

A Terrifying Epic Thriller of Love and Terrorism

RETURN 2 TERROR WITH LOVE

DAVID LOVETT

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By David Lovett

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This book is dedicated to all who served in the United States Armed forces for they are my brothers and sisters in arms.

Chapter 1

The wind pushed the ocean whitecaps into eight-foot swells. The Los Angeles-class submarine SSN 773 Cheyenne broke the surface, and pitched and rolled like a cigar in a washing machine.

The crew never liked surfacing in such weather. They were used to being far beneath the surface during conditions like these. The sub was capable of a depth of 1,475 feet. The cruising depth of the sub was four to five hundred feet. A depth the crew much preferred.

On the bridge of the sub stood Captain McClain, the Commanding Officer of the Cheyenne. Beside him was a large man in a wetsuit, his face was jet black from camouflage paint. His name was Commander John Graves, Commander of SEAL Team Four.

The crew on duty was silent. The tension level was high. Occasionally, someone would look over his shoulder at the Navy SEAL who was preparing to go ashore in a foreign land.

“Status report,” Captain McClain ordered.

“All clear on radar, sir,” replied Petty Officer Kowski.

“Sonar clear, sir,” said another seaman.

Captain McClain turned and looked at Commander Graves for several seconds.

“Are you and your team ready, Commander?”

“As ready as we’ll ever be, Captain,” replied the John Graves. His stomach was in knots as he contemplated the mission.

The captain turned back to his crew. “Prepare to open main hatch!” ordered the captain. The sub was rolling so badly that everyone on board grabbed something to keep from falling.

On the bridge of the sub were eight sailors with differing responsibilities. Petty Officer Kowski stared at the surface radar screen, while another sailor was on the sonar. Another was controlling the steering, while yet another manned the descent and ascent of the vessel.

The sub's captain reassured Commander Graves. “We’ll be back in 24 hours for the 60-minute window we discussed. We’ll stay in the area and attempt to monitor everything that moves on the surface. If and when we see your rafts, or pick up your beacon, we’ll surface and get you out of here ASAP!”

Commander Graves and his men had been flown in from the carrier group currently in the Gulf of Yemen to rendezvous with the sub. With its maximum speed being only 32 knots, it had taken another twelve hours to get to this point of departure.

“God be with you and your men,” intoned Captain McClain. Commander Graves didn't respond. He just nodded in acknowledgement.

“Radars still all clear, sir! Nothing on the water or in the air,” Kowski said, looking intently at the radar screens.

The captain looked at his weapons officer. “Keep the defenses up and armed for another two hours.”

"Yes, sir," Ensign Hecker said. The captain then turned back to Commander Graves. "We'll stay in the area for two more hours at a shallow depth. If we see any trouble, we'll do what we can to help. My orders were quite clear, to enable you to make it to shore no matter what." He paused. "Commander, I've never heard orders received like these! To be honest, you scare me a little. I don't know what your mission is, but I wish you and your men the best of luck!"

The captain looked into the video monitor displaying the surface (the Navy had quit using periscopes years ago), then turned a dial, which enabled the screen to turn 360 degrees. Commander Graves also watched closely, and as soon as they spotted the shore, he said, "Captain, stop it there, and zoom in." The Captain focused in on the shore. It looked quiet, no buildings or any signs of life.

Graves' mind was on the upcoming mission. He knew, as did his men, that many of them might not return alive.

Commander John Graves had graduated from the Annapolis Naval Academy, and had earned his reputation in Desert Storm and Afghanistan.

He had been the Commander-in-Charge of the coordination of four SEAL teams during Operation Anaconda. He and his men had been sent three times into enemy territory on missions that they had not expected to survive, but always had. He had been wounded four times over the course of his 16 years in the SEALs, and was also awarded the Navy Cross, as well as a Bronze Star. He would have earned more medals, but he couldn't be awarded any for actions that had never officially occurred. His missions were that secret.

Graves was a large man. He stood six foot one, and weighed in at 220. He had deep blue eyes and short black hair. At the Academy, he was a champion weight-lifter, and was such a force in the boxing ring that no one ever asked for rematches.

His wife had left him nine years ago, saying she didn't want to be married to the Navy. She had decided against child support, as long as he stayed away.

John's Post traumatic Stress scared her. Often he would wake up in the middle of the night having recurring nightmares. He would see his entire team getting ambushed on some dark street in a country he didn't recognize. One-by-one they were killed and he couldn't move a muscle, he was frozen in place. He watched them all die and John was powerless to help. The last one to always be killed was always the same eighteen year old kid, who would look at John and say, "Why? Why won't you help us?" He would then fall into a pool of blood, He kept saying it-over and-over, "Why, Commander, why?"

After each one of these episodes he would snap awake covered in sweat. Immediately he was hit with a severe Anxiety attack, most of the time he never went back to bed. He just couldn't take the chance of having the dream again. He refused to see the doctors, he feared they would take his command away.

John had a daughter he hadn't seen in seven years. He suspected his wife was more worried about his meeting her new husband, whom she had married six months after the divorce was final. John had always suspected that she had been having an affair when he was deployed, and the quickie marriage confirmed it to him.

John's wife knew how violent he could be and feared for her new husband's safety. She told John if attempted to see his daughter she would make it known about his PTSD to the base doctors.

A sailor pushed some buttons on his console. "Deck hatch ready to open, sir!"

"Open hatch!" ordered Captain McClain.

A sailor climbed up the ladder and started to open the securing latches, when a wave hit the sub, and the sailor fell nine feet from the hatch to the deck. He was out cold, with blood coming out of the back of his head.

"Get him to the infirmary!" ordered Captain McClain. Two sailors rushed over and helped the injured sailor to the infirmary.

"Petty Officer Tames, open main hatch for our friends!"

Tames climbed up the ladder and finished opening the hatch. The second he pushed it open, gallons of water gushed in.

Commander Graves went to the hatchway where his men waited outside the bridge. They wore wetsuits, masks on their heads, and fins at the ready, their faces painted black as well--except Petty Officer Rodriguez, who had stripes of white and green paint as well. "We're set to go, any questions?" Commander Graves asked. Each man only nodded. They were well trained. Each man knew his job.

SEAL Team Four crawled out of the deck hatch, and pulled their gear behind them. The ocean was rough. The sub was three hundred and sixty-two-feet long, with a width of only thirty-two feet. Every time a large swell hit the boat, it would roll twenty five degrees, and almost throwing the SEALs overboard prematurely.

After lowering the inflatable rafts into the water, twelve of the SEALs jumped from the wet, pitching deck into the rough seas. Once they were in position, they pulled the CO2 cords to inflate the rafts, and then struggled to climb aboard each one.

The two remaining SEALs on the deck of the sub then threw the four large oblong waterproof bags into the water. They jumped in, and made it aboard their assigned rafts. This wasn't difficult for the team, as they'd practiced in much worse weather.

They started up the silent, powerful outboards, and made their way slowly to shore, looking back to watch the submarine drop out of sight, deep down into the ocean depths. It was eight o'clock in the evening. There was a little sunlight left. But in another half-hour, it would be pitch black with no moon. In the distance, they could make out the outline of the beach, with sand dunes beyond the breaking waves.

They opened the waterproof canvas bags containing their M-16s, grenade launchers and ammunition, along with their medical supplies and water. Onshore, several headlights lit the

road by the beach. Commander Graves suspected it was a military caravan. The headlights then retreated ominously farther down the beach.

Commander Graves was in the first raft, along with Petty Officer Rodriguez, whom Commander Graves called "the ghost," and Petty Officer Putman, the explosives expert. The next raft was piloted by Ensign Wright, who was number two in command behind Commander Graves. He had Petty Officer Loop, demolition expert, and Seaman Baines, underwater demolition expert (BUD) in his raft. The third raft held Senior Chief Dewalter, Petty Officer Holgren, the team sniper, Petty Officer Pitts, weapons expert, and Petty Officer White, computer expert. The fourth raft held First Class Petty Officer Williams, demolition expert, Seaman Turner, underwater demolition expert, Petty Officer Morales, who was the team medical corpsman and Seaman Prescott, also an underwater demolition expert.

In SEAL training the first step is to become a BUD, Basic Underwater Demolition Expert. After that training was completed they would move on to further specialty training such as above ground demolition, sniper, reconnaissance, weapons expert, etc. Every SEAL had intensive training in combat. The specialties made the team a whole fighting force.

Most the team had worked and trained together for several years, although Seaman Turner and Seaman Prescott were the two newest members of the team. They had recently replaced a team member who was discharged, and another who was killed in a motorcycle accident while on leave. This was their first mission, and the excitement and fear showed on their faces.

The SEAL team sat a quarter-mile offshore, waiting for total darkness. Not a word was spoken. The ocean was so violent they had to tie the rafts together, and then continued to wait. Each man's eyes were on the deserted beach watching for any movement other than the breaking waves.

Chapter 2

Three days earlier. On a cold September morning in Arlington County, Virginia.

Admiral Raymond James sat in the Intelligence Situation Room at the Pentagon, reading the classified reports provided by Israeli intelligence, and occasionally glancing at the digital map taken by satellite on the screen before him.

At the door were two fully armed Marine Corps guards. The Situation Room was two thousand square feet, and had twelve computer work-stations and six big screen HD monitors. The admiral studied one of them.

Five-Star Fleet Admiral James resembled Winston Churchill, but slimmer. At 62 years old, he had commanded the USS Enterprise battle group, and had been a major factor in the quick Desert Storm victory.

In 2005, he had been appointed to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and was the President's advisor on military affairs.

"This is not good, not good at all," muttered the admiral.

General Ross nodded in agreement.

"That's why I felt you needed to see this ASAP. The question is, what we do about it?" he wondered aloud.

The Admiral pondered this for several minutes, rereading the document he held, and then said, "I have to take this to the President immediately." Suddenly a knot built up in his chest.

He paused for a few seconds. "Are we 100% sure this intelligence is accurate?"

The General thought hard. "I'd say about 85% sure, based on what our satellites show."

Admiral James again studied the satellite images and sighed heavily.

"85% is still way too strong of a chance. Load all the images onto a thumb drive that I can take with me."

"According to the Israelis, these things don't leave a signature. At least that's what they want us to believe," said the Admiral.

"That's right, sir, but we can definitely see the build-up in military personnel in the Bushehr Province. We took some satellite infra-red shots of the area this morning, and we did pick up an anomaly at a remote bunker site." The general punched several keys on the keyboard in front of him. An image appeared on another screen.

"Do you see the yellow marker in this area?" The general indicated the spot with a laser pointer.

"Yes, but I've never seen yellow as an indicator in an infra-red photo," responded the admiral. "How do your people interpret this?"

The General stood up and walked around the table to the screen, staring at it for a long moment. "Honestly, Admiral, we don't have a goddamn clue! We do know that several months ago our satellites photographed this same area with no irregularities, and the bunker looked abandoned. Today, it's heavily guarded. Something has definitely changed. The Israelis are certain that this is the location of the missing cargo."

Admiral James looked at his watch, and picked up the secure phone on the table next to him and dialed a number. "Yes," said a man's voice on the other end.

"This is Admiral James. I need to speak with the President. I have a code red situation."

"Please hold," said the voice. A minute later, the President of the United States picked up the line.

"Admiral James, I am in the middle of a phone conversation with the British Prime Minister. This better be good. He doesn't like being put on hold. Did my assistant say something about a code red?" "Yes sir, Mr. President. I need to see you in the Situation Room at the White House this afternoon. Let's say 1700 hours? I'll assemble as many of the Joint Chiefs as are available."

The President paused for a full minute, then said, "Is there something I should know, Admiral James?"

"Yes sir, but it can wait until 1700 hours."

Admiral James hung up and again looked at the screens.

"What the hell were the Israelis thinking? Making and then losing these things?"

He then picked up the phone again, and called Major Welk, his personal assistant.

"Welk, get on the horn, and get as many of the Joint Chiefs together as possible! We'll meet at the White House Sit room at 1700 hours this afternoon."

"What should I tell them?"

"Just tell them it's code red."

"Code red, sir?"

"Yes, Major, code red."

Chapter 3

Special Agent Jill Mayfield ran through the dense chaparral of the Santa Monica Mountains. She had her gun in one hand and her radio in the other.

