contact one of our local people, find out where they will take him, and we will arrange a little visit. I think I will have to deal with him directly. I need to be more aggressive."

CHAPTER 41

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AGENT NICK ROBINS STRETCHED his legs across a couple of seats while working on his theory and discussing it with his assistant. The pieces were falling into place, but many were still missing. He had paper and a pencil in his hand and intermittently would scribble notes. Over period of a few minutes, he spoke less and less until the pencil in his hand fell to the floor of the jet. He was asleep. FBI agents often worked beyond regular hours and sometimes they had to grab sleep wherever and whenever they could.

Nick slept a full half an hour before the co-pilot tapped him on the shoulder. “Agent, a message just came in.”

Nick woke up and smoothed out his shirt self-consciously. “Good. What is the word? Come on, give me good news and I’ll treat you to dinner.”

“Let’s just stick to the bet for the moment, Agent,” replied the co-pilot. “Your suspect was caught in LA and they are taking him to the hospital.”

The word hospital was a surprise for Nick and he put his feet down and sat up. The co-pilot continued. “He was shot after killing

a couple of low-life lawyers.”

“So it was LA, eh? Okay, you win.” He pulled out a twenty-dollar bill and handed it to the pilot. The pressure to hit the target fast intensified with the news of more deaths. Get ready to be hounded by the press sooner or later, Nick said to himself.

The co-pilot smiled at Nick. “Pleasure doing business with you, sir. Look forward to another deal. We’ll be landing within the hour.” He walked back to the cockpit.

Nick got up from his seat and sat in front of the laptop lying on a table. He started sending some instant messages to arrange for carrying out his duties conveniently while in Los Angeles. He requested a car with a driver and an officer who knew the city well.

LA is a warm, sunny, beautiful place, he thought. I wouldn’t mind at all if I wrapped this case up in Los Angeles, the land of the beautiful people. Maybe the bosses will even encourage me to take a few days’ vacation while I’m out there, as a reward for closing this case. He smiled at the thought.

CHAPTER 42

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THE JET ENTERED THE SKIES over Los Angeles right on time. It took them exactly twelve minutes to get clearance to land. The moment the jet landed, Nick rushed out and started to walk toward the lobby of the airport. He had just reached it when his phone beeped. He looked at the incoming number but didn't recognize it. The speaker on the other end introduced himself as an FBI agent and informed him that he had been assigned to assist Nick and where in the parking lot he would be waiting for Nick.

Nick quickly followed the signs to the parking lot and after several seconds of searching, he spotted the car his new assistant had described. Nick headed straight for it. The agent who had called Nick was standing near the car, wearing a jacket marked with "FBI" in large, white letters. The moment Nick reached the car, they shook hands and the officer asked, "Where to first, Agent? Crime scene or hospital?"

Nick didn't speak a single word; instead, he rooted out a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it over to the agent, who looked at the paper. "Why here, sir?" he asked Nick.

"Just do it!" he ordered.

The agent quietly passed the piece of paper to the driver, who was smartly dressed in a uniform, and said, "You heard the man. Do as he says."

The other agent climbed into the passenger seat, and Nick got in the back. The car moved forward. Nick looked out the window. His mind was racing and he seemed in no mood to be disturbed from his thoughts.

CHAPTER 43

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THE CAR CARRYING NICK stopped in front of a nondescript building that bore no indication that it housed CIA offices. Nick stepped out and asked the agent to wait there for him. He entered the building, moved to the first floor, and stood outside the first office on the right-hand side. It was a simple-looking office, but it contained state-of-the-art technology. A laptop and telephone sat on a table and nearby, behind a large and perfectly neat desk, sat Heidi, who was busy reviewing a pile of photographs.

BAM! The door flew open and Nick stood in the doorway, looking very unhappy.

Heidi was startled by the noise and even more startled to see Nick standing there. Before Heidi could react or say something, Nick began to knock at the door. She had known that she would meet him again, but she didn't think it would be so soon and she certainly didn't think Nick would come to her. He was the last person on earth from whom she expected a visit.

"Nick, how did you find me here?" She tried her best to smile but failed. She felt trouble coming.

"You're not the only one who can find things out, Ms. Spook,"

he shot back. He was in no mood to sweet-talk and the tone of his voice made that clear. He strode into the room, pulled out a chair, and made himself comfortable. After a few seconds, he put his feet up on her desk.

Heidi cleared her throat and raised her eyebrows on seeing Nick behave like this. “I am your guest for as long as you want,” informed Nick. “Actually, I am your guest until I get my answers.”

“Some coffee for you, Agent Nick,” asked Heidi, but she knew there was no point beating around the bush; however, she wasn’t ready to give in without a fight. “Alright, what do you want, Nick?” inquired Heidi in a slightly irritated voice. She would have done anything to avoid this confrontation.

Nick was just waiting for Heidi to ask this question. The moment he heard it, he pulled his feet off Heidi’s desk and sat upright in his chair. “The fucking truth, you bitch! Who is Ali? Who is Omar? And what the fuck are they up to? And what are you up to? I want to know everything today. I hope I am coming through loud and clear to you.” Nick was so angry that he forgot that he was talking to a colleague and not a suspect.

Heidi acted surprised. “I do not understand what you’re saying, Nick! What makes you think I know any of those people?” She tried to avoid answering his questions.

Nick wouldn’t have come that far to confront Heidi without sufficient evidence, and he had his entire arsenal in place. He whipped out two sets of papers from his pocket and slammed them down on her desk. “These, Ms. Spook. Now, according to the FBI field office in Kansas, they got a hit on Kelly Delaney after she used Dave Williams’ cell phone to call directory assistance. That is how we found them. I am sure you are aware of her also.”

Heidi still wasn’t ready to give in. “Yeah, so?” she asked, shrugging her shoulders.

“Yeah, except that was not the case,” he retorted. “I checked. We got a hit on a credit card they used to pay for gas and a motel room. It was not Kelly’s credit card. Now, considering no one at the Bureau had any information on the card that was used, and considering the tip came in hours before the other one, I am forced to wonder, who sent it in?”

Nick’s continuous stare was making Heidi uncomfortable. She could answer all the questions and end this interrogation in a few minutes, but her duty prevented this. She had to guard the secret as long as possible. She casually picked up the papers that Nick had slammed on her desk and started to study them. She arched one of her eyebrows. “Sharp, Nick, very sharp. You sure you do not want to change jobs. Why don’t you come over to this side?”

Nick was in no mood for any of this nonsense. He planted his palms on the desk and leaned toward her. “Cut out the bullshit, woman, before I arrest you for obstruction, conspiracy to commit murder, and anything else I care to come up with! I wouldn’t give it a second thought!”

Heidi snorted. “One call from me and you will be serving in Alaska—above the Arctic Circle—so you want to ease off on the testosterone? Do not try to intimidate me. It will not work.” She got up from her chair and began to pace back and forth behind her desk chair. This confrontation was just not going Heidi’s way and Nick was not ready to give in until he got answers to the questions troubling him.

“Fine. So you’ve decided that you’re not going to tell me the truth. How about this, Heidi? Why don’t I just go to the press? Better still, why don’t I just send everything I know and all the evidence I have to them anonymously? They may be incompetent boobs most of the time, but the liberal media loves a juicy CIA conspiracy story. There are still some good investigators out there

and we'll just let them do what they do best."

"Nick, you need to understand..." Heidi tried to continue but didn't know what else to say.

Nick couldn't take all the dilly-dallying tactics being used against him by Heidi. "No, you need to understand, Heidi. I'm here only for one thing. Answers to my questions!" His voice was just short of a shout.

"Nick, there are bigger issues at stake here than mere murders. Things have to be dealt with at the macro level."

"Mere murders? Innocent people dying is mere for the CIA? I love the statement!"

Heidi sighed and walked over to Nick. Her fists were clenched. Today, she was in no position to attack and was instead on the defensive. "In the game of international relations, a few pawns mean nothing. I'm sure you're aware that right now, major changes are happening in Iraq. The scene is really hot."

Nick was not ready to budge on his demands. He wanted directed and frank answers to the matter. "And you, the CIA, is trying to influence it, right?" said Nick with a sarcastic smirk on his face.

It was getting impossible to reason out the matter with Nick but Heidi continued. "Not at all! We would never do such a thing! We are merely trying to position ourselves to improve our relations with the country, no matter the result of those changes. After all, we have a responsibility toward world peace. Being well positioned helps us to be prepared for every eventuality. We are the people who have to give the answers in the end."

Nick's brows wrinkled on hearing this. "I get it. You support the opposition, but you also help the ruling party with cleaning their dirty laundry. That way, no matter who loses, you win! And you

didn't give a flying fuck how many innocent people have to die along the way!"

"Innocent?" Heidi whispered. "Please. Ninety percent of the kills were low-life scumbags! Their existence made no difference to anyone. They were involved in an international money-laundering operation. Ali and Omar have been doing our work for us; they just don't know it! By helping them, we earn brownie points with the ruling party."

Nick threw up his hands in amazement. "Good God! Plans within plots within double-crosses!" he exclaimed in an agitated voice. "What about that ten percent? What, they are a necessary sacrifice for the good of the nation? That might mean something if you would bother to ask them first, or if you were a part of the ten percent!"

"You want to know about this so-called innocent ten percent? They were suckers! All the money that these Iraqi charities were collecting from well-meaning Americans and others goes into what they call the Help Committee."

Nick shrugged his shoulders. "Sounds great."

"Yeah. The thing is, that is really under the control of the Supreme Party, their ruling council. The money then goes right back out to Dubai, Europe, North and South America. It funds most of their illegal activities! They are using our money against us, they have been cheating their own people, and they have been cheating us! Why don't you understand this?"

"Oh, please!" Nick retorted. "Climb down off your soap box, Little Miss Spook. You're no angel; the halo just doesn't fit! Enough of this! I want answers. Where is Omar?"

"I honestly don't know. My contact told me Omar would need my...assistance from time to time. I helped him to hire some helpers—we call them cleaners—and that was all. Omar doesn't

even know that I am CIA. He would not associate with us if he knew that.”

“What number did he call from when he asked for cleaners? Come on, give me the number.”

“Prepaid cell phones and a hotel,” said Heidi, dumping herself in her chair.

“Hotel? Well, it’s a start. Give me the information and I’ll get it checked out while I run down Ali.”

A silence fell between the two. Nick and Heidi stared at each other. Finally, Heidi flipped open a file on her desk, pulled out a paper, and held it out to Nick. He snatched it away and was about to stand and head for the door when Heidi caught his eye. “Mind you, you didn’t get that from me,” said Heidi.

Nick smiled. “Don’t worry. I wasn’t here and we never had this conversation,” He got up to walk to the door. When he reached it, he turned back toward Heidi and said, “But, you fuck with me the next time and I’ll bury you.” He stormed out of the room.

CHAPTER 44

* * *

THROUGHOUT THE DRIVE in the ambulance, Ali was unconscious. Once again, he could see images of his wife and his daughter moving around in his house in Iraq. This time, there was an addition: he saw Kelly moving in his old house in Baghdad. Kelly's image brought him back to consciousness. He opened his eyes and realized that he was in great pain and was being shifted from a stretcher to a hospital bed.

After this, came hours of tests, x-rays, and scans. The doctors pierced his body all over with needles. He gathered some energy and tried to converse with one of the nurses.

“Where am I, nurse?” asked Ali.

“You’re in City Hospital, Los Angeles,” replied the nurse.

“How long have I been unconscious?” asked Nick.

“More than an hour and a half.”

She then told him that because of a fall from a height and all the glass in his body, he was badly injured. After a few minutes, he again dozed off, helped by the painkillers in his bloodstream.

When Ali woke up again, he was feeling slightly better and

noticed the surroundings around him. He found himself in a typical hospital room, though his was the only bed in the room. A window looked out over the garden and beyond that was the parking lot. He tried to turn to his side but realized that he was hooked to several machines and they restricted his movement. Now he began to feel pain and he knew each place on his body that was injured. He was all alone and his thoughts wandered into thinking about Kelly. He missed her but he also thought about how, because of him, her life had gotten all messed up.

* * *

The elevator stopped and the door opened into the hallway of the hospital. It was a simple hospital hallway with linoleum and brightly lit fluorescent lights. Kelly wore a white coat with a stethoscope draped around her neck and looked to anyone who saw her as just another doctor making rounds. She exited the elevator and began walking down the corridor, which had rooms lined up on both sides. She wasn't sure in which room she would be able to find Ali, but she was sure that she would find a police officer standing guard outside it.

Twenty feet ahead, she saw a police officer standing outside Room 173. This must be Ali's room, thought Kelly. She tried to walk straight into the room, but the moment she reached for the door handle, the officer spoke. "Just a minute, ma'am. I'm sorry but no one is allowed to see the prisoner."

"I understand you're doing your job, officer, but I have a job to do, too. I was sent to check the man's condition and report back," said Kelly very confidently.

The officer replied, "I am sorry, doctor, but as per the instructions that I have received, only the floor nurse and the approved doctors are allowed in."

Kelly shot back a stern look at the officer. She wanted to convey

to the officer that she did not like his stopping her like this at all and that he was delaying something very important. "I'm the vascular surgeon. I have come to evaluate him prior to the surgery. I hope you understand what a vascular surgeon does. Unless I examine the patient, nothing can be done to help him, and his condition could get even worse very quickly. If you want, you can accompany me inside."

"Oh, so you're the doctor who knows about the operation?"

"Yes. Now, can I see him or do you want to delay his surgery?" Kelly asked in a curt voice. She sounded as if she would love to submit in her report that the delay in the surgery took place because of the police themselves and would blame the officer for any medical complication that arose from the delay.

"Uh... Well... Okay," said the officer reluctantly. He gave in to the demand of Kelly. The moment the officer relented, Kelly's tone turned soft and courteous. "Thank you, officer, for allowing me to do attend to my patient." With that, she turned the handle on the door, entered the room, and closed the door behind her.

She hurried to his bedside. Ali was crying in pain and didn't not pay attention to who had entered his room. "Ali, Ali," she said. "Ali! Look at me!"

He heard his name being spoken in a voice that sounded like Kelly's. When he turned his head toward the sound, he was shocked to see Kelly beside his bed. He smiled and said, "I didn't know you are a doctor, too. You have multiple talents, I must say." He felt happy to see her. He opened his mouth to speak again but only a groan came out. After taking a breath, he asked, "How?"

"All it takes is just a little digging to find out enough details to make sure you sound official," she replied. "They have got you scheduled for surgery, so we don't have much time. I know where Omar is going." She was stunned to see Ali in so much pain, but

she put on a strong face and continued to sound confident and unshaken.

Ali knew that Kelly was smart and well connected, but he did not expect that she could do so much in such little time. He also knew that she had special feelings for him and that she would go to any extent to help him. She was a person who didn't hesitate to take risks. She was a true friend and was proving her worth every moment and in every possible way. Ali looked at her and asked, "Kelly, why are you risking your life for me?"

"I think we shall discuss all this later. For the moment, our concern is Omar. Am I right?"

"Right." Ali kept looking at her. "Just give me the what and the how." His voice clearly conveyed the pain that he was feeling.

"The cell phone of that lawyer," said Kelly, smiling. "The one that I fished out of his pocket. It had a video camera in it."

Ali spoke with great effort. "Don't tell me he taped his own murder?" In spite of all the hardships and the pain Ali had endured to this point, he still hadn't lost his sense of humor.

"Well, in a way he did. He must have switched it, or it got switched on accidentally when things started to go south, as we say. He kept the phone in his pocket; therefore, the video is black, but the audio is good. Worth a listen. It talks about Omar leaving the country."

"Okay, so where is he going? Where does he want me to follow him now?"

"South America. Some place in Venezuela; he didn't say where exactly."

Ali swore in anger, and then realized that he had a woman standing near him. "Oh, I am sorry, Kelly. Forgive me. I appreciate the help, but without knowing where in the country the Supreme

Party is going, it's not worth much to us. I'm sure Venezuela is not a small country."

Ali was surprised at his ability to utter the forbidden word openly as he, and others like him, had been trained never to speak the name of the Establishment in front of strangers. He interpreted this mean one of only two things: the last of the Establishment's control over him had crumbled away, or Kelly was no longer a stranger. Ali realized that both were indeed true. The Supreme Party had lost a tireless and brave soldier and Kelly was without doubt no longer a stranger to Ali.

"What I can't figure out is why they would be going there," said Kelly. "I thought they were in Iraq. Iraq, Russia, Dubai, all are understandable, but not Venezuela."

"The main army is in Iraq, but the leaders move around the world. That's not important; right now, I have to get out of here!"

Kelly looked at him. "Ali, there's no way. I was lucky to get in here at all. Now, tell me. Is there someone I can call to help you?"

"Help? No, I have to escape. Now!"

"Ali, think. They cannot know you are connected to the attack in New York, and once the forensics come back on these two dead bodies in LA, they'll know you didn't kill them. I don't think running away from here will do you any good."

"Kelly, they are not going to leave me. I fought with members of your police force!"

"I know the circumstances are bad, but they're not hopeless. We can still get you bail."

"What's that?"

"You post money to get released."

Ali took a long breath and spoke as if he had understood

everything. “Ah, a bribe. I do not have enough resources for that. I have no idea where my stuff is now.”

“No, no. It’s not a... Forget it. Just tell me if I can call someone to help you.”

Ali shook his head. “There’s no one I trust. Not now!”

They continued to think about who could come to their rescue. The only thing that they thought would work now was to get bail and the only person coming to their mind was Mohammed; however, there were many ifs and buts attached to his name.

CHAPTER 45

* * *

ALI AND KELLY CONTINUED in conversation, unmindful of the fact that their enemy were keeping tabs on them and just waiting for an opportunity to pay them a visit in the hospital. If Kelly could find her way inside the hospital and to Ali's room, so could others.

DING. The elevator bell rang in the hallway of the hospital—the same elevator that had brought Kelly up. The elevator door opened and Omar and four men walked out. Two of the men looked like Arabs and the other two were clearly American. All four were professional hit men and each one held a gun in his hand. A nurse nearby noticed their weapons. She let out a shriek. In an instant, one of the Americans leveled his gun at her and fired. The nurse fell to the floor.

The sound of the gunshot caught the attention of the officer standing guard outside Ali's room. He saw the nurse collapse and immediately drew his gun, dropped on one knee, and fired at the American. Everyone in the hallway ran for cover as a gun battle ensued.

Upon hearing the sound of shots, two police officers ran toward

their colleague from the opposite side of the hallway and joined the battle.

Ali, though very groggy from all the medicines that had been pumped into him, recognized the sound. “Something’s going on outside,” he said to Kelly. She turned toward the door to see what was happening, but Ali asked her to stop. He began to get up from his bed.

“What the fuck are you up to, man?!” she uttered. “Let me check what’s happening outside.”

“You do not need to check; I know what is happening. It must be Omar. He has come here looking for me. Help me! Get me out of this! Quick, Kelly.” She could hear the helplessness in his voice. It cut her to the core.

Kelly opposed the idea of Ali moving from his bed, telling him that he could not and he should not attempt any such thing. “Are you insane?” she demanded. “You cannot do this to yourself. Man, you need medical care.”

“I can’t lie here and wait to die!” he shot back. “I hope you do not want Omar to catch me on a day when I cannot even defend myself. Just get me out of here!”

Even before Kelly could say or do anything, he ripped out his IV lines and pulled off his EKG leads. Kelly grabbed the IV pole and used it to bend the bed frame.

Out in the hallway, the three police officers were giving Omar and his men a tough fight. BAM! A bullet hit one of the officers and he fell on the floor.

By this time, Ali had managed to reach the door of his room. He peeked out and saw the wounded officer lying just beyond the door. Ali came out of the room in a hospital gown, grabbed the gun from the injured officer’s hand, and started to shoot at Omar

and his men.

Kelly was close behind Ali, ready to catch him if he began to faint from the effort.

Omar saw Ali and swore to himself. This was it. This was his third and final chance to eliminate Ali and secure the praise and the blessings of Ammar and the Establishment. He would not fail this time.

He could see his target now and took aim at Ali. Kelly saw him doing so and she pushed Ali away from the line of fire. This caught Ali by surprise and he nearly fell down. The bullet hit one of the wheelchairs in the hallway. Kelly grabbed a gurney and shoved it with all of her might at Omar, and it slammed into his left arm. “You bitch! I will tame you! You have been causing too much trouble for me!” He dove for cover behind the nurse’s station.

Omar’s four men and the police officers continued to exchange gunfire. One of the officers hit one of the men, who fell to the floor. An officer doubled over in pain when a bullet hit his leg. The officer managed to drag himself behind a pillar. One of the officers moved to one side, away from the gunfire, and called for reinforcements on his radio. A bullet just missed him by barely an inch and slammed into the wall with a resounding THUD!

Amongst all this chaos, Ali spotted an oxygen tank resting on the floor beside the nurse’s station. Ali took careful aim at the cylinder with the police officer’s gun and pulled the trigger. The tank exploded with a deafening concussion. Omar flew into the air, amidst pieces of the tank and the nurses’ station, and hit the wall. One of his men was severely injured and the others quickly found places to hide.

DING! The elevator door opened and four more police officers rushed out. The surviving members of Omar’s team and the new police officers started to exchange fire. Kelly saw their chance to

escape from the hospital. She ran toward Ali and helped him stand up straight. Wrapping one of his arms around her shoulder, she said, "Come on, we have to get you out of here!"

Ali was feeling exhausted. He looked at Kelly and said, "I do not think I can make it, Kelly."

Kelly didn't pay heed to what he was saying and started to pull him toward the opposite end of the hallway. Ali again protested. This time she replied, "When I said you will not be able to leave, you wanted to, and now when I am telling you you've got a chance to leave, you do not want to. You are a funny man. Come on, mister! We are leaving!" She practically dragged Ali down the hall, and they disappeared through an exit door.