Jill wore blue jeans, and a green button-down shirt, her blond hair tied back in a bun. She was a slight girl with curving blue-jean-blue eyes. She was in great shape, and could outrun most men. She had competed in the Los Angeles Marathon last year, and had come in the Top 50 for women runners.

Jill could see him now, only a hundred yards ahead, running as fast as he could. The terrain was rocky, and the brush was thick. The man she was chasing kept falling down. He was big but didn't have her stamina. Whenever he got up, he would look back to see her gaining on him.

It was surprising to her-- cases this big always bring in a lot of dead-end leads, especially when they dealt with a billionaire's daughter. Not this time. They seem to have gotten lucky.

Jill had been in the Los Angeles branch of the FBI for almost twelve years, and was a senior agent in the organized crime and terrorism unit. She had graduated Penn State with a degree in Accounting, and second major in Law Enforcement.

She had always been an attractive woman. In college she had dated some, but she actually preferred women to most men. She would tell her girlfriends, "Men think with their dicks, not with their heads. I need someone who actually cares more about what I think, than how big my boobs are."

Jill Mayfield was five feet six inches tall, and had a perfect body, with well proportioned muscles, and long blond hair. She worked out almost every day, spending an hour on the treadmill with an uphill incline. She usually showered at the gym, and was often noticed by the other female patrons as she dressed. She'd leave just enough time to get to the Federal Building on Wilshire.

Jill Mayfield had always wanted to be a federal agent. Her father was FBI, killed in El Salvador in 1979 during their civil war. Jill was now a division head, and took her job seriously, passing many other agents in promotions, most of whom were men. Naturally, this caused some discontent among the FBI ranks.

Earlier in the day of the chase in the mountains, Jill and her partner, Agent Paul Coleman, had a fresh lead regarding the kidnapping of eleven-year-old Patti Cross. Someone had called the FBI, and said they thought they had seen the girl from the news at a neighbor's estate on the winding Mulholland Highway, up in the Santa Monica Mountains. The caller had hung up quickly without identifying herself.

Patti Lynn Cross was the privileged daughter of Hollywood royalty Allen Cross. At the age of thirty two, he already won an Academy Award for Best Actor.

Patti was walking home from school with her friend Sue. Patti was small for her age. She stood four-feet-ten inches with flowing blond hair and sweet brown eyes. Even though she was small, her little body was starting to take the shape of a woman. Every year she resembled her mother more and more. Her mother was Lynn Cross, former New York supermodel.

"Are you going to call that boy from history class? He has a huge crush on you!"

"No. Not from my house. My dad thinks I'm still too young to talk to boys. He's so old-fashioned. I can't stand him sometimes!" cried Patti.

"What would he say if he knew you were making out at the school dance last Friday?"

Patti stopped and looked at her friend in shock.

"How'd you know about that?"

"Janet Pintar told me and Karen Polski told her. I'm sure the whole school knows!"

Patti started to feel sick.

"How did everyone find out?"

"Come on, Patti, when a boy makes out with the most famous girl on campus he's going to brag about it to everyone." A few minutes later they got to Sue's house.

"Come on in, my mom made some cool punch!"

"No, I'm not feeling so good. I've also got a lot of homework."

"Okay Patti, I'll see you at school tomorrow."

Patti continued on her way. Her mind was reeling about what Sue had said. She was now sure everyone was looking at her differently that day in class.

She was so caught up in her thoughts she didn't notice the new black Mercedes parked up ahead. As she neared the sedan, a large well-dressed man got out and opened a map on the hood. As Patti was walking past him, he asked, "Excuse me, young lady. I'm not from around

here and I think I'm a bit lost. Can you show me where Rodeo Drive is?" Patti looked the man over and saw the new Mercedes. She walked over to the car and looked at the map and pointed to Rodeo. But when she looked up, the man wasn't looking at the map. He was looking up and down the street. He suddenly took a white cloth from his pocket and pushed it over Patti's face. She tried to fight back but within seconds she was dizzy. Everything was spinning as she passed out.

Mulholland has no street lights. Most of its homes can't be seen from the road. Many Hollywood celebrities lived in these deep canyons for privacy, yet still managed an easy drive down into the city. Jill and Coleman had driven slowly, looking for the address the caller had given.

Once they found the house, they pulled into its long driveway. They made their way up a small hill to the front door.

It was a Victorian-style home with manicured landscaping. There was a large fountain in the front courtyard, and custom beveled-glass French doors. The windows were beveled-glass as well.

"This doesn't look like the house of someone who would need ransom money," muttered Agent Coleman.

"Well, so far, there is no ransom demand, and it's been three days."

Coleman nodded in agreement. "This place just doesn't fit the profile of a kidnapper."

Both agents got out of the car, and walked up the stone steps to the front door. Jill pressed the doorbell. After a long pause, she rang the bell again, while Coleman knocked loudly. The door opened. A huge man, standing at a good six-feet-six and 270 lbs., he had short curly hair. His head connected to his shoulders with practically no neck. It appeared he hadn't shaved in several days. He was wearing a gray short sleeve t-shirt with large sweat stains under both arms. He looked over Agent Mayfield and Agent Coleman. "Can I help you?" he asked.

Both Mayfield and Coleman produced their badges and identification.

"We'd like to ask you a few questions. May we come in?" asked Jill.

The man hesitated, "This really isn't a good time."

"It'll only take a few minutes. It's about that girl, Patti Cross. I'm sure you've seen on the news that she was abducted a few days ago."

The large man suddenly looked nervous, and looked over their heads at their car. "I have something on the stove. I'll go turn it off. I'll be back in a minute."

He quickly shut the door and they heard him locking it. Jill and Coleman exchanged a look, then ran down the steps, and circled behind the house. They saw the man running into the foothills behind the property.

"I'm going after him! You check the house for the girl and call for back-up. We might need a helicopter," yelled Jill. She took off following the man's trail.

When she got to the top of the hill she saw him down on the other side in a dry creek bed, bent over and trying to catch his breath. *Good! He's out of shape!* thought Jill.

"Stay where you are, you're under arrest!" The giant looked up, surprised to see her. Then she saw the gun in his hand. He raised it and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened. He stared at the gun, dumbfounded, then threw it down and started to sprint. He was a surprisingly fast runner but somewhat clumsy.

Jill yelled again, "Stop or I'll be forced to shoot! You're under arrest!" He made it to the top of the next hill. It looked like he was having an asthma attack, wheezing loudly. Jill made it to the top of the hill, and leveled her gun at him.

"Like I said, you're under arrest! Get on your knees, with your hands locked on your head, NOW!"

"Wait, I can't breathe," he gasped, then with surprising agility, jumped at Jill. He knocked the gun away into the surrounding brush. He grabbed her by the arm with a devilish grin, and a viciously strong hold.

"I'm going to enjoy this!" he growled, then pulled Jill closer, and formed a fist to deliver a punch to her face.

Jill kicked him in the groin as hard as she could. He gasped, and bent over, then let go of her arm. She slammed her knee square into his face, breaking his nose. He fell to the ground, blood flowing down his face.

Jill whipped her handcuffs out of her back pocket, rolled the big man over, and put her knee on his back and cuffed both hands.

Agent Coleman came sprinting up the hill. "Are you okay, Mayfield?"

"Yeah, he got a jump on me. Big guy's faster than he looks. Any sign of the girl?"

"No, she's not inside, but this guy's a real sicko. He definitely knows where she is."

"How so?" she asked.

"You need to see for yourself. Let's get this piece of shit back to the house. The black-and-whites should be here in a few minutes."

By the time they got to the house, the front of the big man's shirt was covered in blood from his oozing nose.

"I need medical attention! You broke my nose, you bitch!" he whined.

"Keep up the bitch talk, and I'll kick you in the balls again!"

"This is police brutality! I was just taking a walk in the hills on my own property, and you attacked me!"

Two LAPD squad cars pulled into the driveway, and both agents flashed their badges.

"Take this guy and frisk him, he had a gun earlier. Also, hike that trail. On the other side of the hill, there's a gun in the creek bed. Bag it for evidence," Jill barked.

"Jill, you really need to see this." Coleman motioned to her to follow him up the steps.

They walked in the front door and Agent Mayfield saw the beautiful limestone floors. They looked like plunder from some ancient Tuscan monastery. The entryway chandelier was

at least eight feet wide, with hundreds of crystals sparkling from it. The circular staircase had an elaborate ironwork handrail. The windows billowed with rich fabric. In a niche by the front door stood a life-size sculpture of a bald eagle on a branch, with its wings outstretched as though taking flight. Everywhere Mayfield looked she saw serious art, ancient vases, and many other antiques.

"Wow, this guy knows how to live!" Agent Mayfield said.

"Come upstairs, I need to show you something," urged Coleman.

As they climbed the staircase, Jill examined the art on the walls, and noticed they were all originals. When they got to the top of the stairs, they entered a great room that was easily seventy-feet long by forty-feet wide. The room held a grand piano covered in dust, five-foot-tall paintings, and shelves of books filled with hundreds of leather-bound volumes. The room had a musty smell as though it was rarely used.

"This guy's got some serious cash," Jill said, raising her eyebrows. "Look at this." Coleman crossed over to some shelves filled with trophies. Jill read their inscriptions.

"Superbowl? This one's for the American League championship! Looks like the guys name is Paul Grier."

"Yeah, I know you don't follow football, but this guy was a superstar with the Denver Broncos. Paul Grier was one of the best linebackers ever!"

"That explains his sudden agility and all the money. Is he still playing?" wondered Jill aloud.

"No, if I remember correctly, he fractured his spinal cord, and had to retire about three years ago. But come over here. This is what I wanted you to see."

The passage led them down the hall to the master bedroom. The bed had four huge posters. Across from the bed was an elegant stone fireplace, with a pounded copper mantel.

There was a small desk with a computer on it. Next to it a door led to a spacious bathroom.

Coleman said, "When I came in here, I did a quick glance around, and didn't notice anything unusual. But as I was walking toward the door I thought I heard a girl crying. I followed the sound to this wall. It's hard to see but if you look closely you can see the seams of a door."

Coleman pushed the paneling where the seams were, and a door popped open.

"Be prepared, Mayfield, this isn't pretty." The light in the secret room was on. Jill's mouth dropped open. Plastered over the walls were hundreds of photos of young boys and girls totally nude.

Jill walked around the room, and realized that the photos got more and more graphic as she proceeded. Several of the snaps showed children being molested.

"Oh my God! This guy's a real pervert! Did you say you heard a girl crying?" Jill asked.

"Over here."

They walked to another desk and another computer. Agent Coleman took a pen out of his pocket, and pushed the mouse forward bringing the screen to life. On it, a young girl was naked and crying. It was Patti Cross.

Jill took out her cell phone, and called Wilshire headquarters, getting the Senior Agent on duty.

"I know that Agent Coleman called this in already..."

"I have two teams en route to you right now. They should be there soon."

"We're going to need a tech guy here as well, and we need dogs! We have good reason to believe that Patti Cross is somewhere on the property."

"Got it, they're on their way. I'll send out a forensics team, as well."

"Thanks, Dickerson."

"Good luck finding the girl!" Dickerson hung up.

Jill then noticed that none of the images showed Paul Grier in action.

She choked up. "I want this room sealed off immediately! This computer could be a gold mine of perverts, email and websites."

"I'm on it," Coleman said.

Jill went back down the stairs and into the front yard where there were now six LAPD units waiting.

"Gentlemen, I think Patti Cross is here somewhere. I want the house searched, without touching anything. We found a secret room in the master bedroom, so keep your eyes peeled for what else could be false walls."

Grier sat in the back seat of the patrol car, overhearing her command. Jill approached the squad car.

"Want to talk to me? Things could go better for you if you cooperate."

"I want my lawyer. I have nothing to say to you," Grier said.

"Have it your way, pervert." As she was walking away from the patrol car, two black SUVs pulled up the driveway, and six agents climbed out.

"Guys, we've got pretty strong evidence that Patti Cross is here. LAPD is conducting a search of the home. I want all of us to start searching close to the house. Be sure to take radios. The pervert who lives here has a lot of cash. He could have built a special underground shelter, or something that could hold an eleven-year-old girl. We found a secret room off the master bedroom, so keep your eyes open. Let's do it!" The agents scattered in different directions. Coleman approached Jill.

"I've got six agents walking the property. My guess is this place is close to five acres. We have dogs on the way. I just can't get that picture of Patti Cross out of my head," she said.

"I know it's pretty bad. Hope this guy gets put away a long, long time. When I walked into his porn room, the video was running. Those were the screams I heard. He must have been watching the video when we knocked. I only saw the girl, but I heard Grier's voice telling her to do things to herself in exchange for food." Agent Coleman seemed shaken to the bone.

Jill sighed. "That poor baby! If I'd seen that room before I arrested him, he'd be in a body bag right now."

"You know we can't make this personal."

"No, it's not that. It's the background of the photo on the computer you found. It looked like plywood, and some two-by-fours. Be sure LAPD checks the attic."

Just then, Jill's radio went off, and one of the agents squawked in. "Mayfield, you need to check out something I found. I'm about 50 yards directly behind the pool."

Jill left Coleman to walk around the house. "What have you got?" she asked the agent.

"I'm pretty sure Patti Cross is still alive."

"Why's that?"

The agent walked about 20 feet around some bushes, and pointed. "That's why."

Behind the bushes was a freshly dug, empty grave.

Chapter 4

As the rafts approached the shore, the seamen cut the engines, and used paddles to move more silently.

They stopped 300 yards off the shore. Graves nodded his head to Second Class Petty Officer Rodriguez, who immediately back-rolled off the raft into the turbulent water. Rodriguez was doing recon for the team. He specialized in getting in and out of places he shouldn't have been. That's why Commander Graves called him "The Ghost."

Rodriguez had grown up in East Los Angeles. He had been member of the 17th Street Gang since he was 13 years old. His two older brothers had also been members.

When he was 17 years old, his brothers had done a job on a rival gang's turf, and came back with a pound of stolen cocaine.

Three days later, several gang members had been hanging out at the corner of 17th and Compton, drinking beer. His older brothers had each packed weapons, as did most of the gang. It was 11:30 on a Saturday night. Most of the members were pretty high on meth or booze. Juan had been about to leave to see his girlfriend, when suddenly a Cadillac screeched around the corner.

Juan had seen two rifle barrels come out of the passenger window and the back seat. He dove behind a Dumpster and hid. His brothers and their friends pulled out their guns, but it was too late-- the rifles started shooting automatic fire. All six men on the sidewalk were riddled with bullets. They hadn't stood a chance.

The Cadillac sped away, turning down the next street. Juan got out from behind the Dumpster and ran to his brothers, who lay in a massive pool of blood.

Pedro, Juan's oldest brother, was still conscious. "Get out of here, bro! They might make a second round! Mama needs you now, little bro! Run!" Just then, the Cadillac rounded the corner again. Juan grabbed the .45 from his brother's hand.

"Juan! Get out of here! These guys mean fucking business!" he said as he passed out. Juan jumped behind a bush, and waited until the Cadillac slowed to check and see if they got everyone.

At that very moment, Juan opened fire into the windows of the Caddy, squeezing off eight quick rounds into the open front and back windows. The car rammed into another parked car on the street.

With the .45 empty, Juan ran to his other brother, who was also in a pool of blood, and took his .38 special.

A door opened on the Cadillac, and out stepped a man with a Russian-made fully-automatic AK-47. Juan laid down on the ground, and took careful aim.

In the distance, he could hear sirens coming in their direction. The guy with the AK-47 was bleeding from his upper chest. He raised the weapon to shoot Juan, but he seemed disoriented.

Juan opened fire, and shot him four times with direct hits. The gangbanger fell back against the car, and slid down to the ground, leaving a giant blood smear on the side of the shiny Cadillac.

Everything got very quiet, and Juan could hear the sirens getting closer. He looked back at Pedro, and saw that he was alive and awake. "Little bro, run!"

"I can't leave you!"

"You have to! They'll have ambulances here soon! Get out of here, and take the guns and dump them where they'll never be found. Do it now!" His brother strained to mouth the words.

Juan picked up both guns, and looked down the street. He could now see the lights on the LAPD cars getting very close. He ran to a nearby alley, and made his way to 16th Street, then went in to an abandoned building, found a rag, and wiped down both guns as best as he could.

In the far corner of the building stood a 50-gallon drum. Juan took off the lid, and peered down into the barrel's mixture of oil and water. He dropped both guns in the barrel, and put the lid back on.

He walked home a total mess, sobbing and crying. When he got to his apartment, he went in the back way so he wouldn't be seen, and went in to the home he shared with his mother. The apartment was dark. *Good*, he thought, *She's asleep*. He went into his bedroom, and quickly got into bed.

He didn't sleep. After an hour, he heard a knock on the front door. He then listened to his mother talking with police officers through his bedroom door. She let out a blood-curdling scream.

The police asked to talk to Juan. "I'm sure he's in bed," his mother said, and then remembered that she hadn't seen him all evening. She ran to the back of the apartment, screaming, "My baby! My baby!" But by then, he was back in bed, pretending to be asleep. His mother threw open the bedroom door. "Thank God he's here!"

The police questioned Juan for several hours, and then left. Both of his brothers were dead. Two days later, Juan joined the Navy, and left the gangs and their constant turf battles behind him. After a year, he was stationed aboard the USS Point Defiance LSD 3, a landing ship dock, the type that can carry 500 Marines, and make a beach landing, like ones at Guadalcanal.

Aboard the Point Defiance were members of SEAL Team Seven. Prior to any landing, the SEAL divers go to the beachhead to be sure there are no obstructions to block the landing crafts, and usually put a small American flag on the beach to let the Marines know they weren't the first ones there. Juan met several of the Navy SEALs and became friends with a few of them. They convinced him to volunteer for the Navy SEALs. Each SEAL has a different military specialty. A cook can volunteer and if he makes it through the rigorous training he becomes a SEAL, but he is still basically rated as a cook.

Juan Rodriguez was well suited to the SEALs. After seven months of intense 'BUD' training at Coronado Island, San Diego. He went to Marine Corps recon school where he learned how to camouflage himself in any environment. This is where he gained the title as a "ghost." He was an expert marksman who could hide anywhere, anyplace and never be seen. In the SEALs he felt like he was home, hiding behind the Dumpster. But this time, he would save his friends and loved ones, instead of watching them die. After recon training, Juan went to Fort Bragg jump school and learned first-hand how hard it is to jump out of an airplane at five thousand feet, especially the first time.

After a year-and-a-half of training, Juan was now a Navy SEAL. His first orders were to become part of SEAL Team Four based out of Little Creek, Virginia.

Thirty-five minutes later, they spotted a bright green light flash from shore. Juan carried a directional marking light. These lights could only be seen in one direction. If you flashed 10 degrees off the intended recipient, the signal would never be seen.

Back on the lead raft, Commander Graves paused a few seconds. He scanned the shoreline one last time. He sliced his hand through the air three times, and instantly, all four rafts made their way ashore, where they opened the last waterproof bag.

Petty Officer Holgren took out the M-107 sniper rifle, while Chief Dewalter took out the communication unit. They quickly buried the rafts and wetsuits on the waterline, including the transmitters, so they would be able to find them in a hurry on their return trip--provided there was one.

Once they were sure the beach was secure, Juan returned, and spoke in a rumble. In combat, a whisper carries a long way, but a low growl travels only a few feet. He knew that many soldiers died by making the fatal mistake of whispering.

"All clear for half a mile up and down the beach, and no movement inland. There are a couple of houses down the beach with lights on," Rodriguez said. Graves nodded. He hesitated as if to be sure all was silent as it should be at 9:00 p.m.

If they were captured on Iranian soil, they would surely be tortured and used as leverage to embarrass the United States, possibly even executed.

Graves stood, gave several hand signals and the team started inland, slowly, but ready for anything.

After a couple of minutes, they came to a paved road, the same road on which they'd seen the caravan, and took cover. One by one, they crossed the road, regrouped, and started on their way again, stopping occasionally to check their position on the handheld GPS in the dark.

At 9:45, they came to a small village of about twelve concrete buildings. Most of them were dark except one on the north end. In the rear of one of the buildings, they found a small dirt parking lot with three beat-up mini trucks and a couple of old sedans. "We're going to need those trucks to make it to our alpha position on time," said Commander Graves.

Holgren and Loop went to the trucks to see if they could hotwire them. "Senior Chief Dewalter. Take three men and secure both ends of the street. Be sure we have no eyes on us," commanded Graves sternly.

After about 20 minutes, they managed to start the three pickups when a boy of about nineteen, in a white shirt and dark pants, appeared in the shadows of one of the buildings, and started to raise the alarm but never got his mouth open. Petty Officer Williams appeared behind the boy from nowhere and sliced his throat from ear to ear. They dragged the body to one of the trucks and threw it in the back.

The little band of men climbed into the revving trucks, and slowly headed out until they were half a mile down the road, then sped up to 65 miles per hour, using the handheld GPS to guide them. As they crossed the desert countryside, some of the men used night-vision goggles to search the terrain around them. They occasionally passed concrete houses, but no one bothered to even look out the windows.

They had eight miles to cross without detection. The dust kicked up from the dirt road making breathing difficult for the ones in the back of the second and third trucks. Their bandanas covered their mouths, obscuring their faces and origins, in the event of being spotted from a distance.

They came upon a herd of sheep blocking the road. Graves opened his window, and in perfect Farsi yelled to the shepherd, "Move your animals or we'll start shooting them!" Assuming they were Iranian military, the shepherd ran to the road, and poked and prodded the sheep off the road with his staff. Graves thanked him, again in perfect Farsi. They continued on in silence, each man aware of the danger around them.

According to intel, the Iranians had recently built up a military presence throughout this region.

None of the crew wore any type of identification. Even the labels in their clothes had been cut out. If they had to leave someone behind, it would be practically impossible to determine their country of origin.

Graves kept his eyes on the GPS, while Dewalter drove.

“If the gas gauge is working, we’re pretty low on gas, sir.”

“We only have a couple miles left, chief.”

“Yes sir, my estimation is we’ll probably make it on fumes.”

Commander Graves and Senior Chief Dewalter had served together over twelve years and had become good friends. Dewalter had been in the Navy for nineteen years, and member of the SEALs for eighteen. “You know, chief, we’re getting too old for this.”

“That’s affirmative, sir.”

“My wife wants me to transfer out, and get a desk job until I can retire. I’m starting to think that’s not such a bad idea. Let the younger generation handle this cloak-and-dagger crap.”

Dewalter was 37 years old and was in top-notch condition. He ran eight miles every morning before breakfast. He prided himself that no SEAL could beat him in arm-wrestling. Weight-lifting was his hobby, and he never missed a day when they were in the States.

His first marriage had ended tragically. His high school sweetheart, Samantha, had been the love of his life. They had married right after graduation. Dewalter had been a tough guy in constant trouble with the police for street fighting. If anyone had even looked funny at Sam, he would usually throw a punch before thinking about the consequences.

One day, the guy he punched turned out to be a Nevada State Trooper, and Sam convinced him to join the service to avoid prosecution. After a year, he decided to try out for the Navy SEALs.

His class started with 93 sailors. After six months of intensive training, only 23 remained. At the end of the training, only nine men became SEALs.

Gary Dewalter thrived in every aspect of the demanding physical training. He became a full fledged SEAL in 1991 and he was assigned to SEAL Team Three. Within a year he had been promoted to Second Class Petty Officer.

In September 1994, he went on his first West Pac as a Navy SEAL, which meant nine months traveling the Pacific aboard the USS Ronald Reagan aircraft carrier. He wrote to Sam every day, and received letters from her whenever mail arrived on the ship. His free hours were spent in the ship’s gym, bench-pressing almost 500 lbs. But most of all, he missed his Sam.

After six months, he was summoned to the Captain’s quarters, where he was told to sit down and make himself comfortable. The captain leaned over and said, “Mr. Dewalter, I’m afraid I have some horrible news.” The first thing that came to his mind was Samantha.

There was a knock at the door. The Captain ushered in the chaplain, Lieutenant Commander Rice, who had a grim look on his face.

"Gary... may I call you Gary?" asked the captain.

"Yes, sir, that's fine," said Dewalter tensely, looking back and forth between the two men.

"Gary, I'm going to get right to the point. I received a communication this morning from Naval Station San Diego of the gravest consequence. Your wife was murdered yesterday. I am so sorry." Dewalter just sat there, stunned. He stared dumbly at the captain for several seconds. "Beg your pardon, sir?"