The police officers' bullets claimed the last of Omar's men and then the officers moved among them cautiously, check to see which ones were still alive. One of the officers started to scan the area for any men who might be hiding while another officer rushed into the Room 173 to check on Ali. Another police officer started to arrange for getting the injured removed from the scene.

Kelly had managed pull Ali to one of the service doors leading out of the hospital and then toward the parking lot. With great amount of effort, she dragged him to the car and helped him to get into the passenger seat. She herself hopped into the driver's seat and they took off.

CHAPTER 46

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WITHIN NO TIME, there were ten police cars in the parking lot of the hospital. The hallway and the corridor were blocked off with the characteristic yellow tape that declared a place a crime scene. Police officers carried out investigations throughout the entire floor. One investigator directed a hospital maintenance man to switch the elevator from automatic function to manual function, and then the investigator assigned a police officer to duty in the elevator. He instructed the officer to make sure that no one except investigators or other police officers got off on that particular floor.

Agent Nick Robins came out of the elevator and walked down the hallway. He looked around, trying to make out what exactly must have happened. The linoleum had been torn in many places and many florescent lights had shattered due to the impact of the explosion. Glass and rubble were scattered all around. Just outside the nurses' station, a police officer sat on a gurney, receiving first aid from a doctor and nurse. Nick walked up to the officer and asked, "So, Wyatt Earp...any survivors from this shootout?"

The doctor didn't care for Nick's humorous comment. For him, the police officer was a patient who needed care and rest, and Nick was being an intrusive police officer, disrupting the comfort of his

patient. The doctor continued with his examination and said, “I advise that this should wait for a few minutes. I need to—”

The doctor raised a penlight to examine the officer’s eyes. The officer shoved the doctor’s hand and said, “Thank you, doctor, but that won’t be necessary. I’m fine; it’s just a bump from when I dove for cover. I would really appreciate it if you could tell me about my men. How are they?” The officer slid off the gurney and onto his feet.

The doctor signaled to the nurse to pack up the first-aid kit and she began the task. The doctor, the officer, and Nick took a few steps towards the hallway. “Both are still in surgery, but they should pull through,” reported the doctor. “The rest have been examined and the ones who needed first-aid have received it.”

“Good to hear,” replied Nick. “So what about my suspect?”

“Before you get busy with your work, I would like to say one thing,” said the doctor. “We have been very lucky that none of the other patients or hospital staff came out during the shootout. The nurse who was shot at is out of danger. The hospital administration is not very happy about the whole incident and demand that the police guarantee that incidents like these do not happen again. We would also be happy if the media do not highlight the whole incident. This kind of publicity is not good for the hospital.” The doctor brought his hand forward, shook hands with both Nick and the officer, and walked away.

The officer looked at Nick. “We’ll take care of this later. As for your suspect, you seem to be mistaken. As far as the LAPD is concerned, he is our suspect.”

Nick walked to Ali’s room, threw open the door, and stuck his head into the room. “Oh really, officer? Well, we can discuss that later, but for now, where is he? Huh? I don’t see him in the room. Maybe he’s gone for some examination, eh?”

The officer was reluctant to answer the question for the simple reason that he did not know where Ali was either. He had escaped from police custody. “Ah... Well... Actually...” The officer tried to speak but he knew his stammering only underscored that Nick was right.

Nick very well knew the answer to the question he had asked the officer. By this time, it was very clear to Nick that Ali was not an easy person to handle. Nick pulled out a picture of Kelly and held it up for the officer to see. “He is gone, and she helped. Right?” asked Nick.

The officer accepted the fact that Ali had escaped. “How did you...?” he asked.

Nick shrugged his shoulders and said, “That’s why he’s mine! Do you have any leads into this case?”

“Well...a partial license plate,” the officer replied. “But the witness said it looked like a rental.”

“Yeah, probably was. But the alias might lead somewhere,” said Nick while moving down the hall to the chalk outlines that marked the places where the dead bodies lay. Nick took a round of the hallway, came back, and stood near the officer.

“What about the assault team? Any information on them?” asked Nick.

“Undoubtedly, they were professionals, but that’s all we know about them. It’s surprising that the suspect actually took out two of them himself.”

After thinking for a minute or so, Nick asked, “Any survivors from their side?”

“None at all.”

The officer’s statement, “the suspect actually took out two of them himself” stuck in Nick’s mind, and he made a mental note of

it. He put his hands in the pockets of his jacket and stood looking at the rubble all around. “Yeah, well, for the suspect, this was kind of personal. I wonder what his next move is going to be. With Omar dead, is his mission over? Does he go home now?”

“Well, there, I don’t think I can help you,” said the officer.

Nick was silent for several seconds and then said excitedly, “I think I know someone who can help us find answers! Thank you, officer. Keep me updated on your people undergoing surgery. Wish them all the best and a quick recovery.” He shook hands with the officer, then turned and hurried down the hallway toward the elevator.

CHAPTER 47

* * *

ALI, ALL BANDAGED UP, lay on a portable hospital bed and Kelly sat next to him on a stool, tending to his wounds. He awoke and tried sitting up. The attempt made him whimper in pain. “Oh, my back!” he cried out. He saw Kelly sitting next to him, applying medicine to one of his wounds. He looked all around and discovered that he was in a living room of a seemingly modest home. The windows had heavy curtains, which were drawn, and a large couch sat against the wall.

Kelly was happy to see him awake. “Welcome back,” she said, smiling. Ali smiled back and asked, “How long have I been out?”

“Would you like to drink some juice?” asked Kelly, walking over to a kitchen shelf.

“Kelly, do not avoid answering my question. Tell me how long I have been out.”

Kelly poured some juice in a glass and brought it to him. “Not long. Just around two weeks.”

“Two fucking weeks?! At this moment of crisis, I slept for two weeks?!” Ali was shocked to hear this. He had never thought that he could lie unconscious for such a long time. He tried sitting up

once again and started looking around restlessly.

Kelly tried to get Ali to lie flat on the bed again. “First of all, you were not asleep; you were unconscious and you could not have done anything about it. Second, take it easy. We are safe.”

For Ali, being in one place for fourteen days spelled danger. He pushed Kelly’s hands away and forced himself up to a sitting position. “We’ve been here all this time? Are you insane? We need to get out of here. Omar...”

“It’s all right, Ali. We will not be found. I am saying we are safe. Trust me; I have spent enough time with you. I know what you consider safe.” She hoped to assuage Ali’s concerns.

“You think it is my safety that I’m worried about? I don’t mind if I die, but I will not close my eyes till I...” His voice faded. Kelly offered him the glass of juice and he gulped it down.

“How do you know that we are safe?” he asked Kelly after a few seconds.

“I called Mohammed,” she replied. The moment she uttered Mohammed’s name, Ali looked up at her. She kept quiet for a few seconds and then added, “You went unconscious the moment you sat in the car. Once I drove away from the hospital, I had to think fast about what to do. I was sure that the FBI must be hot on our trail. Omar had been severely injured in the explosion that day, but I couldn’t rule out the possibility of him or his men looking for us. The only person that I could think of to turn to for help was Mohammed. I figured he was the one person we could trust. He called a friend and arranged for us to stay here. So don’t worry—there is no trail for the police to follow.”

Ali took a deep breath and said a short prayer. He looked up at Kelly. “Thank you, my dear. I am again in your debt.”

“Well, it was not me entirely,” Kelly explained. “You have

something else to thank, too.” She held up Ali’s military ID. “Now it has a slight dent in them.” Ali took the badge from her and kissed it. “You were wearing it, and it seems a bullet bounced off of it. So you were partially protected by it.”

Ali had tears in his eyes. He took Kelly’s hand and said, “Well, it seems Allah was protecting me. Still, I am in your debt. It is Allah who has brought us together. If you would not have been there, I do not think I would have been able to escape. I would have been sleeping somewhere under the earth by now.”

Kelly bowed her head. “I am humbled, but please don’t say anymore. I’m not used to all this.” Kelly took Ali’s hand in her hands and said, “Allow me to tell you the good news. You can go home. You have done your work. It’s been all over the news—Omar is dead!” There was excitement in her voice. After all, Ali’s efforts had gotten them this result. He should have been the first one to get the news. Kelly anticipated that sharing the news with Ali would certainly raise his spirits tremendously.

Ali let out a short snort. “What are you talking about? Omar is dead?! How I wish I could believe this news!”

Kelly was shocked at Ali’s reaction. She had waited fourteen days to relate this wonderful news to Ali and celebrate with him, and his reaction was exactly the opposite of what she had expected.

“You want me to believe this news—news that was reported by the same guys who reported that I was the killer back in New York, and that all of us were dead?”

Kelly threw her hands in the air and in an agitated voice said, “So, what? You think he’s still alive?”

Ali looked at her. “Kelly, I understand how you are feeling at this moment, but you do not know people like Omar. They have nine lives! Until I stand over his cold, dead body, I assume nothing! Now, how am I?” Slowly, he slid toward the edge of the bed and

tried to swing his legs over the side. He could barely budge them.

“Well, as good as we could make you. The doctor we brought in thinks you have blood clots in your legs. If they break free, they could cause a heart attack or stroke. We need to take you to a hospital.”

Ali shook his head vigorously. “I need to get to the airport. I’m catching a flight to deal with the Supreme Party leadership.”

Kelly opposed the idea immediately. “You think I will let you commit suicide like this? You are not going anywhere. You are not moving anywhere all alone.”

“It is a small price to pay, Kelly,” answered Ali. He was staring at the ceiling. He could see no way out of this. As a result, there was a feeling of frustration coming over him. Already everything had been delayed by fifteen days, and now his legs were not ready to support him. He wanted only one thing: to get back at them, as Americans were fond of saying.

Ali took a minute or two to compose himself. “Will the doctor be a...problem?” he asked.

“In LA? You clearly do not know how things work around here. He was well paid and will keep quiet.” Kelly stood up and walked toward the kitchen. She understood that she would have to be patient with Ali until he recovered completely. He was a man used to action and having control over situations, but now nothing seemed to be the way he would like them to be.

Kelly stood in front of the open refrigerator door, trying to decide what to cook for Ali. He was very weak and a nutrition meal was essential for helping him recover.

“Kelly, come here,” Ali called out. She walked over to his bed. He gave her a piercing glance and asked her, “Why would you do all this for me? Why... Why have you done all this? Why have you

been trying to help me?”

All the while that Ali had been unconscious, she'd had to spend a lot of time with herself and to think about where exactly her heart lay. The events of the last few days had helped to bring clarity in her thoughts and feelings. Walking back to the kitchen, she called back to him, “Love played a major part in all this. Don't tell me you are not aware of it.”

Ali was quiet for a minute, not knowing what exactly to say. It felt odd to hear the word “love” in this kind of a state. He shot back at her, “Only a part? And what influenced the rest of it? You better tell me.”

Kelly responded from the kitchen. “Well, I will tell you about the rest. Are you aware of the origin of my name?”

Ali had finally accepted the fact that he didn't have the strength to stand, at least for the time being. He lay back on the bed and while doing so let out a short whimper. Once he was settled, he replied, “Ah, I remember, you had mentioned it one time that your family came from Ireland.”