"Mr. Dewalter, there's no mistake your wife was killed yesterday at your home in Lemon Grove. I am truly sorry to tell you this."

Petty Officer Dewalter sat firmly for a minute just staring at nothing. A tear ran down his cheek and Gary began crying for the first time since he was a child. The chaplain got out of his chair, and got on his knees in front of him.

"Would you like to pray?" The Chaplain asked, tenderly.

Between sobs, Gary managed to choke up the words, "I'm sorry, Father, but I'm just not a believer."

"That's okay. If you need me for anything, anything at all, I'll be there for you."

"How? What happened? How did my Sam die?" Gary addressed the captain.

"I don't have much information other than that she was murdered. I am so sorry, Gary. I have arranged for you to leave this afternoon on the mail helicopter back to the States. You should be in San Diego this time tomorrow."

Dewalter got up, without asking the captain permission to leave and exited the room without a word.

The Captain said, "Gary--I mean Petty Officer Dewalter--I need for you to be with your SEAL team until your transport is ready." Gary did not respond. He just kept walking.

Dewalter roamed the carrier's passageways in a daze, until he found himself on the flight deck, not even sure how he had gotten there. He looked over the rail at the open sea, and stood there for a half hour, trying to make sense of the situation, when someone came up behind him.

"Dewalter, are you okay?"

Gary recognized the voice of SEAL Team Commander Safrit.

"I heard this terrible news about your wife an hour ago. The whole team is searching the ship for you. We're your friends and right now you need us."

Dewalter turned to his Commander and wrapped his arms around him.

"Why! Why, my Sam? She never hurt anybody!" Again he began to weep more than he had ever wept in his life.

Commander Safrit took Gary to his quarter. Two other Seals were there waiting. Safrit nodded. They understood. No one said a word. What do you say to a man who just found out his wife was murdered?

Gary climbed into his bunk and stared at the ceiling. One of the SEALs walked over and said, "Do you want to talk?" Gary just shook his head. He climbed down off his bunk and started walking out of the room. "Gary, the Commander wants you to stay here," one of the SEALs said. Dewalter just grumbled something about taking a piss. After he did his business, he was on his way back to the cabin when the mail Yeoman saw him. Every day Gary was always so excited to get a letter from Sam that the Yeoman personally delivered them. He usually left them on his bunk. "Hey, Petty Officer Dewalter, you got a new one," and handed Gary the letter. The Yeoman had no way of knowing about his wife's murder. Gary just stared at the letter for several minutes.

Slowly, he opened the letter to see the familiar writing of his wife.

Dear Gary,

I miss you so much! I got your letter yesterday and you sound really bored. Only six more months and we'll be back together again, I'm counting every day!

I got some amazing news. I hope you're sitting down. I saw Doctor Cleland this morning he said I'm pregnant! That's right! You are going to be a Daddy! Isn't this exciting-----

Tears started to fill Gary's eyes. He couldn't read any more. Just then a Chief Bosun's Mate came down the hall. "Step aside, Petty Officer, I'm in a hurry." Gary looked up at the large man, not even sure of what he said. "I said step aside--I'm in a... Are you crying? I thought you SEALs were..." He never finished his sentence. Gary grabbed him with both hands, lifted him off the ground and threw him seven feet down the passageway. He landed on the metal stairs. Blood seeped out of his head and ears.

Gary went mad. The two SEALs ran out of their quarters, right into Gary. He hit one as hard as he could, and the guy went down. He tried to hit the second one, but the guy was fast and threw Gary against the bulkhead. By now, several other sailors came out of their rooms and got into the melee. It took seven men to restrain Gary.

Soon the Master-at-Arms appeared and cuffed Dewalter and took him to the brig with his sidearm out. When Commander Safrit heard about what happened, he rushed to the cabin. While the SEAL was telling him what happened he noticed the crumpled letter on the deck. He reached down and smoothed it out--read it for thirty seconds and said "SHIT."

Twenty minutes later, Safrit was sitting in front of Gary's cell, speaking to him softly. The ship's Captain walked into the brig. "What the hell happened, Commander? You had orders to have your men with him until the mail chopper leaves!" Commander Safrit just handed the letter to the Captain. He read it twice. The Captain looked at Dewalter and said, "The Chief has a serious concussion. Two other men are in the infirmary." He took a deep breath and continued, "You're to stay here until the chopper is ready. Master-at-Arms, be sure he's on that bird with no more incidents."

"Yes, sir."

The next day, he was back in San Diego. His in-laws had also arrived from Nevada, having made all the necessary arrangements to have her body flown back to their hometown.

The following day, Dewalter went to the San Diego Police Department, and talked for two hours with the detectives in charge of the investigation.

“We have suspects, four men whom we believe have been committing home invasion robberies in the same area as your home. We’ve gone through your house with a fine-tooth comb, and can’t find any direct evidence.”

“Detective, was my wife... you know, raped?”

“I’m afraid so, Mr. Dewalter, I’m sorry.”

“But can’t you get DNA from that?”

“Whoever did this wore protection, and took it with them. We plan to arrest the four men we suspect tomorrow. Maybe we can make one of them talk. Right now, that’s our only hope.”

Gary Dewalter went to Nevada for Sam’s funeral. It was hard on him. He wore his naval dress uniform.

During the entire funeral he never shed a tear even though his heart was completely broken. After the funeral Gary flew back to San Diego. He did not even attend the wake. He just couldn’t face Sam’s family. The Navy was his only family now.

He was given a desk job at SEAL Training Center on Coronado Island until he was emotionally ready to return to his SEAL team. For two weeks, Dewalter did his duties, and stayed in the barracks. He couldn’t bear going back to his house where his Sam was murdered. He called the landlord and the lease was torn up. He then had some of his SEAL buddies hold an estate sale. All Gary wanted were his clothes, some photos and a necklace he had given Sam on their first anniversary.

The four men never confessed, and were never even put on trail.

But within six months, all four men died from broken necks after being castrated with butter knives. It was later determined that each victim had condoms forced down their throats filled with battery acid. Dewalter was a lead suspect in all four murders, but he always had alibis from the other SEALs who swore that he was on base when each murder took place.

Chapter 5

Admiral James sat in the Situation Room of the White House at a large oak table that could easily accommodate 18 people. Only six men sat there. They were all in uniform, except for General Mitchell, Chief of Staff of the Army.

He said to James, sharply, “This better be good, Chris, ‘cause I was planning to beat the pants off that CIA asshole John Sherman on the course.” James breathed a heavy sigh.

“Unfortunately, Rodney, this isn’t good.” Concerned at hearing the name of the number two man at Langley, Admiral James said, “What did you tell Sherman when you cancelled?”

General Jones shook his head. "Don't worry, I said it was personal." The Admiral snapped, "Oh, yeah? I bet he probably covered you with bugs. Knowing that prick, he might have shoved one up your ass, and enjoyed it."

They all just smiled, knowing that no bug could breach the security of the President's Situation Room. The two most secure places in the White House were the Oval Office and the Situation Room.

"Well, we sure don't want the fucking CIA on this," said James. Just as he said that, President Powell walked into the room with his White House Chief of Staff Dick Bresser. President Powell was a good-looking man with short black hair and a perfect nose and a strong jaw. He stood six feet and weighed in at one hundred and ninety pounds.

"Gentleman..." President Powell nodded to his military chiefs. The President was the second-youngest President, after J.F.K., ever elected to office. Thomas Powell was forty-six-years-old, and had graduated Harvard Law School after which he entered public life. At twenty-seven, he was elected to the House of Representatives. At thirty-five, he was elected to Congress. Thomas Powell had a unique charisma. When he came into a room you felt as though royalty had entered.

It was Sunday. The President was dressed casually in Levi's and a button-down bright red shirt. The President moved slowly. He had been working around the clock with his advisors on the North Korean missile crisis. He looked drained both emotionally and physically. He and Bresser took seats across from the Chiefs of Staff, to make the point that he was the Commander-In-Chief.

The President looked long and hard at everyone, then said, "Well, let's get this show on the road. My wife and kids are expecting me for dinner tonight." Admiral James opened his briefcase, and handed a folder to each person in the room. "I know what you are about to see looks impossible, but after 9/11, we know anything is possible. Mr. President, I'm sorry, don't count on dinner tonight with your family."

James then inserted the thumb drive into his laptop, hit some keys and the two flat screens in the room came to life. One was a satellite image of the Bushehr Province taken six months ago. The other was the image from that very morning. Each man peered at the screens. Then Admiral James read his report aloud. The President eyes shot up in amazement.

The President pushed a button on the phone in front of him, and said, "Marge, get the Israeli Ambassador here tonight, the sooner the better!"

He then looked up at his staff. "Gentlemen, if this report is accurate, we have a major situation on our hands. Admiral James, when did this come to light?"

"Sir?"

"I mean when did you find out about these... what did the report call them?"

"Thermo displacement devices, sir," replied James smartly.

"What makes Israeli intelligence think that they are going to be used against us? The United States is a long way from the Middle East," asked President Powell cautiously.

"I really don't know. But you know how they work over there. I'm sure that Mossad has its own methods of intelligence gathering."

"Yes, so I've heard," President Powell said, almost condescendingly to the Admiral.

Admiral James let Powell's tone pass, and continued. "We have to work under the assumption that their intel is correct."

"I understand, Admiral. What do you propose?"

"Well, sir, we need to come up with a game plan. As you see on the screen, the Israelis are confident the devices are in this bunker, in the Bushehr Province in Iran. The bunker is only twelve miles from the shore. If we, in fact, believe that they plan to use these... weapons, let's call them. Then we need to take immediate action. If these reports are close to accurate, I'd rather to destroy them on their soil, not ours."

The President thought about this a minute, then leaned over to Bresser. They whispered back and forth a few times.

Then Powell cleared his throat forcefully. "Let's make this clear. You're saying that we invade Iran, on some level?"

"Yes, sir, that's exactly what I'm saying. I recommend we send in a crack SEAL team to do the job. Get in and get out."

The President thought about this. "You're talking about a strike like the one Obama did with Bin Laden?"

"Not quite, sir, we can't use aircraft of any type. The Iranians are just waiting for us or the Israelis to attempt to retrieve the devices. It would have to be a beach landing, and then a ground assault."

"That sounds dangerous. It could have huge political ramifications if we fail."

"Sir, the ramifications would be much worse if we do nothing, and one of these things goes off in Times Square."

The President sat quietly for awhile. Bresser leaned over and spoke in his ear for a full two minutes.

"Do we have a team that can handle this type of operation?" asked the President.

"Yes, sir, I believe we do. I know the Lieutenant Commander personally. He has accomplished some of the most difficult operations we've had. He is our go-to guy for land operations, and his team is highly trained."

"I want a complete mission analysis on my desk by tomorrow morning. I also want the file on this superman Lieutenant Commander you're talking about. Oh, and Admiral, I want your private records on him, not just the standard profile. I want to read about every mission he's been on since he enlisted. If I agree to invade another country's sovereignty, I have to be sure

he's the best of the best." "Yes, sir, but believe me, this man and his team are the best we have."

Chapter 6

It was getting near 3:00, and the day was heating up. Jill was in Paul Grier's kitchen, going over plot maps of the property along with topography maps of the surrounding hills.

Six sheriffs from the horseback unit were searching the rough mountain terrain. The FBI brought in three dogs to walk the property. They were trained in both search-and-rescue, and cadaver searches. There were now twelve FBI agents, sixteen LAPD, and at least a dozen sheriffs on the property conducting searches.

"She must be close to the house. Grier wasn't in very good shape. I don't see him taking big hikes every day to toy with his victim."

Jill heard barking, and she and Coleman looked up at each other, their eyes frozen in anticipation. "Sounds like one of the dogs might have found something," Coleman said.

The barking came from the area near the empty grave. They went out to the back, and saw two LAPD officers with their cadaver dog as he repeatedly sniffed, barked, sat, then stood and barked again, a signal that he was definitely on to something.

Jill and Coleman approached the officers. "What's he hitting?" One officer pointed. "He hit three different spots--there, there and here." Jill and Coleman stared coldly at the three spots just feet from the empty grave.

"Looks like we found ourselves a graveyard. Agent Coleman, call Wilshire, and get us an excavation team." He took out his cell and made the call.

Just then, a black SUV pulled up. Jill recognized it immediately as Assistant Director Jules, Station Chief for the Los Angeles FBI.