Kelly came back into the room, this time with a soup bowl in her hand. She raised the back of the bed and handed over the bowl to Ali. She sat on the stool beside his bed, the place where she had spent a lot of time in the last fourteen days. “Do you know the history of that poor land?” She pointed at the bowl. “It's not very warm so have it right away,” ordered Kelly like a stern nurse.

Ali took a spoonful. “I know that Ireland's been deeply divided for a long time.”

“Yes, my land has been deeply divided for a long time, and for generations the men of my family have fought in the battle to unite our country.”

Ali, taking another spoonful, commented, “A noble cause, eh?”

Kelly snorted. “A pointless cause. It’s only people like you who think that it’s a noble cause. The graveyards are full of men fighting for noble causes, and what does it achieve? Nothing! Nobody thinks of their family! How long can a mother keep sending her sons to die untimely deaths?”

Ali was surprised to see Kelly talking with so much emotion. He had never suspected that this little woman had so much bottled up inside her. Her perspective about the whole thing was so different from his, and yet she was supporting him. She was a riddle for Ali, and every now and then, he found out something new about her.

Kelly continued. “I thought if I helped you to find Omar, that would be enough. Now, I’m sorry I ever learned of his true destination.”

“But you did,” Ali replied, “and now I know what I have to do.”

“No, Ali, you think that you know what you want to do. There is a difference. Stop this, Ali. Stop it finally. Right now. Just...turn away and...let us—” She didn’t finish her sentence.

“Run away and hide? Is this what you are suggesting to me?” asked Ali.

Kelly took a deep breath and looked at Ali. He had finished his soup and she took the bowl from him. She put her hand on his knee and said, “Ali, it is not running away. What I am asking is for a life of peace for you. Go away and live in peace.”

Ali heard everything that she said and what she left unsaid. Kelly stood in front of him, promising him a life full of love and care. She stood in front of him questioning everything that he was fighting for. He did not want to have to choose one or the other; he wanted his revenge and Kelly both. However, if asked to make a choice, he was sure of what he wanted most.

Ali looked in the other direction and said, “I’m going after the

Supreme Party. If you want, wait for me, and I'll meet you wherever you like after that." Nothing could distract him from his mission and neither would he be able to take a no from Kelly.

She stood next to his bed with the soup bowl in hand. There was pain in her eyes. After a few seconds, she said, "Or? That sentence sounds like it should be followed by an or, Ali."

Ali quickly turned his face to her and said, "Or come with me and help. But come only if you are ready to do what must be done. I hope you understand what I'm trying to say."

Kelly started to walk toward the kitchen. The moment she walked away, he felt his life leaving him. He wanted her to stop and talk to him. He wanted to know what she had decided. Kelly came back after a minute. She stood next to the bed. "I guess, when you say that I must be ready to do what must be done, you mean that I must be ready to kill."

"It's your choice, Kelly."

Kelly had her arms crossed over her chest and seemed like a pillar of strength and determination. "If I am the one who has to make a choice, I choose you. I don't agree with your choice, but I'll stand with you, no matter what."

Kelly's words brought a smile to his face. "You would make a fine warrior, my dear. If we survive this, you should have only male children."

Kelly giggled at what she heard. "What, you do not want girls? Don't tell me!"

They had made their choices and decisions. Now, it was time to discuss the future and as they looked at the future, they saw themselves together.

Ali stretched out his hand toward Kelly's and clenched it tightly. "No, it's just that, with the blood of two fighters such as us in their

veins, any girls would scare potential suitors away. I don't want to be stuck with a bunch of old maids!"

Kelly laughed at hearing this and put her arms around his neck. "Well, we'll have to see what we can do about making them a bit more...feminine."

Kelly put her lips on Ali's and they kissed desperately. Ali signaled Kelly to slip into the bed with him and she obliged. They explored each other's body and made love. This time, it was different. With all the passion, it was more restful and gratifying.

Afterward, Kelly took a short nap on Ali's shoulder. Ali was awake and feeling better; she was happy and relaxed. She woke when Ali kissed her on her forehead. She got dressed and then helped Ali to do the same.

Kelly walked around the room for a while. Ali asked her to switch on the television; he wanted to see the news. For the last fourteen days, he had been cut off from the world. He wanted to make up for this as soon as possible.

After watching the news, Ali asked Kelly, "So this is your country. How best do we get out of here and reach Venezuela?"

"There's something we have to figure out first," answered Kelly. "Where exactly in Venezuela is the Supreme Party going?"

Suddenly, Mohammed walked into the room. "Maybe I can help." He stood there looking at them. Kelly walked to Mohammed and hugged him. Ali turned and was surprised to see Mohammed standing there. "Wha- How did you get here?" asked Ali. His smile seemed to be ever expanding. The fact that he still mattered to Mohammed made him feel exhilarated. Though their modus operandi and their philosophies may differ, their goals were the same. Mohammed satisfied Ali's intellectual needs.

Mohammed walked up to Ali's bed and said, "I flew out here a

few days ago when Kelly said that you were nearly recovered.” They hugged each other.

Ali looked at Mohammed and asked, “But...why?”

Mohammed sat down on the stool beside the bed. “Originally, I was going to try and convince you to stop all this, but...” He didn’t complete the sentence and went quiet.

“But what, Mohammed? Say what you have to say.”

Mohammed nodded his head. “Things have changed, and so has the way I think.”

This, too, left Ali surprised. A peace-loving man—a man who tried every argument to convince him to leave the path of violence, a man whom Ali’s every justification for violence failed to convince—approved of his means today. He was sure it must be something extremely compelling that had prompted Mohammed to change his mind. Ali wanted to know the reasons. Astonished, he asked, “Why Mohammed? What happened?”

Mohammed said nothing; instead, he moved to the TV and tuned in CNN. After a few minutes, a report covering a rally in Iraq lit up the screen. The people participating in the rally were beaten mercilessly. Turning toward Ali and Kelly, Mohammed said, “Our people continue to suffer. I decided to act.”

“I understand that everything that is happening is wrong and disturbing, but what can you do?” asked Kelly.

Ali was sitting on his bed with his legs hanging over the side. “Mohammed, why do I have a feeling that you can find the Supreme Party for us?” There was a hint of anticipation. He wanted the answer in the affirmative.

Mohammed switched off the television. He smiled at Ali and said, “Already done! I contacted some good, old friends—veterans I served with long ago—and they found out about a base out in the

Netherlands Antilles.”

Kelly had never heard the place and out of curiosity asked, “What are they?”

“A cluster of islands off the coast of Venezuela, near Aruba,” replied Mohammed. He had done his homework, and he had answers to all the questions that Ali and Kelly would ask him. While Kelly had spent the past fourteen days tending to Ali, he had spent that time gathering the necessary information. One of their team had been injured, but that was no reason to stop the work. Their nation needed whatever help they could provide.

On hearing Aruba mentioned, Kelly said, “Aruba? I always wanted to go there.” Kelly was back to her child-like enthusiasm. With the commander rising from his sleep, the pressure of managing the show was lifted from her shoulders.

“First things first, Kelly,” said Ali. “How do we get to Venezuela?”

“That shouldn’t be much of a bother,” she answered. “I would say, lets head south and cross into Mexico. From there, we grab a flight. If you’re truly worried that the police are still looking for you, it’s the best way that I can think of.” Kelly looked at Mohammed and then Ali.

Ali was not satisfied with Kelly’s suggestion. He wanted to discuss the pros and the cons of her plan. “Won’t the police think of that?”

“Maybe,” replied Kelly, “but only if they are smart. If you want to really confound them, we could go north to Canada.”

“I’ve stayed alive by always assuming my opponents are smart. If I were your police, I’d expect both of those moves. I have had no reason to believe that your police are not smart.” Ali smiled because he was expecting Kelly to joke about his habit of being cautious.

Kelly smiled back but didn't comment. She understood the gravity of the discussion. She asked Ali to suggest an alternative.

"We just do as your Biblical Daniel did—walk right into the lions' den! What say?" His eyes darted from Mohammed to Kelly. He wanted their approval.

Kelly was surprised by his statement. "You know our Christian Bible?"

"My father saw the value of all faiths and taught us about many of them; Christianity was one of them. Take the best of all religions and you shall grow as a human being."

There was silence in the room. After a few minutes, Kelly spoke. "Okay, so...what are you saying? We...go to the airport?"

"Yes. With proper disguises, we should be able to slip through security. Besides, if we're getting a flight to another country, they shouldn't be watching too closely."

Mohammed chipped in, "And if we're traveling as a family, we'll look even less suspicious." Mohammed's statement conveyed beyond doubt that he approved of the plan and that he was in it with them.

Kelly and Ali both stared at Mohammed in silence. Kelly was the first one to speak. "We?"

Ali spoke next. "No, my friend, you can't."

Mohammed was pacing around the room. He looked at both of them as he continued to pace, and said, "Do not argue with me on this point, Ali. I must do what I can to help the nation and our people. I know what I am doing."

Ali thought it to be his moral duty to apprise Mohammed of the dangers that lay ahead. "It will be dangerous. It could cost us anything and everything."

Mohammed, in a voice reflecting confidence, said, “Danger and I are old friends. I have taken this decision after thinking a lot. There is no other way to stop all this.”

Kelly walked up to Mohammed and stood in front of him. She held on to his left arm and said, “Mohammed, this is life and death!”

“I’ve lived a good life. A man of my years can either live in fear of death or face it with courage, and it is time to face it with courage. I cannot escape my responsibilities any longer. I have tried doing things my way, but that does not seem to be working. We need some quick results.”

Ali was happy to have his friend with him. The trio was back together. This rejuvenated their strength and commitment towards their mission. “Then we shall face it together,” said Ali.

Mohammed was happy to be a part of everything that was happening. He had a role to play and a chance to do something for his nation. He looked at Ali excitedly and said, “Ah, perhaps we should rethink your plan, my friend. Let us drive to the border. That will let you rest some more, and then we will get a flight once we are in Mexico. I know some people there who can help us.”

Both Ali and Kelly accepted the suggestion.

CHAPTER 48

* * *

ALI WAS RIGHT WHEN he had said, “Men like Omar have nine lives.” Omar was still alive. Mohammed was unaware that he had led Omar to the house that was being used as a hideout by Ali and Kelly. Unaware of the fact that they were being observed from outside, they prepared to move out on their journey to Venezuela. Mohammed advised Kelly to pack whatever food was present in the house. It was important to feed Ali as often as possible.

Omar had hidden himself behind some bushes about one hundred yards from Ali and Kelly’s safehouse, and he watched the house through binoculars. Four large, armed men were working with Omar and, as Omar had instructed, three of them had taken up positions behind cars or adjacent homes; the fourth man stood beside Omar. Omar wore a bandage on his forehead and the right side of his body still bore bruises from the explosion. Still, his injuries could not deter him from seeking vengeance. He had to get rid of Ali. Ali was the reason that the leadership was not ready to trust Omar. It was only because of Ali that the mission was still unfinished. Ali stood between Omar and his success and so he had to be eliminated.

Omar looked at the house carefully through his binoculars.

“Ah, perfect, there’s Mohammed’s car. You see,” he said to the man standing beside him, “I told you he would lead us right to our quarry. It did take a little time, but it was worth the wait.”

The man agreed and acknowledged that Omar was right about Mohammed. The man added, “Sir, we’ve got a minor problem. There are people in some of these other houses.”

The statement set Omar’s mind racing. The more people in the area, the difficult it would be to deal with Ali, Kelly, and Mohammed. More people meant more chaos and more witnesses. Omar turned his head and refocused his binoculars at another nearby house. Through one window, he saw a man was dialing his phone; in another house, a woman was playing with her child on a front porch.

Omar swore. He felt frustrated. Every time his target came close, something would happen to push him away from it. “All right, fall back for the moment,” he hissed at the man. “We’ll follow them and wait for a better chance to get them. We cannot afford to be noticed.”

The man nodded and signaled to the other three men. They all dropped back and began to walk back to join the fourth man while Omar continued to observe the house through his binoculars. He saw Ali coming out of the house and Kelly and Mohammed were close behind. Ali looked very weak. He got into the back seat, while Kelly took the passenger seat, and Mohammed got behind the wheel. They drove off.

The moment Omar and his men saw the car pull out of the driveway and onto the road, they rushed toward their cars and started to follow. In the distance, sound of sirens grew steadily louder.

CHAPTER 49

* * *

MOHAMMED STEPPED on the gas and headed straight for the interstate highway. Once they were actually on the road and cruising at highway speed, the tension started to build. Each of them was quiet and lost in their own thoughts and wondering what the future had in store for them. Mohammed switched on the radio and searched for a news station.

The trio was unaware that Omar and his men were following them nor did they realize that a helicopter was tracking them from overhead. The moment Mohammed's car entered the highway, unmarked police cars had fallen in behind Omar's car and those of his men. Ali, Kelly, and Mohammed were at the head of this convoy, completely unaware that their pursuers were so close to them.

After a couple hours, Mohammed saw a sign indicating the approach of the United States-Mexico border. Mohammed said a short prayer. Kelly turned and looked at Ali and then at Mohammed. A moment of truth was fast approaching. Within a few minutes, they joined a line of cars waiting for their turn to

cross into Mexico.

There were a few cars between Omar's and Mohammed's cars. One of the men who was in Omar's car dialed his cell phone and connected with Omar's men in the other cars. Once their cars had also stopped in the line, all the men exited their cars and started to walk toward Mohammed's car. Simultaneously, Nick and his SWAT team of ten top officers of the force moved forward to surround them all.

Mohammed was concentrating on inching his car forward as the line of cars moved; however, Ali looked through the windows, observing the happenings all around them. His eyes then fell on the rearview mirror and stopped. He saw a lot activity behind them. The people moving toward their car moved with a professionalism that Ali recognized instantly. He spun around and saw Omar's men closing in on them. He grabbed a gun and said to Mohammed and Kelly, "Arm yourself! Things are about to get lethal here! They found us!"

Ali's comment made Mohammed and Kelly turn around immediately and they saw the men closing in on them. Mohammed and Kelly immediately grabbed their weapons. They did not want to be the first ones to fire.

"Bastards!" exclaimed Kelly.

Ali addressed Mohammed. "In case the fireworks start, you concentrate on the driving and Kelly and I shall take care of them." Once again, the commander had taken charge. He was ready for the battle.

Omar and his men opened fire on the three. People in other cars started to scream and dive for cover in their cars while others honked their horns insistently and quickly pulled their cars out of the line and sped away. Ali and Kelly returned fire.

Nick heard the gunshots. "Shit! We're too late! Come on, people,

let's get in there! Evacuate the bystanders and stop Omar!"

Omar and his men continued to close in on Ali, Kelly, and Mohammed. The three of them abandoned Mohammed's car and took cover behind other cars. Ali managed to hit some of the men, stopping their advance and buying some nearby woman and children time to get out of the line of fire. Nick and his team members observed that Ali and Kelly were trying their best to protect the innocent citizens in the area. He wasn't bad after all, He reasoned.

The helicopter landed nearby, sending a fresh wave of panic through the crowd. The door of the craft flew open and Heidi jumped out, her gun aimed straight ahead and an expression of intense determination on her face.

After the next burst of gunfire, Ali heard screams cut through the air. He turned in the direction of the sound and saw four children lying on the ground, blood quickly soaking through their clothes. Ali turned to Kelly and mouthed, Follow me. She nodded. From behind the car where he had found shelter, he stood up and laid down suppressive fire. Omar and his remaining men sought cover. Ali continued to fire at his enemies' positions as he walked around the front of the car. Kelly was right behind him. Ali rushed forward to the first child, knelt down, and picked her up, tossed her over his shoulder, and stood up again, all while continuing to keep Omar and his men at bay. He passed the injured girl to Kelly. She laid the little girl over her shoulder. Ali then walked a few feet to the next injured child. Again, he knelt down, scooped up the boy with one hand, and held him out to Kelly, who took him and placed him over her other shoulder, then raised her arm again to keep her gun aimed and ready. Ali moved forward another few feet and stood above the other two wounded children. Again, he aimed his gun at Omar's position and repeatedly pulled the trigger. Three shots fired and then his gun clicked. The clip was empty. Ali turned

to look behind him and gestured for Kelly to get back to a safe position with the two children. She promptly obeyed. Ali reached into his pocket and pulled out a full clip. With expert speed, he removed the empty clip from his gun, slammed the fresh one into his weapon, cocked it, and laid down another barrage of fire as he bent down and scooped up the other two children and held them to his chest tightly. He began to walk backwards toward the car where Kelly was hiding, continued to fire at Omar's position.

Suddenly, Omar popped up from his hiding place and shot at a woman who was trying to get to safety. This angered Ali. He swore and shot at Omar. Omar and his men began shooting back and Omar lead Ali, Kelly, and Mohammed toward the border on foot. Nearly a dozen border guards surged toward them and chaos ensued. One of the border guards caught Omar by the arm and tried to pry the gun from his hand, but Omar twisted free, stepped up behind Ali, and took aim at his head. However, before he could shoot, a bullet slammed into his neck and he fell on the ground.

Nick stood with his gun aimed at the spot where Omar had stood just a couple seconds before. Ali, Kelly, and Mohammed turned around and saw Omar lying on the ground in a rapidly spreading pool of blood.

The border guards surrounded them. Ali dropped his weapon to the ground, and Kelly and Mohammed followed suit. Kelly and Mohammed ran to hold Ali. Nick stepped forward, bent down, and picked up Ali's gun. He handed it to Ali, saying, "You're going to need this."

Heidi walked over to the border guard commander and initiated a brief conversation in hushed tones.

It wasn't easy for the three to accept this help. They had suffered at the hands of their own people, and once again, strangers stood helping them. Ali, Kelly, and Mohammed had no reasons to trust

them. “Who are you?” Kelly asked Nick.

“Just an overworked, underpaid government employee,” replied Nick, pausing, “who’d like to see you people succeed in taking those motherfuckers down.” Now Heidi stood next to Nick.

A look passed among the three. Heidi stepped over to Ali and in a voice that was just barely audible to them said, “Okay, you’re all set. If I were you, I would go through Caracas. It’s the quickest way to the coast.”

Ali and Mohammed looked at Kelly to say something. She thanked Heidi for the tip and apprehensively asked, “And if I may ask, who are you?”

“No one. I am not here and I do not exist. All that happened here tonight was a bad car accident. That’s what the official reports will say and the newspapers will say the same.”

Mohammed thanked Nick and then turned to Heidi and thanked her. He then turned to Ali and patted his back, signaling for him to move on.

Ali and Kelly started to follow Mohammed toward his car. They got in and Mohammed drove through the border. The three were stunned by the happenings of the day. Until now, they had been thinking that they were on the other side of law, but Heidi’s and Nick’s statements had left them confused.

Nick and Heidi watched the car leave. Heidi turned to Nick and said, “So, we’re square now, right? I hope I’ve cleared my account.”

Nick smiled at Heidi. “Like you said, we’re not here and this didn’t happen.” He was quiet for a several seconds. “What do you say? Do they have a chance?”

“They have one thing going for them—they believe in what they’re doing. Sometimes pure, raw passion goes a long way.” Heidi walked away.

CHAPTER 50

* * *

THE MOMENT MOHAMMED'S CAR got on the road, Ali dozed off. The entire ordeal had left him exhausted, and with Omar gone, a true sense of relief had started to come over him for the first time in a long time.

Mohammed and Kelly were quiet, too. They had seen varied facets of humankind in the last few days, and most of them were very ugly. After a while, Kelly said to Mohammed, "I don't know what to make out of everything that has happened to us in the last few days. It seems I have been hit by a whirlwind and nothing is going to ever be the same in my life."

"I can understand, Kelly," he replied, nodding his head. "Everything has been happening too fast for you. You will feel settled with time. Do not try to comprehend everything that happens. We have to accept certain things as they are because that is the way they are meant to be." He smiled at Kelly. He knew her world had changed. Kelly had changed.

* * *

Ali woke up when Mohammed was driving the car into the parking lot of the airport. Kelly looked at Ali and said, "We have just entered

the airport.” They were feeling more confident now that they knew that the authorities were with them.

Once Mohammed parked the car, they got out and started to walk toward the international terminal. When they entered it, they were surrounded by ticket counters, check-in desks, and monitors displaying flight information. Several yards ahead stood the security checkpoints. The terminal was quite crowded and the sound of planes landing and taking off echoed through the building periodically.

Ali sat down in a plastic chair at the end of a long row of connected chairs. Mohammed stood next to him and Kelly went to one of the ticket counters. After several minutes, Kelly returned with three tickets and handed one each to Mohammed and Ali.

After a wait of nearly one and a half hours, they boarded a plane that would take them to the capitol city of Caracas, Venezuela. The sun had begun to set as the jet flew over the blue-green waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Ali slept through the entire flight.

The next morning, the plane entered the skies of Caracas. It was a beautiful, sprawling city. The jet landed at the airport in Caracas. The city was nestled in the foothills of a narrow mountain, separated from the Caribbean coast by about fifteen kilometers. The three disembarked the plane, with Ali looking well rested and much healthier.

The sandy coast of the country was beautiful. They decided to rent a seaplane, as it would be quick and best suited for their needs. It took them a few hours to be able to arrange for one and collect the necessary provisions. Now, they were stepping onto the turf of their enemy, so they had to be well prepared and extra cautious.

When they arrived at the hanger where the seaplane was kept, they found it to be an older model but still in good condition. Ali was the only one among them who could fly the plane so he

took his position behind the controls and Kelly and Mohammed buckled themselves into the passenger seats. Ali taxied out to the runway and when his path was clear, he brought the plane up to takeoff speed and deftly guided it into the air.

Mohammed sat next to Ali. Kelly, in the backseat, was looking over a map. A variety of weapons and equipment sat on the seat beside her. Every time she looked out the window at the beaches below, she could feel a surge of excitement run through her. The breathtaking sight of land and sea mesmerized her, and she had to make a concerted effort to concentrate on the map more than the scenery. "Sure is extremely beautiful here," Kelly shouted over the roar of the engines.