"Oh, great! Jules is here," moaned Jill. "Jules only cares about his own advancement. He's a total media whore and just gets in the way of most investigations," commented Agent Mayfield.

"This means the press isn't far behind," agreed Coleman.

"Amazing how he always shows up right before the press. That bastard can't stand missing a photo op, any chance to get his face on the news."

"Right on schedule," said Coleman. Jill watched the Channel Two News van pulling up the driveway.

"Mayfield," called an agent from beyond the garage. "We have something here."

Inside the garage were two cars. One was a new Ford van, still with the dealer plates. The other was a black Mercedes sedan.

"What have you got?"

"We found this shoe in the trunk of the Mercedes, wedged behind the spare tire." It was a little girl's shoe. Jill put it in the evidence bag and said, "Get a photo of this to Patti Cross's parents for identification."

Director Jules strode pompously into the garage, not even giving a nod to the agents. "What have we got?"

"Agent White found this in the trunk," explained Jill.

"Good. Secure the garage, and get forensics in here."

"Yes, sir, I was just about to do that." Jill left the garage, feeling irritated at Jules for giving orders when this was her crime scene. He sensed her impatience, and added, "Mayfield, can you bring me up to speed?"

Jill turned to face her boss, feeling disgusted that he was even on the scene. Director Jules was about five-foot-ten-inches tall, and the top of his head was bald and shiny. He had a small mustache, making his nose seemed too small for his round face.

"Well, sir. There's the shoe, and over by that oak tree, the cadaver dog hit three spots. And of course the video we found in his porn room. So far, that's all we've got."

"Three spots?" replied Jules.

"Yes, sir, it appears that this Grier guy may have been abducting kids before the Cross girl." She noticed that the director wore a conspicuously nice suit for the cameras. She thought, *God, I wish he'd leave us alone.*

It was almost 5:00, with no more discoveries. Jill was getting frustrated, but could feel that they were close to finding Patti Cross. In the meantime, the excavation crews had dug up two of the spots hit by the dog. And sure enough, they found the partial remains of two children. One appeared to be a small boy and the other was a young girl.

She got on her cell, and called Senior Agent Reese, who was in charge of the interrogation of Paul Grier. The phone rang four times. Jill was about to hang up when Agent Reese answered.

"Reese here."

"Hi, Mayfield here. Any luck with that pig Grier? I could use any help that you can give me. We're hitting a wall out here."

"Sorry, Mayfield, he refused to talk without his attorney."

"Did his attorney show?"

"Yeah, about an hour ago. They've been talking since he got here."

"This may help. A few hours ago, the cadaver dog made three distinct hits right by the new grave that creep Grier dug."

"So he's a serial?"

"We have two bodies so far. Both minors. An anthropologist is en route right now. But I don't think either of the corpses is the Cross girl. Too much decomposition. Maybe when he knows that we found more bodies, he'll loosen up, and start giving us something. We've got

to find her. We have no idea as to her condition or if she even has food and water. For all we know she could be already dead and he just didn't bury her yet."

"Got it. I'll go and have a little talk with his attorney. I'll get back to you as soon as I get something." They hung up.

Jill looked down the driveway where Jules was standing in front of a dozen news cameras, and craned her neck to hear what he was saying.

"Are there any further questions?" asked Jules.

"How many mounted police are searching the surrounding hills?" asked the L.A. Times reporter.

"So far, this is a foot and dog search only. We are looking under every rock in the immediate area of the house," answered Jules.

"Really? Then who are those sheriffs on horseback coming down the hill behind you?"

Jules turned around to see them. He turned red in the face. "Uh... It appears my agents haven't kept me as informed as they should have. Any other questions?" he said as he cleared his throat.

"Have you talked to Patti's parents John and Lynn Cross? If so, what are their comments?" asked a reporter from the New York Times.

"Yes, we have been in communication with the Crosses. But, any conversation we have remains confidential."

Half the reporters finished up, and were returning to their vans. The ones remaining just stared at Jules, wondering if he would venture to say any other stupid thing that they could print.

Ten minutes later, Director Jules pulled Jill aside to chew her out. "Why didn't you tell me we had a sheriff-mounted search party? Do you know what an idiot I looked like?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," said Jill, suppressing a laugh, as she turned and walked away.

5:30. Still no more leads.

The digging teams set up lights to work through the night. They were highly trained to sift through everything. Even a mere button could be DNA evidence. It wouldn't be the first time a murderer had missed something while covering a grave.

Jill's phone rang and she quickly grabbed it.

"Mayfield? Reese here. Not good news. He claims that that's where he buries dead coyotes and rattlesnakes he kills, and if there are human remains, we should look to the former owner, who just happens to be a famous rock star."

Another agent came up hurriedly to Jill, panting. "We got something! Come with me! I don't want Jules seeing this before you do."

Jill pocketed her phone, and followed the agent as nonchalantly as she could.

"We used metal detectors to look for underground structures, and hit this entire area. We found a large structure about three feet down. I chalked off the perimeter." Jill walked around the chalked-off area. It was about 12 feet wide and 12 feet long, and ended at a tool shed.

“So, what's in the shed?” asked Jill, knitting her brow.

“Some gardening tools, a lawnmower, nothing special. We checked the floors. There's no sign of a trap door.”

Jill entered the metal shed. It was filled with gardening supplies. She saw that the place had been searched thoroughly. Cobwebs hung from the ceiling to the floor and the entire shed smelled like mold. She went back outside and took a deep breath of fresh air. She walked around the perimeter of the chalk lines. She felt tremendous apprehension. She just had to be close. Thinking for a moment, she went behind the shed, but found nothing.

As she was walking back around the shed, she tripped on something in the dirt. It was a small track. She kicked away the soil, and found five feet of track behind the shed. She hurriedly ran to the other side of the shed, and dug her fingers into the dirt finding another track.

Her heart was pounding, and she called over two sheriffs. “I think this shed is on a roller track system. See if you can push it back.” She was thinking, *She has be here, it's going to be dark soon!*

The sheriffs got in front of the shed, and gave it a shove. It moved easily, revealing a small staircase leading to a steel door.

Mayfield's heart was in her stomach now. She climbed down the rough stairs, and threw her weight against the door. It was locked. She pounded and shouted, “Patti, are you in there?”

Crying could be heard through the door. Jill scrambled back up the stairs just in time see Jules' SUV leaving the crime scene.

“We need to get that door open! I'm sure Patti is in there!”

One of the Sheriff's detectives went down to the door, and pulled out locksmith tools. He fiddled with the lock for about two minutes and then yelled, “It's open!”

Jill jumped back down the stairs. By now, Coleman had joined her. “Shouldn't we have the bomb squad check it out first?”

“No time! We don't even know how much air she's got!”

Jill cracked the door. It was pitch black inside.

“Gimme a flashlight!” Coleman dropped her one and when Jill turned it on it illuminated a small naked girl crouched in the corner wailing piteously.

“Patti! Patti Cross! Is that you?”

“I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! I'm a bad girl. He wouldn't feed me until I did the things he wanted. Please don't tell my parents, Oh God!”

Chapter 7

Commander Graves watched the concrete bunker through his high-powered binoculars, taking note of the eight-foot fence with concertina wire on top.

The SEAL team was in an old burnt-out structure less than half a mile away from their target. They were taking refuge in what appeared to once be a house, but hadn't been occupied in several years. There was no roof, and several of the interior walls had fallen down. The wall facing the bunker was completely gone. Graves' best guess was that at some point it had been used as artillery target practice.

This was their alpha point. From here, they would make their plans on how to get in and out of the bunker. Satellite images from the day before showed this structure to be not only empty, but rarely visited.

They had left the trucks a half a mile back and several yards from the highway, spaced about a quarter mile apart, to avoid detection. The first one, they rolled onto its side, the second they rolled completely over, and the third, they just left the hood open, making them all look abandoned. They hastily buried the body of the boy in the sand.

At a quick glance, the vehicles appeared to be derelict. But if a patrol or police stopped for a closer inspection, they might quickly notice that they were not stripped, and in fact, were in running condition. This was a chance they had to take, because they would need them for their return trip to the beach.

Commander Graves said, "Something's wrong," as he looked intently toward the small concrete bunker. He saw hand-written warning signs every 20 or so feet on the outside of the perimeter fence, written in Arabic. Graves read them, "Caution, Mine Field!" Said Graves to no one in particular, "My bet is the road's clear. Good thing, too. That's our only way in and out."

The land around the bunker was typical Middle Eastern desert. A lot of sand and not much else. Graves looked to the east. He knew that the Iranian army had a base only twenty clicks away. He couldn't see any lights, so he hoped that the base was a little farther than what had been projected. He studied the satellite dishes on the roof of the bunker. He figured that it was mostly underground, maybe one or two levels beneath the desert floor. "No perimeter guards," he thought aloud. "But the satellite imagery had shown guards 24/7," he said to Ensign Wright, who was lying next him with binoculars.

"What now, sir?" asked Wright.

Graves considered. "Let's keep an eye out for a few hours, and see what happens, if anything. Rodriguez, watch our flank. Chief Dewalter, break out the comm." The Senior Chief took out a small steel box, and carefully entered a 6-digit code. Most of the men took a few steps away from the Chief. They all knew if the wrong code was entered, the box would

explode into a thousand pieces. This was security to ensure self-destruction if not properly opened, but also to make it impossible to determine the country of origin if found by the enemy.

Inside the box was a simple phone receiver, with one green and one red button. The Chief handed it to Commander Graves. He nodded to the Chief, and Dewalter pressed the red button. Graves waited for the correct tone to come from the earpiece, and said, "Alpha Charlie Zulu, this is Red Robin Foxtrot. We have arrived at the control tower, and it shows no activity, I say again, no activity." We will investigate tower in 2 hours. Out." He nodded again to the Chief, who pushed the green button, took back the receiver and re-entered the code, then closed the box with a light click. "Comm box secured, sir," said the Chief.

This one-way satellite phone was new military technology. Not only is the message encrypted, but if a trace were put on the signal it would show a location over 10 miles from where the actual transmission was sent. It broadcast outgoing messages only because an incoming transmission could not be deflected the same as an outgoing.

A door opened at the bunker. A solitary man in a white lab coat came to the perimeter gate. He inserted a code into a small box, and opened the gate all the way. Graves squinted through the night-vision goggles.

The man in the lab coat waited a few minutes, then turned and watched the bunker and started to walk back to the door from which he came. Graves sensed the man's impatience. Just then a large overhead door opened. A truck emerged from the building. Behind the truck came a Jeep with a mounted machine gun. The passenger door of the truck opened, and the white coat climbed in. The truck exited the compound, leaving the gate wide open.

"What do you make of this, Commander? A trap? Do you think they left the gate open intentionally?" Ensign Wright asked.

"I don't know," replied Graves. "Let's keep a close watch, and see what happens."

Another hour went by and nothing happened. The gate remained open. Graves' legs started to ache. "Keep a close watch, Ensign. I'm going to stretch my legs." Graves crawled back far enough to be sure he couldn't be seen from the bunker. He got up and went around the side of the structure where Chief Dewalter was on watch. "What's up, Gary?"

"Nothing, sir, even with the night-visions I can see only a few hundred yards. But everything seems to be okay. I heard some vehicles awhile ago. Were they leaving the bunker?"

"Yeah, they did. Something feels really wrong."

"What's up, Commander?" He sounded concerned.

"Well, a few things. Too begin with, there's no guards. When that truck left he had a Jeep escort with a mounted fifty-caliber. Then to top it off, they left the gates wide open."

"Think we're too late, sir?"

"That's possible. We'll know soon enough."

Graves went around the back and looked for any sign of Rodriguez. As hard as he looked he just couldn't find him.

"Rodriguez, where are you?"

"Right behind you, sir." John turned startled, and sure enough, Juan was standing only two feet away. "Hey, how the hell do you do that?"

"Practice, sir, are we ready to move?"

"Soon, are you ready? You're going in as lead man!"

"Yes, sir, ready when you give the word."

"We'll hold our last briefing in thirty. Why don't you tell the other sentries."

"Yes sir, will do." Commander Graves turned and started to walk away. He then stopped, looked back and Rodriguez was gone. *How does he do that?* thought John.

It was now 12:40 a.m. and still no sign of movement. Graves assembled his men in the center of the burnt-out building leaving three out on watch.