Ali turned and looked at her. "When this is all over, and if we...I mean, when we're done, we could take a little vacation here." His voice faltered but still he managed to complete what he wanted to say.

Kelly liked what she heard. She reached over the seat, took Ali's hand in hers, kissed it, and said, "I will simply love it."

* * *

The night was getting ready to take over the sky when they swooped over a small island off the coast of Venezuela. The last glow of the sun in the far west was bidding goodbye to the tides hitting the coast. The plane flying low enough that the lights on the island's building were easily seen from their altitude.

"Ali, take it easy!" Kelly said to Ali. "Any lower and you'll turn this craft into a submarine!"

Ali kept his eyes locked on the sky in front of him. "I have no option. I have to come in low; we must avoid the marine radar at all costs." He began to circle the island.

"Okay, fine, but how about landing?" She patted on Mohammed's

shoulder as if asking him to make the same request.

“I have to wait,” replied Ali.

Kelly saw no reason for hovering around in the sky. She asked, “What do we have to wait for?”

Ali pointed toward the island. “For that! We are away from the inhabited area of the island. By the way, does everybody here know how to swim? Any idea about sharks in these waters?” Ali brought the plane lower.

“Hey! Hold on, this might be a little rough,” warned Mohammed. “Nighttime landings can be difficult.”

Kelly held onto her seat tightly. “Oh my God! I had a feeling you were going to say that. I was expecting something to go wrong. I hope you guys aren’t going to feed me to the sharks!”

Ali brought the plane in just inches above the water and cut the engines to below takeoff speed. The plane continued to glide for several seconds before it made contact with the water, which immediately began to slow the plane. The three of them heard a loud SWOOSH and the sudden deceleration briefly threw them forward against their seatbelts. The plane rose up from the water for a few seconds and then contacted the water again, and the three passengers slammed against their restraints again as the sound of spraying water rang against the fuselage. Kelly grunted, groaned, and complained as the plane repeatedly slammed into the dark waters three more times. Finally, the plane settled into the water and Ali throttled the engines back, and then brought the plane to a stop close to the shore.

“There, that wasn’t so bad, was it?” asked Mohammed teasingly of Kelly. Her reactions and paranoia was making them laugh.

Kelly winced in pain and looking at Mohammed said, “Tell that to my ass! It feels ten times worse than any whipping I got from my

father. I will not be able to sit all day. I have never experienced a worse landing than this one”

Mohammed intervened. “Now Kelly, don’t be so mean. He did not do that bad a job. You should thank him—at least we have landed safely.”

Ali laughed at what she said. “It’s all right. I don’t think we’ll be sitting much in the coming days. But I hope you are not throwing me out of your employment ma’am.” The three of them shared laughter laugh.

“Good point, but what’s our next move?” asked Kelly. “Have you people thought about that? Will someone tell me what we’re planning?”

CHAPTER 51

* * *

THE NIGHT TOOK OVER of the beautiful island of Aruba. It was a private island owned by the Supreme Party. On any other day, it would have been a perfect retreat for a honeymooning couple. All the elements of nature were at their best, and the setting sun made those elements look all the more beautiful. If the earth could choose on whom it would bestow its bounties, it would never have allowed anyone from the Establishment to even come near the island.

They set up a tent on the beach to block the light of several glow sticks from view from the inland area of the island. By the glow of the light, the three prepared their gear and weapons. Soon, they would face the enemies of the nation and didn't want to leave anything to chance.

While handling the weapons, Ali looked at Kelly and said, "Kelly, I hope you understand what's involved with what we're doing here."

Kelly stopped working and looked from Ali to Mohammed and back to Ali. Her reply was one single, emphatic word: "Yes." She resumed checking the weapons.

Ali wasn't expecting her to say anything different. He again asked,

“Do you actually understand that the people in the compound just over that ridge are enemies of the Iraqi people? We’re not going in there to negotiate with them or arrest them.”

Kelly put down the weapon she was handling and looked at Ali and Mohammed. Mohammed spoke. “They are not about to show us any mercy either. Do you know what they’ll do to us, to you, if we’re caught?”

Kelly’s expression was stern. “Enough of your questions,” she said, her tone equally serious. “Don’t worry—either of you. I understand and I know what the consequences can be. And in case you want to say something more, I am not going back. I have not come this far to go back and leave the mission unfinished. I am into this with you to the end...whatever that is. Now, let’s just cut out this conversation and go.” Saying this, she chose her weapon. It was an AR-15.

Ali and Mohammed continued to look at Kelly for several seconds and then exchanged a look. Ali took off his military ID and put it around Kelly’s neck. “Here, perhaps its luck will protect you today.”

Kelly’s eyes widened and her face registered surprise. She knew how much the ID meant to Ali.

“I’d say we can use all we can get,” said Kelly. She kissed the ID and hugged Ali. Mohammed moved in and joined the embrace. The three stood holding hands. Mohammed pulled out his military ID with his free hand and, raising it toward the sky, said, “Perhaps Allah shall watch over all of us.”

Ali, Mohammed, and Kelly turned and started to head inland.

CHAPTER 52

* * *

THE THREE OF THEM HIKED for a solid hour and then found a small clearing in the dense vegetation where they could safely stop and rest. They stayed there for the next few hours. About another half hour's hike away, they saw a wall and beyond it an assortment of buildings. From their position, though, they couldn't observe much else.

When the sun started to rise in the east, the trio moved in closer to the compound. It looked as if it were a resort. The low wall circled the compound, which consisted of a beautiful main building, a pool, a recreation center, well-manicured lawns, a maintenance shed, a Tiki bar, and several round tables shielded from the sun by large umbrellas and surrounded by chairs. In fact, it appeared to Ali, Kelly, and Mohammed that every amenity that they had ever associated with the exterior of a modern luxury hotel or exotic holiday resort was present at this compound. They could only imagine what other features were available inside the main building.

Ali, Mohammed, and Kelly crawled over a low ridge and made their way toward the compound. They strode through the native vegetation so quietly that it seemed as if the wind had caressed

them. The trio could not afford to attract any undue attention. Lights were on in a large room on the left side of the main building, and when he saw this, Ali, who was leading his team, he raised his hand, signaling Mohammed and Kelly to stop. Each of them took out a pair of binoculars and slowly started to scan the area. They fully expected the compound to have guards posted at lookout positions, and it was crucial that they spot the guards before the guards spotted them. They scanned the entire length and width of the compound but saw no sentries.

“I do not get it,” said Kelly, still looking through her binoculars. “Where are all the guards? Doesn’t the leadership need any guards? This is very surprising.”

“They don’t think they need them,” answered Ali, who also continued to scan the compound. “After all, this is their private island. Actually, I’m pleased. The lesser the number of guards, the lesser the number of people we have to shoot”

Mohammed was looking through his binoculars in one particular direction. “No guards, but that does not mean that the place is wide open for us. Look to your left—ten o’clock position.”

Ali and Kelly shifted their sights and saw security cameras rotating on tall, metal poles, surveying the perimeter of the compound. “Good use of technology, those security cameras. I bet they have tripwires and motion sensors, too,” offered Kelly.

The level at which the Supreme Party functioned no longer surprised Kelly. Now, it was easy for her to accept the fact they could own a private island and have a sprawling compound armed with the most sophisticated security technology. Ali hadn’t been exaggerating when he told her how the Establishment had strengthened itself so much in the last few years. It was going to be a formidable foe to defeat.

Ali and Mohammed agreed with Kelly’s observation. The

question that faced them now was how to get in. It was important for them to enter the compound and move in as far as possible without being noticed. Though none of them said it aloud, they all knew that one wrong move would almost certainly get them caught.

A flock of seagulls flew over them, catching Ali's attention. After a few seconds, Ali's face lit up. "I have an idea."

CHAPTER 53

* * *

AMMAR WAS IN A LARGE CONFERENCE ROOM with six other members of the Establishment. He was giving orders and making sure the room was ready for a meeting to be held shortly. It was a beautifully decorated room with expensive, splendid furnishings. The environment of the island had a bearing on him and he seemed relaxed and at peace. It was a private island and no one could step foot on the island without his knowledge, thanks to its state-of-the-art security technology.

Ammar checked his watch and seemed pleased with himself. “Good. We’re making excellent time,” he said aloud. “This is the way things should be.” He turned to one of the workers standing near him. “In a short while, Omar will call to give good news.” He called out for another worker named Haneef and asked him about the food to be served after the meeting. Haneef nodded and left the room. Just as he was closing the door, the intercom on the wall buzzed. Another worker moved forward to take the call but Ammar stopped him. “I will take it,” he said forcefully. “You continue with what you are doing.” He moved to the conference table and pushed a button that transferred the call from the intercom on the wall to the phone. He lifted the receiver to his ear and demanded, “Give

me the report. What's going on?"

"We are not sure, sir," replied the guard on the other end. "Our sensors all over the island are tripping, but we are not able to identify why this is happening."

"Maybe it is a malfunction," Ammar replied nonchalantly. "Call the security technician on duty and I will be right there." He hurried out of the room but neither his face nor his body language expressed concern. His mind began to review all the possible causes and quickly ruled out intruders on the island as one of them. Most likely, it was a malfunction in a circuit or lizards or wild boars or birds setting off the motion sensors. Still, he couldn't afford to dismiss the incident, even if it distracted him from the meeting that was scheduled to begin in a matter of minutes. Even if there were intruders, dealing with them would be quick and simple enough. His main concern was the upcoming meeting. He was expecting international delegates and he wanted to be completely ready to welcome them when they arrived.

Ammar walked through a long, marbled corridor and reached the security wing of the building. The guard at the door greeted Ammar and opened the door for him. The room had two long rows of tables running the length of the room. Five video monitors sat on each table. The room was full of uniformed security personnel, most of whom were Venezuelan, and bustling with activity. Several guards huddled in front of the screens.

The moment Ammar entered, the head guard stepped up to him and said, "A few minutes ago, flocks of seagulls started to move into the compound; they have completely swarmed the area. We have no idea why this is happening." Together, they walked up to one of the monitors. On seeing the seagulls flocking into the compound, the only words Ammar could utter were, "What the hell?!"

On one side of the manicured garden was a maintenance

shed that housed a generator and a variety of supplies. Kelly had managed to slip in and crawl toward the shed. She knelt down next to the building and set up an explosive charge, as Ali had taught her the previous night.

“This is it, sir,” said the head guard. “They just flocked into the area.” Ammar reached toward the console below the monitor directly in front of him and grasped the knob that controlled one of the cameras that watched over the compound. He moved the control and what he saw caused him to frown. The camera zoomed in and the image on the monitor magnified the flock of birds. He asked, “What’s that they’re pecking at?”

The guard whose duty had been to watch the screen replied, “Looks like some sort of food, sir.”

Ammar looked at the head guard and said, “I see. We have intruders!” he shouted in a booming voice, addressing everyone in the room. “Sound the alarm immediately and get out there! I want them now!” Instantly, several security personnel scrambled to man their posts while several other members of the security team rushed toward the doors that led outside. Ammar remained in front of the screen and continued to fiddle with the controls.”

Suddenly, there was sound of a blast and the building shook and the lights flickered then went out. Emergency lights came on a moment later, but indicators on the consoles beneath the monitors reported that the security systems were down.

“Oh shit!” exclaimed Ammar. “Guards raced about the room. Some of them rushed out of the room and some started to work on repairing the system. The head guard said to Ammar, “It’ll take the systems a minute to reboot, sir.”

A feeling of panic had started to take over Ammar, and the man who was relaxed and in control just a few minutes ago was gone. His confidence was evaporating in the heat of the situation. He

grabbed the gun from the holster of the guard standing beside him. “I do not think they are going to give us that much time! Forget the systems and get going! Everybody outside!”

CHAPTER 54

* * *

THE MOMENT ALI AND MOHAMMED heard the sound of the blast, they looked apprehensively in the direction of the shed. The first thing they saw was the shed catch fire and burn; it was only after a few seconds that they saw Kelly running from the shed toward the main building. They heaved a shared sigh of relief and then they, too, started to sprint toward the main building.

Ali and Mohammed caught the attention of the guards, who immediately began to shoot, though their aim was off considerably. Ali and Mohammed, running at them full-speed, returned gunfire, and these seasoned war veterans' aim was straight, steady, and deadly. Several of the guards fell to the ground.

Ammar reached the main door leading out of the building. Guards surrounded him. Ali saw Ammar standing on the porch. He felt a surge of anger run through him. He wanted to catch hold of him, put the barrel of his gun to Ammar's head, and squeeze the trigger. Still, he somehow found the strength to keep his emotions from overwhelming his cold, logical, practical discipline of a trained, seasoned soldier. In a split second, he assessed his chances of a direct assault on Ammar and the guards and just as quickly ruled it out. Instead, he took cover and gestured to Mohammed to

do the same. The guards continued to shoot and though they hadn't hit Ali, they had succeeded in pinning him down. Mohammed spotted a tall stack of wooden crates and took cover behind them.

Kelly appeared from behind a tree that stood off to the side and about fifty feet from the building. She raised her weapon and opened fire on the guards. Her Irish blood was boiling in her veins, generating courage in her heart and steadiness in her hand. She pulled the trigger on her AR-15. Repeated flashes of fire spat from her rifle and several of Ammar's guards were permanently relieved of their duty.

Ammar saw her and directed the guards to return fire, and then he ran inside. As fearless as Kelly was, Ali knew that a long, drawn-out gun battle was more than she could handle. As a civilian, she didn't know to shift her position often, even while shooting in the same direction. Reaching into the bag that hung over his shoulder, he pulled out a grenade, pulled the pin with his teeth, and threw it skillfully, dropping it a mere ten feet from the guards. The blast sent three guards flying through the air, while others simply dropped where they stood. The explosion bought Ali time to move to another position and time for Kelly to fall back closer to the burning shed. Mohammed quickly waved at Kelly and signaled for her to start shooting at the guards again. Now, they were pinned down between Mohammed's and Kelly's positions and together, they succeeded in dropping many more guards.

The remaining guards retreated into the main building. Kelly gave Ali and Mohammed the thumbs up. Suddenly, more guards appeared on the second-floor balcony of the main building and opened fire on Kelly, Ali, and Mohammed.

Ali and Mohammed were pinned down behind a truck and they tried to shoot the guards from there, but with the guards shooting down at them from an elevated position, Ali and Mohammed were

at a distinct disadvantage. The guards unleashed the full power of their automatic weapons on the truck, reducing it pieces. Ali and Mohammed felt trapped but they knew that they had to break get away as soon as possible, before too little of the truck remained to shelter them.

Kelly had exhausted all her ammunition for the AK-15 in her firefight with the guards on the porch so she tossed the gun aside and took hold of the sniper rifle that was slung across her back. She raised the weapon and looked through the scope on top of it. She centered one of the guards on the balcony in the crosshairs, and slowly squeezed the trigger. The gun fired and the kickback punched the stock of the rifle hard into her shoulder. The pain broke her concentration for a moment but when she saw the guard thrown back against the wall of the building, she quickly regrouped, found another guard in the scope, and fired again. That bullet found its mark as well and the guard slumped forward and fell head over heels over the balcony railing, dropped to the ground below. She continued to aim and fire and picked off another guard and then another and another, until the remaining guards realized what was happening to their comrades, and they shifted their gunfire toward her.

Now Ali and Mohammed saw their chance to shift to a better position. Ali sprang out from behind the truck and sprayed the building with gunfire as he sprinted toward the main doors of the building. A moment later, Mohammed followed Ali. As he neared the building, he saw one of the guards fall from the balcony. The guard landed directly in front of Mohammed and he instinctively leapt over the body and continued running toward the building.

The moment Ali reached the door of the building, he saw an ornate, richly appointed atrium. Broad corridors lay to the right, left, and straight ahead. There were four guards placed at strategic defensive positions just inside the door. Ali tossed a grenade

through the doorway and the security guards dove for cover. The grenade exploded with a deafening blast, filling the entryway with dust and debris.

This is my chance, thought Ali, and he jumped through the fireball of the blast in complete disregard for his life, then skillfully fired off shot after shot, eliminating the surviving guards.

Ali identified the direction from which light was pouring out, left, and he moved in that direction. It was a beautiful hallway and had many doors opening off it. The doors were closed and Ali focused in on the sounds coming from different directions. Mostly what he heard was muffled gunfire, but down the hallway, from one of the rooms, came the sound of cautious steps. He placed his bet on this particular room. His military training told him this was the room to hit.

Suddenly, Ali heard gunshots just feet away from where he stood in the hallway. His eyes spotted guards hidden behind elegantly crafted pillars that stood farther ahead of him. He threw himself flat against one of the doors that lined the hallway and tried the knob but the door was locked. These guards had lain in wait for him, holding their fire until Ali was halfway down the hallway with nowhere to go except back the way he came. It was a classic ambush scenario; one Ali himself had used during battles. He knew his only chance to stay alive was to take out the guards, but that would be tricky. They were sheltered from his bullets by the pillars but Ali had nothing to shield him from theirs. Four more shots echoed down the hallway, and Ali flattened himself against the door as much as he could. He saw two of the guards slowly walking down the hallways toward his position. Ali gripped his gun and took a deep breath. As he was about to step into the guards' field of view, a barrage of shots rang out from a spot near where Ali stood. Mohammed stood in the hallway, just a few feet from Ali, and had his gun aimed at the

guards. Mohammed let off another round and the voices of two guards cried out in agony. Ali stepped away from the door and now stood side by side with Mohammed, facing the remaining guards. Ali and Mohammed fired their weapons in unison and the guards fell silently to the floor.

Mohammed heard gunfire behind him and he turned to find more guards behind them. Panicked, he aimed his gun poorly and sprayed the hallways with bullets. Still, he managed to take down a few guards but he also caught a bullet in his leg. He fell to the floor. "Ali! Behind you!" Mohammed called out, as he desperately dragged himself toward one of the doors that lined the hallway.

Ali spun around to face the guards as they continued to advance toward him and Mohammed. The guards continued to move toward Ali, taking cover behind a large stone fountain to avoid being seen by him. They were sure that with Mohammed wounded, they would be able to pin down Ali.

Kelly had also managed to come in the front doors behind Ali and Mohammed, and she darted in the direction from which the gunfire seemed to emanate. When she saw the guards closing in on Ali, she leveled her sniper rifle and again picked them off one by one, from the back of the group to the front.

Ali saw the last guard fall and he gave a thumbs up, letting Kelly know that he was okay and that she had done a good job. She crouched and started to move toward Mohammed and when she saw him sitting back against one of the locked doors, she went pale. He looked at Kelly and said, "I'm fine. You go and finish this."

Kelly tried to argue and offered to stay with Mohammed, but he rejected the idea altogether. "No, it's all right, Kelly. Go finish this. Go with Ali; he needs you. I'll be fine."

Kelly moved farther up to Ali, and they continued to shoot at the other guards by the door.

Keeping his eyes on the door, Ali asked Kelly, “How’d you take out all of those guards so quickly?”

“A little something my uncle taught me when we were shooting turkeys. You shoot the last one first, and then move up the line. That way, they never see each other fall, and do not run off. I never thought I’d use that technique on people!”

“It was most useful today,” commented Ali.

There were some guards and some six minions immediately outside the room. It was evident that they were in a state of panic. They had no idea what the future held for them. They had hoarded bags of wealth, which were proving useless today. They had favored their relatives who were not there to help them. They had played with countless innocent lives as if they were pieces in a board game and now they were the unwilling pawns, moved and sacrificed for greed and whim in someone else’s game.

With every passing minute and every bullet shot, Ali and Kelly moved closer to the remaining guards and the minions. Ali marched toward the room like a fearless warrior. He had already lost so much in life that now the fear of losing did not bother him anymore. The guards and the minions came closer and Kelly and Ali fought with them hand-to-hand, using martial arts.

Having disposed of them, Ali and Kelly darted toward the room. Ali fired a barrage of bullets at the door, destroying the lock and latch. When they reached the door, they pushed against it, opening it easily, and entered the room.

Ammar sat at the head of a long table with a gun in his hand. The somber, disillusioned expression on his face said it all. He knew the game was over and this was his last chance to keep the Establishment’s plans alive. The gun dropped from his hand to the table with a loud clatter the moment he saw Ali and Kelly standing inside the door. They scanned the room and saw that Ammar

was alone; however, neither one of them noticed the door behind Ammar that stood slightly ajar.

Ammar did not get up from his chair. He was trying his best to look confident and composed. He looked at Ali and said, “So Ali, you’re finally here.”

Ali took a few steps forward and said, “You don’t seem surprised?”

Ammar let out a short snicker. “Not really. I had a feeling that Omar would prove much less than perfect. To be honest, it’s what I hoped for.”

Kelly, who was new to the ways of this world, was surprised to hear what Ammar had to say. He’d sent Ali to eliminate the people who were not proving beneficial for the Establishment, then he sent Omar to get Ali, and then he wished for Omar to fail. “What?!” she exclaimed. “You wanted Omar, your own man, to fail?!”

Kelly’s comments brought Ammar’s attention on her. He saw an American girl who had traveled far from home and risked her life alongside Ali. He was quite surprised by this. “Who is this, Ali?” Ammar demanded, pointing at Kelly.

Ali continued to stare at Ammar. “She and I are together.” Ali scanned the room. His warrior’s instinct told him that the situation was not what it seemed to be; the room was too quiet; too calm considering that a man of Ammar’s rank and importance was left alone in a room with intruders. Were he and Kelly being watched by unseen eyes? It was likely and if so, he knew that his movement would invite a rain of bullets from somewhere close by.

“Taking up with a westerner?” asked Ammar, not moving. “This is not appropriate. I was hoping that you might eliminate each other. That would have been so very nice and clean. No loose ends, as the Americans say. Right, Ms. Delaney?”

Just beyond the room where they were standing was a narrow hallway that led to the recreational center. A guard stood there with a rifle raised to his face, ready to shoot. He observed Ali through the sight, waiting for the right time to shoot.