"We're going in at 0130 hours with a change of plan. We haven't seen any guards, so we're going in fast and hard. There's a minefield surrounding the perimeter, so stay on the road. We'll get our job done with no bullshit, finish the job, and be back on the sub tomorrow. In the meantime, try and get some rest."

One hour later, they assembled for their final briefing. Graves looked each man in the eye before beginning. "We're going to find what we're looking for, and then blow the place to hell! Rodriguez is our lead man. Chief Dewalter is our number two. I want Holgren here with the M-107 sniper rifle, watching our backs. Chief, I want you and two others to stay between the perimeter fence of the bunker. After we're inside, it won't really matter if a warning shot is fired. We'll already be committed. Loop, you take a position at the entrance to the bunker and make sure we've got a way out. Everyone else is going in. Understood?"

Petty Officer Williams asked, "Sir, what's your take on the lack of guards, and gate left open?"

Alan Williams was a black man from New Orleans. He never talked about his past. Actually, he rarely spoke at all. On previous missions he proved himself to be quite the killer. He always had a hatchet in his utility belt. Alan Williams could bury his hatchet in a man's head from thirty feet away. He was six-feet-three-inches tall and built like a gladiator. Besides Graves, no man on the team would ever challenge him. Williams was just pure mean. He had spent two years on SEAL Team Three, but was moved to SEAL Team Four because the Commander of SEAL Team Three felt he couldn't control him.

He fit in perfectly with Commander Grave's team. SEAL Team Four was geared for land operations. They all had a talent for deception and getting the job done at any cost.

"I don't know, but we sure as shit are going to find out. Gentlemen, lock and load and keep your powder dry. Let's move out."

The fourteen SEALs each darted for the entrance of the bunker one minute apart, with Rodriguez taking the lead. Since they knew the landscape was mined, they made their way on

the dirt road that the truck had used earlier. Within 30 minutes, Rodriguez was in the perimeter, and took a position by the gate. Chief Dewalter was next and manned the entrance to the bunker. As each man arrived, they took up defensive positions.

Ensign Wright was the last man there. Graves gave a hand signal, and Petty Officer Putman and Petty Officer Williams went in opposite directions around the bunker. In ten minutes, they returned, reporting no signs of cameras. Any windows that might have existed were now bricked over.

Stealthily, they made their way to the large truck-sized roll-up doors. Loop pulled off his pack to get his C-4 to blow the doors open. When Senior Chief Dewalter reached down and gave the base of the roll-up a slight pull, it gave easily. "Commander, it's open."

Graves looked shocked. "Everyone, back to the gate! I'll open it slightly, and see if it's wired. If anything happens, you know the mission. I expect you to finish it." Ensign Wright stayed with Graves and said, "Commander, I'm staying here to cover you."

"Thanks, Ensign, but if anything does happen, I need you to get these men back to the sub."

Graves got on his back and with delicate care, raised the roll-up door until he could wedge his rifle into the opening. He waited to see if anything would happen. But to his relief, nothing did. He pushed it up a few more inches, and stared into the blackness for what seemed like hours, even though it was only a few minutes. He raised it another six inches and quickly slid inside. Each man noted that Graves took on the most dangerous aspects of any mission.

Chapter 8

Admiral James, the Admiral Chief of Naval Operations, sat quietly at a desk near the center of the White House Situation Room.

At a nearby table were Vice-Admiral Shanks, Four-Star General Gates, the highest-ranking person in the Marines and its commandant, and General Wagner of the Air Force. Sitting at this table were three of the five Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Each man was reading the report over again while taking notes.

General Gates looked up at the Admiral. "When's the President due here?"

"Any minute, General Gates," Gates nodded impatiently.

Shanks looked Gates up and down, and saw what he thought was maybe one of the toughest looking men he had ever seen.

Gates had a bulldog face and never smiled. Even at 62 years old, he didn't have an ounce of body fat. Shanks couldn't help but imagine this man as a replica of the most famous Marine ever, General Chesty Puller, who, during the Korean War's Battle of the Choson Reservoir,

was surrounded by a million Chinese soldiers. Puller had redirected his fight back to the coast, where reserves and the Navy waited. A Stars-and-Stripes reporter had asked General Puller if they were retreating. Puller had looked the reporter over, and said, "Son, we are just fighting in another direction."

President Powell and Dick Bresser returned unceremoniously to the room. No one jumped to attention. The President seated himself across from the three Chiefs of Staff. "Let's get right to the point. Where are we in Operation Cube Recovery?"

James, the senior man in the room under the President, stood. "Well, sir, we received a one-way comm at 0300. They are at the target, and there appear to be no sentries."

The President reflected on this. "What's your opinion, Admiral? What does this mean?"

No one spoke for several seconds. Then General Pete "Bull Dog" Gates stood. "Sir, in my opinion we're too late. They would have major security, given what was stolen from the Israelis."

Vice-Admiral Shanks concurred. "General Gates may be correct. It's also possible that they've noticed our satellite surveillance, and are keeping a low profile."

Powell reflected on this. He asked, "When are our men going in?"

James spoke up again. "My guess is they're probably in there right now. We have our very best man leading this operation, and he knows what's at stake. We should know something either way within a few hours."

The President stood, and paced around the room deep in thought. He looked tense. He asked, "Do we have an alternate plan, in the event these energy devices are not where they should be?"

The room was dead still. Finally, Admiral James spoke haltingly. "No, sir, there is no contingency plan at this moment. We have no idea how the Iranians plan to get them into this country. We don't even know for sure they even are planning to bring them here."

The President collapsed into his chair heavily. "I don't want to be remembered as the President who dropped the ball and caused the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians."

The President sat quietly for several seconds as if deep in thought. He said, almost in a whisper, "Gentlemen, I have been on the secure line with the Israeli Prime Minister. He is quite certain that they are intended to be used against us. He told me that these stolen devices are still very much in the experimental stage. They had even made the decision to destroy all of them after their first underground test."

The President searched carefully for his next words. "Even though each device is only about 12 x 12 inches, they are capable of killing every living thing in a half-mile radius, and can cause casualties upward of one mile."

General Gates burst out, "What the hell were the Israelis thinking, and what did they do with the remaining devices?" President Powell tried to stay calm. "The Prime Minister assured

me that all the energy devices have been destroyed, except of course for the three that were stolen. Five days ago, Mossad sent two fighters in to take out the bunker where they think they're being stored. But Iran's air defense was ready for them and blew them out of the air." He took a breath. His brow was sweating.

"I briefed CIA Director Holland and FBI Director Holcome before coming here. They say that there has been a huge burst in intel traffic and excessive chatter. Holland feels that the devices and the pick-up of extremist chatter are related. He's putting all of his resources into this. The Israeli Prime Minister also said that they plan to bring these things in by way of Canada."

"How is it that the Israelis seem to know so much?" said General Gates.

"We all know that Mossad has its own methods. I feel sorry for the poor bastard they interrogated," replied the President.

"Let's assume for a minute that they're right about the Canadian border. That's an awfully big border to protect!" snapped General Gates. "Yes, General Gates, I'm aware of the size of our northern border, but that's irrelevant. Right now we have to find a way to stop them."

James shook his head. "It might be premature to start bringing in other agencies until we know more about the outcome of the mission."

Bresser finally spoke. "This is way too big to take any chances. At this point, we know that the United States is most likely the main target. Obviously, if they wanted to use the devices against the Israelis, they would never have smuggled them out of the country."

There was a heavy silence in the room, as the officers contemplated the impossible task ahead of them.

The President stood abruptly. "As far as I am concerned, this meeting is concluded. I want to know the result of the mission ASAP. Is that understood?"

Admiral James nodded to the President. "Yes sir, of course." As the President and Bresser headed for the door, President Powell stopped to face his Chiefs of Staff. "One more thing. If the mission is not a 100% success, I want a contingency plan to keep those damn things off American soil. Is that completely understood?"

James said, "Yes sir! Completely understood. We've been working on some ideas."

The President and Bresser strode out of the room.

James turned to the other Chiefs. "Gentlemen, this shit is going to roll downhill, and we're at the bottom. I want written contingency plans from each of you by tomorrow morning! Let's just hope SEAL Team Four is successful. If not, God help us. There's no way we can blockade the entire Canadian border! "

Chapter 9

Zarar Raskin stood facing the floor-to-ceiling window of his office above downtown Los Angeles. On his large oak desk were piled several stacks of papers. On the wall behind his desk hung an oil painting of his wife and sons. His wife had wanted him in the picture as well, but he'd said it would be tacky to have a large painting of himself in his own office. "Next year, we'll have another painted with all of us in it, and we can hang it at home."

Zarar was a tall, handsome man, although he was starting to show signs of balding. Zarar went to the gym every other day, and it showed. At 43 he was lean and fit. He had dark friendly eyes, and a prominent nose.

Zarar had been in the US since 1995. After emigrating from Iran, he'd lived in New York for two years but couldn't stand the cold winters. He'd worked on and off as a taxi driver. Then one day, he quit. He flew to Los Angeles and started his life over. Zarar saved every dollar he earned as a carpet salesman during the day. At night, he worked as a security guard at an office building in the San Fernando Valley.

Over time, he met other Iranians. One Saturday night, he was invited to a party in Woodland Hills, a family community at the west end of the Valley. There, he'd seen a beautiful woman across the room. He couldn't take his eyes off her, and knew instantly he had to have her. He asked his friend for her name. "That is Zawiya. But be careful. Her father is a very protective man, and it's rumored he is involved with some very bad people. I'd stay away from her if you want to stay healthy."

"What do you mean?" Zarar enquired.

"I mean if you don't want both legs broken, then don't mess with his daughter."

Zarar ignored his advice and introduced himself to her and as she smiled at him, she looked over his shoulder, and saw her father watching them closely. They chatted for the next two hours, laughing and giggling. By the end of the evening, Zarar was in love. Eight months later, he asked her father for her hand in marriage.

Her father had said that he would only allow her to marry a man who was successful, not some low-life carpet salesman and part-time security guard. Zarar was mortified that this man would talk to him this way. But it did something to Zarar. Besides, his heart was broken. He made up his mind to prove his worth to her father.

A week after that, he withdrew all his savings, leased a shop on Robertson Blvd., and started his own business dealing in Persian rugs and miscellaneous goods. He kept prices low and dealt in volume, and his business did remarkably well. Within a few years, he opened a second store on La Cienega to supply wealthy local Iranians with authentic goods from home.

During that period, life was good to Zarar. He opened four more stores, the third one in Sherman Oaks, and the fourth in El Monte. He then went back to Zawiya's father, and asked for permission again. Her father knew how well Zarar had done, and finally consented. They married on September 4th at a mosque in Sherman Oaks.

A week after the wedding, her father went missing. He was never seen again. Rumors floated about that he had been murdered for cheating his business partners, and thrown into the ocean.

Zarar's business kept growing. Soon he had a warehouse in the City of Vernon. He was driving a new Mercedes, and owned a nice home in the Hollywood Hills. He felt blessed to have a wife and two wonderful sons whom he cherished beyond life itself.

Zarar stared out at Santa Monica Blvd. It was 10:30 in the morning, and the traffic was still bumper-to-bumper, but Zarar didn't notice the traffic. His hands were trembling.

Eighteen long years before he had come to the United States, he had secretly attended an Al Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan. He had then been sent to the United States as a member of a sleeper cell. Not even his wife knew of his revolutionary past. He always told everyone that he was a simple farmer's son, who had never traveled until he moved to the United States.

Over the years, he had assumed his trainers had lost track of him, or at least hoped they had just plain forgotten him. After 9/11, he felt confident that he could live the rest of his life as a normal working prosperous Iranian-American.

But this morning, his entire world collapsed.

Zarar had been walking from his car to the elevator in the concrete parking structure that serviced his building. The elevator would take him to his corporate office on the ninth floor. Then a man crept up behind him, and said menacingly, "Zarar, so good to see you have discovered the American dream!"

Zarar turned to see a tall, slender man with a long grey beard in a black suit with no tie. The suit looked a few sizes too small and was badly wrinkled. He looked to be in his late sixties, and his eyes were deeply inset. His ears appeared to be uneven. The left was definitely lower than the right.

"I beg your pardon? Have we met?" asked Zarar, warily.

The man looked Zarar over from head to toe.

"Well, well... I can see that the reports I've received were correct. You appear to be very successful in your capitalist business here in America."

"Excuse me. I must to get to my office. If you would like an appointment, please contact my secretary." Zarar turned on his heel.

"Zarar Raskim, Zaighum told me that you were one of his best students."

Zarar froze. He hadn't heard that name since 1995. Zaighum had been his trainer from the Al Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan. "So you remember the Lion. Unfortunately, he is now in paradise. So I have come in his place."

Memories came rushing back to Zarar. He remembered the six months of constant training how to build bombs, from household chemicals to firing weapons, along with a crash course in English.

Zaighum had been like a father to Zarar. They'd spent hours talking about the necessity of killing as many Americans as possible when his time was called.

Zarar stared back at the stranger who now had a big grin on his face.

"Did you think we'd forgotten you, Zarar?"

"What do you want from me?"

Again the stranger smiled. "For now, nothing, but soon your services may be needed."

"But it's been so many years. I'm 43 years old, I'm not a young man anymore. I have a family."

"Yes, I know. You and your family live at 23194 Laurel Canyon. Your wife's name is Zawiya. And she's home right now. She just returned from dropping your sons off at school. Your home has a wonderful view of the city."

The gleam in his eye was maniacal. And with that, the stranger turned and went down the steps to Santa Monica Blvd., and was gone.

Zarar was frozen on the spot. He looked down the stairs in disbelief, until a car came around the corner looking for parking. Zarar came out of his trance, and continued walking to the elevator, going over the conversation he had just had. He got a chill remembering that the man knew exactly where he lived. For the first time in years, Zarar was truly frightened.

The elevator doors opened on the first floor, and several people stepped in. A young woman, a receptionist from another company down the hall from Zarar's office looked at him for a brief second. "Mr. Raskim! You look like you've just seen a ghost!"

"That's a possibility." He pressed the ninth floor button and said, "I'm fine, thank you, just not feeling like myself today," he snapped.

Zarar got out on his floor, and walked down the hall to his office. There he saw his receptionist typing on her computer. She barely glanced up. "Good morning, Mr. Raskim."

"Good morning, Ruth." Then he added, "Ruth, cancel all my appointments for today. I don't wish to be disturbed."

Ruth stopped typing. She turned and looked strangely at Zarar.

"Of course, Mr. Raskin, but Mr. Hidleman from Santa Monica Imports is supposed to be here in an hour. You've been trying to meet with him for months."

Zarar took a deep breath. "Call him and apologize. Tell him I have the flu, and reschedule for next week." He closed and locked his office door with a trembling hand.

Chapter 10

Several members of the SEAL team waited and watched the small opening of the roll-up door for any sign of Graves. The others were scanning the desert for any sign of an approaching threat.

The night was black and moonless. The SEALs were nearly invisible in their black dungarees.

Inside the bunker, Commander Graves sat still allowing his eyes to grow accustomed to the total darkness. He was inside some sort of large garage. To his left was a large military truck. To his right the garage was empty. This was where the truck they saw leave with the Jeep was parked earlier in the evening. Graves' nerves were on edge. His stomach was tight as a rubber band.

He listened. Nothing.

He made his way around the truck. Ten feet ahead of him was a large metal door. He quietly made his way to the door. Next to it was a table with a computer on it. He tried the handle to the door and it turned easily. *Good, it's not locked*, thought John. He wanted to get a better look at the truck. He was thinking that this would make a perfect getaway vehicle.

He slowly climbed on to the running board and carefully pressed the driver's door handle and it also was unlocked.

He slowly opened the door and it made a faint squeak. Suddenly, inside a sleeping soldier jumped up in shock when he saw Graves with his face painted black!

Graves didn't hesitate. He reached in and grabbed the soldier by his shirt collar and in one movement pulled him from the truck and threw him to the ground. Graves was now on top of him and snapped his head to the right, instantly breaking his neck.

After Commander Graves made sure the soldier was dead, he dragged the lifeless body to the overhead door. He went back to the truck and climbed inside. *No keys*. On the floorboard was the soldier's AK-47. Graves took the rifle and went back to the overhead door and low-crawled out the door backwards. Once he was completely outside the bunker, he pulled out the dead body of the soldier along with the assault rifle.

"All clear on this level. This was the only guard I saw. He was half-asleep in a truck parked in there, definitely not their A-team. On the other side of the roll-up is a garage, with one deuce-and-a-half military truck. This will be perfect for our escape. On the other side of the truck are some stairs leading down into the bunker. Loop, you stay at the overhead and watch our backs," he ordered. Loop nodded.

Graves continued, "I didn't see any surveillance. Ensign Wright, I want you to stay and secure the stairs after we go down, and see if you can find the truck keys, and check the gas. Loop, you think you could hotwire this thing if there are no keys?"

"If it's got a motor I can start it, sir."

"Good. If you hear any firing, start the truck, pull it into the courtyard and be ready for a fast getaway."

Ensign Wright just nodded. Anyone could see the disappointment in his face. He wanted to be where the action was, but he also understood the Commander was keeping him out of harm's way--in case he ended up commanding the team on their escape--should Graves be killed.

"Okay, it's a go!" One at a time, they entered the bunker, and with their M-16s ready, they made their way to the stairs. Rodriguez went first. They each stayed about ten feet apart as they made their way slowly down the spiral stairs. There were overhead lights every six feet, basically no more than light bulbs hanging from wires. This left the corridors only partially lit, which worked to their advantage.

They froze on the staircase. They were sitting ducks. They had no cover whatsoever. In the distance, they heard water running. Tension filled the air.

Rodriguez reached the bottom of the stairs. He stood silently, listening. He looked down the long concrete hallway. There were three doors on either side, and at the end of the hallway stood double steel doors.

Rodriguez heard Farsi being spoken, along with an occasional laugh. He craned his neck trying to determine from which door it came. He was sure it was the one on the left at the end of the hall. He gave the go signal to the man behind him, who shadowed it to the one behind him, until everyone knew it was a go.

Slowly, Rodriguez made his way down the hall, stopping at every closed door and listening for a few seconds before moving on to the next. He was now about halfway down the corridor with the rest of the men. Suddenly, the door to the room on the left opened.

A soldier backed out of the room, still talking to others inside. He shut the door, and turned right into Rodriguez's knife. He tried to speak, but nothing came out. The knife had silenced him. Rodriguez lowered the writhing body to die on the concrete floor.

Immediately, the door burst open again, and hit the dead soldier on the head. Rodriguez didn't hesitate and squeezed off a quick burst of fire, sending the next soldier back into the room with six rounds in his chest.

Petty Officer Putman ran by Rodriguez holding a hand grenade. As he ran past the door, he lobbed the grenade into the room and took cover on the other side of the doorway.

Sounds of panic came from inside the room before the grenade went off. Smoke billowed. The sound of the explosion was deafening in the enclosed bunker.

Rodriguez fired several rounds into the room. By the stairs, another door burst open behind the SEAL team. One soldier in a green uniform came out firing, and shot Petty Officer Pitts and Seaman Turner from behind.

Seaman Harley Baines was still at the bottom of the stairs, and opened fire, killing the Iranian soldier from behind. Baines immediately jumped to the open doorway in a crouch position but the room was empty.

"Morales, get these men back upstairs to the truck, and see if the Ensign had any luck, and if he did, put these men in the back! Hopefully we can be out of here in a hurry!" barked Graves. "Let's move! I want those double doors opened in under thirty! Secure the rest of these side rooms! I don't want any more surprises!"

Petty Officer Putman and White were already attaching C4 to four points on the double doors, running wires from each point to the detonator on the floor. "All clear," said one. The other set the digital timer to fifteen seconds. "Fire in the hole!" Putman yelled, as they jumped into one of the concrete rooms. Rick Putman was a big Texan, born and raised in Pampa, Texas. He had served two years on the USS Midway before volunteering for the SEALs. Rick loved working with explosives. It gave him a sense of superiority.

The SEALs waited for the explosions. On schedule, the C4 went off, after which, everyone ran toward the doors.

The first two SEALs in the room were Seaman Prescott and Seaman Baines. Commander Graves tried to stop them. They were new and inexperienced. Immediately they were cut down by automatic fire. Rodriguez and Graves opened fire, killing three more Iranian guards inside. Then all was silent.

After the smoke cleared, an Iranian soldier was on the ground with most of his head missing. *He must have been guarding the doors when the C4 went off*, thought Juan.

Commander Graves quickly rose from the floor. He nodded at Rodriguez, and together they jumped through the opening where the doors stood seconds before, and rolled into a sitting position with their backs to each other. Each man scanned his side of the room. "Clear!" shouted Rodriguez, which Graves acknowledged.

The rest of the team burst in, guns ready, "Secure this room, ASAP!" yelled Graves. He surveyed it. There was not much in it. There were several tables with computers. It appeared to be no more than a makeshift laboratory.

The room had very little inside, just masonry walls and ceilings. At the far end of the room another door was painted red with a sign in Farsi.

"Set charges to blow this place in twenty minutes in case we can't detonate remote. We're out of here in ten!" Each SEAL knew his job. Petty Officer White and four of the team were already taking apart computers to retrieve the hard drives. Another three were assembling the last of their explosives.

Petty Officer White, Putman and Rodriguez were doing a complete search of the bunker looking for the cubes they were sent to destroy. "Sir, you should see this," said Petty Officer Williams, while peeking through a small square window on the large red door.

Graves looked in the window Williams was peering through and saw a small 12 x 12 box on the center of a table with Hebrew lettering. Scattered around the table were several tools and heavy-duty gloves, along with two pairs of protective eyewear. "No hazmat suits," muttered Graves to himself.

He said, "I'm going in. If anything happens, blow up this shit hole and get out. Oh, and tell my ex-wife, 'she gave lousy head!'" As tense as the situation was, the men smiled.

"Sir, why don't we just blow this place and leave?" asked one of the men.

Graves answered, "That looks like one of the devices we're here for, but I only see one! There should be three. I must be 100% sure that they're not here. Back off, Petty Officer, I'm going in on five." For another five seconds he again surveyed the room. Then he opened the door just enough to slide his body in.

He estimated the weight of the door, which was constructed of very heavy steel with rubber insulation. Immediately, he closed it behind him, and stood for a few seconds, then took a deep breath. He thought, *Well, I'm still alive*. He bent down, and under the table he saw an object covered with a towel. When he pulled it off, he recognized three sophisticated detonators. He wondered if there were any compartments storing the missing units. Graves looked around the entire room. Nothing.

He went back to the device on the table and walked around it several times, staring at it. *No detonator*, he thought. But he noticed it had a pull-cord protruding from its case, which resembled a short seatbelt. *What the hell? Maybe they couldn't figure out how to work the Israeli timers, so they went with this sandman, terrorist version of detonation.*

He lifted the box. It was much heavier than it looked, maybe 25 lbs. On its side, Hebrew lettering spelled out something. It was smooth all over, except on top where the cord snaked out of the box.

The Commander left the room and carried the device to the team assembling the explosives. "Include this with your C4. I have a feeling it's going to make a big bang."

"Yes sir." Carefully, Putman took it from him, and placed it in the center of one of the four packages they had prepared around the laboratory.

"Sir, we have the hard drives," said Petty Officer White.

"Sir, C4 is set," said Petty Officer Putman.

Graves looked around one more time. *Only one box! This mission is a failure*, thought Graves.

Chief Dewalter came down the stairs and into the laboratory and approached Commander Graves.

"Sir, we found the keys to the truck in the desk drawer. We have three-quarters of a tank, and she seems to run okay. All casualties and dead are on the truck."

"Alright," said Graves "Let's get the hell outta here!"

"Sir?" said.

“What is it, Chief?”

“There are headlights on the horizon coming fast in this direction! Could be military headed this way.”

Graves exploded. “Move it! Out, out!”

Chapter 11

Jill was back in her office at the Federal Building on Wilshire Blvd. She was writing her report on the Cross incident when the phone rang. On the third ring she picked up. “Special Agent Mayfield.”

“Ah, Agent Mayfield, I’m glad I reached you.” Jill recognized the voice from several conversations from the previous week. It was the famous Allen Cross. “Yes, Mr. Cross, how can I help you?”

“It’s not how you can help me--it’s how I can help you?”

“I’m not sure I understand,” Jill replied.

“Come, come, Agent Mayfield. If it wasn’t for you, my daughter would probably be dead.” Jill felt a great feeling of accomplishment. Even though she made it sound routine, she was tremendously satisfied about saving Patti Cross.