Ali took a few more steps toward Ammar. “You dare to talk to me of being inappropriate?” he retorted. “You have betrayed all that the Supreme Party and the Revolution stand for! It is not me who has been doing inappropriate things; it is you!” Ali pointed his finger directly at Ammar.

”Shut up!” Ammar shouted back at Ali. Do not lecture me! I decide what is best for the country. After the election, my power will be absolute. How dare you talk to me like this? Do you know I hold your fate in my hands?”

”Your hands, my fate!” Ali said, defiantly. “What of your mother, the leader of the Supreme Party?”

Ammar let out a short, self-conceited laugh. “That old woman? Ha! She will be gone soon. I have been slowly shifting control into my hands. I am the true power now!”

Ammar was talking like a man possessed. His eyes wide open, he had both his hands open in front of him. He looked at his hands as if he could see the power in them.

“No, Ammar! This ends here! Now! My loyalty is to the nation and its people—not you. I have said this before and I will say it again and again and again. The traitors of the nation...”

The tip of a rifle appeared through the slight opening in the door behind Ammar and Kelly saw something moving behind the door. “Ali, look out!” she shouted as she jumped toward Ali, knocking him to the floor and falling on top of him. The bullet grazed Kelly’s left arm and hit a beautiful painting hanging on the opposite wall.

Ali quickly pushed Kelly off him, sat up, and fired multiple shot

all around the room. Startled, Ammar jumped up from his chair. A security guard emerged from behind the door, took aim at Kelly and Ali, and started to shoot. Kelly ran to the side while Ali ducked underneath the table at which Ammar had sat just moments ago. The guard began shooting under the table, trying to hit Ali. With the guard's attention on Ali, Kelly knew she had to act quickly. She came up behind the guard, leapt on him, and grabbed his rifle with her free hand, trying to pull it from his grasp.

Meanwhile, Ammar had begun to run toward the door behind him to get away from the gunfire, but Ali had other ideas. With Kelly distracting the guard, Ali scurried out from under the table, got to his feet, and closed the distance between him and Ammar. He grabbed Ammar by his clothing and stopped him in his tracks. Ammar turned and landed a punch to Ali's jaw. Ali reeled from the impact but held his grip on his prey. He balled his free hand into a fist and returned the favor, catching Ammar in the stomach and doubling him over. Ali then lifted his knee quickly, catching Ammar in the face. Ali heard a sharp snap and his prey screamed in pain. Ali grabbed Ammar by the hair, straightened him up, and saw blood streaming down his face from an obviously broken nose. "You bastard!" yelled Ammar and he kicked his foot hard into Ali's knee, causing it to buckle and Ali to lose his balance and drop to his knees.

Ammar turned toward the guard and screamed with clear frustration, "You idiot! You could not shoot a man right in front of you!" Ammar again ran toward the door but made it only a few feet before two arms wrapped around his ankles. Ammar's momentum carried him off balance and he slammed face first to the floor so quickly that he couldn't get his hands in position to break his fall. He rolled over onto his back to see Ali standing over him with an icy look on his face.

"It appears you chose your killers poorly, Ammar," said Ali flatly.

Kelly continued to struggle with the guard, trying desperately to wrest the gun from his hands, even though it was getting more and more difficult for her. The guard tried to choke her throat with his hands and she fell down on her knees, gasping for breath. "It is time for you to die, bitch!" the guard shouted. Kelly, though, was not one to give in so easily. She held onto the guard's hands and tried twisting his pinky fingers backwards. She pressed them hard and the guard let out a cry in pain and loosened his grip on her throat. Kelly was like a wild cat; she kicked and punched the guard, saying, "No, not yet! Not me!"

There was a determination in her voice to come out of this fight alive and victorious, and her unrelenting resistance was frustrating to the guard, who was clearly big and stronger than Kelly. "You vile creature!" he hissed through clenched teeth. "For you, my hands are going to be enough!"

Two more guards entered the room and when they saw the battle between Kelly and their fellow guard, they stepped in to help him. Now three large, strong men were engaged in a viscous fistfight against a petite woman with determination and steel grit to match any man.

Suddenly, Ali noticed that Kelly was in trouble and he ran to help her. Ammar quickly got to his feet and ran out of the room.

Ali came up behind the guard who was choking Kelly and grabbed him around the neck, pulling him off her. Ali drove his foot into back of the guard's knee, buckling it and dropping the guard to the floor. Ali twisted the guard's head quickly to the left. The guard's neck snapped and he slumped to the floor dead.

Kelly backed up against the wall to help steady herself as she regained her composure. Her hand fell on something hard and heavy. She looked over and saw that her hand was resting on what looked to her like a club. It was dark in color and the surface was

covered in pits, gashes, and stains. It rested on a pedestal, as if it were an antique on display. Kelly picked it up and immediately felt its considerable weight. She slid her hand down to what appeared to be the part of the club meant for holding. She looked up again and saw one of the guards coming toward her. She tightened her grip on the club and pretended that she was still dazed from being choked. When the guard was about six feet from her, Kelly yelled, "No!" with the ferocity of a warrior, lunged at him suddenly, and brought the club up with all her strength. The guard saw the club coming toward him but was powerless to avoid it. The club connected squarely with the side of his head with a loud CRACK and stopped him cold in his tracks. For a moment, he was expressionless and motionless, and then collapsed to the ground right where he stood.

Kelly stepped over the guard, intent on coming to Ali's aid, just as he had come to her aid just moments before. Ali was fighting with the last guard and had his arms pinned behind his back. All at once, the guard pulled one of his arms free from Ali's grasp. The guard immediately reached into his pocket and pulled out a knife. Ali didn't see the weapon but Kelly did.

"Ali! He's got a knife!" she screamed and rushed forward toward the men. Ali didn't seem to hear her warning. Kelly reached the guard and attempted to grab the hand in which he held the knife but she was a second too late. The guard jabbed the knife up over his shoulder in an attempt to stab Ali in the neck. Instead, the blade plunged into Kelly's stomach. She collapsed on the floor.

Ali was horrified at what he had just witnessed, and the rage that he had been feeling surged to a level he had never felt before. He felt as though his world was crumbling away right before his eyes. If he lost Kelly, he truly had nothing left to lose. Enraged, he grabbed the knife from the guard's hand, raised it high above his head, and brought it down hard into the guard's chest. The impact made a sickening, wet sound that was like music to Ali's ears. He

pulled the knife out and brought it back down into the guard's chest again and again and again, each time blood spurted onto Ali's face and shirt. He released his grip on the guard, who slumped to the floor in a widening pool of blood.

Ali knelt down beside Kelly. "Kelly?! Kelly?! Speak to me! Are you okay?" He lifted the front of her shirt and examined the knife wound. His experience on the battlefield told him that the wound was superficial and looked worse than it was. He used the knife to cut off a piece of Kelly's shirt and used it to fashion a bandage to stop the bleeding.

"Kelly?" He shook her.

Slowly, her eyes opened. "Did I save you?" she asked, her voice weak.

"Yes, Kelly, you did save me," Ali answered.

"My stomach hurts," said Kelly. She started to reach for it with her hand but Ali stopped her.

"No, don't touch it. Your stomach...you were cut a little bit. It's not bad. I bandaged it up and you will be fine, okay? Just stay here and rest. Okay, Kelly? Just stay here and I'll come back for you."

"Where are you going?"

"Ammar got away. I have to go find him. But the guards are dead. You'll be safe here. I won't let anything happen to you. I promise you, Kelly."

Kelly smiled. "I know you won't, Ali."

Ali stood up, grabbed the dead guard's knife, and ran after Ammar.

After traversing a long hallway, Ali reached a large, open room with a pool, tables, chairs, and exercise equipment. This was the recreation center in the compound. Ali saw Ammar; he was trying

to escape. From the entrance of the room, he hurled the knife at Ammar. The blade found its mark in the middle of Ammar's back, bringing the man to his knees. Ali ran over to his adversary, grasped the handle of the knife, and twisted it.

Ali saw a pair of swords hanging on the far wall of the recreation center. He ran to them and removed one from its mounting. He was walking back toward Ammar when the man turned his body to one side and saw Ali coming toward him with a sword. "All this ends now, Ammar!" shouted Ali.

Ammar knew that his game was over and his end was near. "No, wait!" he stammered. "I can— I can— give you anything you want! Please...spare me. What do you want? Name it! Name it!"

His attempts at bargaining his way out of the consequences of his actions had no effect on Ali, who stood over Ammar expressionless, with a look in his eyes that was distant and dangerous. Ammar realized Ali could not be bribed so he began to plead for his life.

"You will give me anything that I ask for?" said Ali.

Ammar's eyes widened. "Yes!" he replied eagerly. "What do you want?"

Ali spoke just three words. "My country back!"

He lifted the sword and swung it deftly. Ammar's head flew nearly the length of the room and fell to the floor with a thud.

The traitor of the country was dead.

Ali threw the sword down at Ammar's feet and ran out the door and down the hallway to Kelly.

* * *

Ali came out of the front door of the building with Kelly unconscious in his arms. His military ID was dangling from her neck and slightly jingling as he carried her, and Ali thought it sounded like

beautiful music. Mohammed walked beside Ali, limping from his leg wound.

The trio headed back toward the beach. They had won their battle. The enemy of the nation was eliminated.

CHAPTER 55

* * *

THERE WERE THREE BEACH CHAIRS lined up on a lovely stretch of sand at a luxurious holiday resort. Kelly sat on one of the chairs with her stomach bandaged; Mohammed sat on the chair next to her with his leg in a cast; and Ali sat reclined on the third chair. A seaplane sat moored offshore. It was a beautiful day and the three of them were together. With their mission fulfilled, they were completely relaxed and happy. Mohammed pulled down his beach hat and closed his eyes.

Kelly looked at Ali and asked, “So, what do we do now for excitement? It seems nothing will excite me now. I’m going to find everything else too normal.”

Ali laughed. He got up from his chair and sat down on hers. “We start by me nursing you back to health. After all, you have done it for me twice. It’s the least I can do in return.”

“I did it for love...and you will do it for...” she said flirtatiously.

Ali tapped her nose with his index finger and said, looking into her eyes, “I, too, will do it for love, my love.” He pressed his lips against hers in a long kiss. Kelly took his face in her hands and that excited him even more.

After a few seconds, she asked, "After that, what will we do?" She was driving him toward something specific, but she wanted it to come from him.

Ali stood up and gave her question some thought. He waved his hands in the air and said, "Oh, there are many things to do and see in this world. I'm sure we will find something to ease the boredom."

"I don't know," Mohammed chipped in. "I could easily get used to this!" He spread his arms wide. "I wouldn't mind." The three of them broke out in laughter.

Ali looked far into the distance, where the sea met the sky. He seemed to be lost in his thoughts. After a minute, he took Kelly's hand in his, knelt down beside her, and said, "Maybe I can show you where I grew up, God willing. Would you like to see my country?"

She smiled wide. This is what Kelly had wanted to hear all along. This time, she leaned forward to put her lips on his.

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