“Mr. Cross, this is what we’re paid to do at the Federal Bureau of Investigation. I’m just so glad we were able to find her in time. How is Patti doing? Is she still in the hospital?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I’m here with Lynn. I’ve been speaking to some of the officers who were at the scene, and they tell me that you were the one who really found her in that horrid underground whatever-it-was.”

“A lot of federal agents and local police did their jobs as well. I can’t take all the credit.”

“Ms. Mayfield, I appreciate the fact that you want to share the honors with your fellow officers. But I really believe that it was you. My wife Lynn has been a complete wreck since the beginning of this whole ordeal. She asked to speak with you so she could thank you herself, but she is still so hysterical I don’t dare put her on the phone.”

“That’s okay, I understand. Now you all have to be there for each other.”

“I took the liberty of making dinner reservations for you and a friend at Spago, in Beverly Hills. It’s the very least I can do.”

“That’s very kind and generous of you, Mr. Cross. But we are not allowed to accept any gifts. Thank you anyway.” Jill was thinking, *Spago! I could never afford to eat there on my salary, let alone get a reservation!*

“Well, Agent Mayfield, I tried.”

“It’s very thoughtful of you. You’ve just got to take care of that beautiful daughter of yours. She’ll probably need some counseling for some years to come.”

“Yes, yes, I know. The doctors here have said the same thing. This whole ordeal has been just horrible. I have to accept much of the blame. I never dreamed my baby could ever be in danger. We’ve already started to make some major security changes.”

“What kind of changes?” Jill asked.

“For one thing, she will never walk home alone from school again. I’ve also hired a security company to guard the estate around the clock. Next week I’m going to look for a new home in Lake Sherwood. They have around-the-clock security. Several athletes and people like me live there.”

“That sounds very good, Mr. Cross. I should go. I’ve got a pile of reports to finish. Thanks again and give my best to Mrs. Cross.”

“Again, Agent Mayfield, my wife and I thank you from the bottom of our hearts.”

After they hung up, Jill looked out her window and felt good. *He’s not a bad guy. A little egocentric, but what do you want when you make twenty million dollars a movie?*

By the time Jill finished her reports it was after ten o’clock. She had never felt this tired. After working more than twelve hours, she put everything away and locked the desk, and left her office. There were still a dozen agents sitting in their cubicles. As she walked to the elevators, each agent stood as she passed and congratulated her on the Cross case.

In the elevator, Jill had a warm feeling inside, even as tired as she was. She felt truly happy. Happy to have her career. Even happier for Patti Cross.

The phone started ringing at 7:30 am. Jill reached over and picked up the receiver. “Hello,” Jill said, sleepily.

“Agent Mayfield. Good morning. This is Assistant Director Jules. Did I wake you?”

“Well, as a matter of fact you did.”

“I’ll just get to the point then. I just got off the phone with Director Holcome himself. He couldn’t be happier with the Cross case and he wants to give you a special citation. You earned it and it’s good publicity for the bureau.”

“Thank you, sir,” Jill said as she yawned.

“Also, I see the reports are complete. Why don’t you take a couple days off with pay?”

Jill was quiet for a moment. Jules rarely offered paid days off.

“Well, thank you again, sir, I’ll do that.”

Jill hung up.

The events of the previous day came back to her. She thought, *I hope they give that creep Grier the death penalty*. It was then she remembered that she hadn’t asked about the graves and if the bodies had been identified. She thought about calling Jules back but changed her mind.

She went back to sleep.

Chapter 12

Each man ran full speed through the corridor that had taken the lives of two of their comrades, and up the stairs to the truck that was now outside the roll-up door with the engine running. Ensign Wright was on the running-board of the driver's side holding binoculars, watching the approaching convoy.

"They're about twenty minutes out, sir!"

"Then let's move," replied the Commander. "We'll grab Holgren on the way."

A shot rang out from the burnt-out structure almost a mile away.

The M107 is far from being a quiet weapon but is accurate up to over seven thousand feet. Everyone turned to see what Holgren was firing at. Another white jacket fell to the earth a couple of hundred yards away running from the bunker.

"They must have another exit. He's probably the one who called for help because he sure as shit wasn't in the part of the bunker we checked," Rodriguez said.

"Screw it! Let's get the hell out of this pisshole!" yelled Graves.

They climbed aboard the borrowed deuce-and-a-half truck. A deuce-and-a-half is a two-and-a-half-ton truck which can carry twenty men comfortably. There are two benches on each side and three feet of space in the middle. Plenty of room for the entire SEAL team.

Ensign Wright floored the gas pedal, and the truck slowly started moving. It had eight gears, all of which took several excruciating minutes to accelerate. The lights in the distance were getting closer.

Chief Dewalter was sitting in the middle next to Wright, clutching the one comm box. In the passenger seat sat Commander Graves.

"Get the link up, Chief, ASAP! We have a serious-as-shit problem," Graves yelled.

"Sir?" replied Dewalter.

"Just get me the link *NOW*, Dewalter!" Dewalter went through the delicate procedure of linking up the phone, which was difficult due the bouncing of the truck on the rough dirt road. When it was ready, he handed the receiver to Graves. He waited for the correct tone.

"Alpha Charlie Zulu, this is Red Robin Foxtrot. Task completed. Only one package present. I say again, only one package present. Heading to Sierra Tango pick-up. We have heat. I say again only one package present and we have heat." Graves handed the phone back to Dewalter, who secured the box.

"Sir, weren't there supposed to be three boxes?" Graves didn't respond. He just looked out the window at the fast-approaching vehicles. He noticed that a few of them were moving much faster than the others.

Ahead of them on the side of the road was Petty Officer Holgren, his sniper rifle over his shoulder. Graves stuck his head out the window. "Get in the back with the others, and set up your weapon on a tripod! Get ready for spooks approaching from behind."

"Yes sir! I saw the headlights about 6 clicks out."

Holgren then ran to the back of the truck, and as Ensign Wright punched the gas, Holgren almost fell off the back tailgate. Rodriguez grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him up.

"Thanks," said Holgren.

"Can't leave you out here! I still want to do that cute sister of yours!"

Holgren looked at Rodriguez quizzically for a few seconds.

"I don't have a sister!"

"Well, then maybe it was your wife I saw."

Holgren then noticed the dead SEAL team members on the floor of the truck, with another two badly wounded. He shook his head, as Rodriguez' smile faded from his face.

"They were good men. Prescott had a kid, and his wife is pregnant with another." Holgren reached in one of the bags and pulled out the tripod and connected it to the rifle, then balanced it on the tailgate of the truck. Again, he looked back at the bodies, and thought, *I really don't want to die in this shithole.*

"Do you think they saw us?" said Loop to no one in particular. "If we saw them, they saw us, you can bet on that," Rodriguez said.

Ten minutes later, Graves told Ensign Wright to stop the truck. Graves jumped down, and climbed onto the hood with his night-vision binoculars. He looked back at the bunker which was now about four miles away. He saw one of the approaching trucks turn into the compound while another truck followed. There were two Jeeps with mounted machine guns getting closer.

He pulled out the remote detonator and was about to push the button, when Ensign Wright said, "Sir, are we far enough away?" Graves looked back and said, "Doesn't really matter. We can't take the chance they'll get the device that's still in there."

He pushed the button, and two seconds later the entire bunker started to glow. The soldiers who were in the compound just sort of melted away. The compound grew brighter and brighter. Graves observed how odd it was that there was no explosion.

What happened to the C4? thought Graves as he watched the pursuing vehicles to see if they were affected. The entire bunker was turning bright red. Even the sand around the bunker glowed red. Soon the perimeter fencing started to melt away. *Holy shit, what was that thing?*

Graves stood on the roof of the truck, and was mesmerized by what he saw. He watched as the entire concrete bunker seemed to just dissolve into the desert, after which the desert almost looked as if it would fold into itself. He looked back at the vehicles chasing them. The two Jeeps were well ahead of the truck carrying about a dozen soldiers. But then, the truck suddenly slowed down and caught fire. The troops jumped over the sides, but never hit the ground. They were vaporized in mid-air.

Graves jumped into the cab of the truck.

“Pedal to the metal, Ensign, we have two bogies on our tail about two miles back and gaining!”

The Ensign was looking in the rearview mirror and said,

“What the hell was that thing?” Again, the truck was slow to gain speed.

After a few minutes, a loud shot was heard from the rear of the truck. One of the Jeeps slowed to a stop, and the soldier sitting shotgun pushed out the dead driver. He had a hole in his forehead.

“Good shot!” Rodriguez said to Holgren.

“That should make them think twice,” Holgren shot back to Rodriguez.

Louis Holgren, who was from Kentucky and claimed his grand-pappy could shoot the eye out of a turkey from five hundred yards away, was already taking aim at the front Jeep, which was pulling closer by the second.

He slowly pulled the trigger while looking through the night-scope of the Browning sniper rifle. At that the same instant, the truck hit a bump in the rough road. His shot went high and to the right. “Shit!” said Holgren.

Again he took aim, guessing that the distance between them was around 350 yards away. Way too close! Holgren took aim, held his breath, and squeezed the trigger.

Click!

“What the fuck? It’s jammed!” yelled Holgren while he ejected the round, pulled out the ten-round clip, and cleared the breach.

He then loaded a new ten-round magazine into the chamber. He took aim, figuring the soldiers were now maybe 200 yards behind. So much dust was rising from the front Jeep they couldn’t see the second Jeep.

Just as he was about to take his shot, the mounted machine gun on the front Jeep fired a 4-second burst of rounds. Bullets were flying into the back of the truck. Holgren took his own shot and missed the driver, but inadvertently hit the machine-gunner, who was standing up in the back of the Jeep with the mounted machine gun. He was hit in the stomach. Holgren looked around. Loop was down, with blood spurting from a chest wound. Morales pressed his hand down on top of the wound to stanch the flow of blood, while Rodriguez ripped open the medical pack.

Holgren could now see the soldier sitting shotgun was already climbing to the back to take over as gunner, which gave Holgren some time. This time he fired and hit his target. The driver jumped back in his seat with a large hole in his chest. The Jeep veered off the road and started rolling.

“One down, one to go,” said Holgren. “How’s Loop?”

“Not so good,” Rodriguez replied.

Holgren could now clearly see the second Jeep. He prepared for his next shot, but the Jeep also had a visual and opened fire.

Bullets flew around the truck. Petty Officer Holgren took his shot and killed the driver instantly. The machine-gunner again fired off a volley of shots. Most went wide, since the Jeep was now slowing down and losing control. Despite this, it didn't flip like the first one. It slowly made its way to the side of the road, and came to a stop with a very dead driver.

The machine-gunner looked back expecting to see the truck with reinforcements. But all he saw were the remains of the burning truck.

As the Jeep rolled to a stop, the machine-gunner started to take aim. But before he could pull the trigger, a round caught him in the throat, severing his head.

Holgren kept a watch out the back as the others tended to Loop. In the cab of the truck, Graves watched the battle out of the rearview mirror. When he saw the last Jeep came to a stop at the side of the road, he looked to his left, and saw Chief Dewalter holding his knee with blood gushing from a wound.

"Dewalter, you're shot!" cried Graves. "Yes, sir, that appears to be the case. I knew I couldn't fool you, sir," moaned Dewalter.

Graves pulled off his shirt, and wrapped it around the wound. He reached down to the floor, found a piece of metal, inserting it into the shirt, and turned it to keep pressure on the wound.

It was now after 5:00 a.m. The sky was starting to show signs of the coming dawn. They were still a half-hour from the rendezvous point at Sierra Tango. Graves kept his eyes to the sky out of the passenger window. In the back, Holgren did the same, knowing that helicopters would soon arrive. They all knew the choppers would go to the bunker first, and then start a sweep of the area, making bigger grids with each circle of their target area.

In a stroke of luck, Graves and his crew proceeded undetected. They arrived at the beach in less than 45 minutes. They scrambled off the truck. The sun was starting to rise over the distant horizon. "Get the rafts inflated ASAP!" yelled Graves. Three men went to the beach and found the homing beacons. They pulled the rafts out of the sand, and pulled the secondary CO-2 charges. The rafts quickly filled with air.

"Leave the wetsuits! Put the Chief and Loop in Raft One, Rodriguez and Holgren go with them!" He turned to Phillips, the youngest of the SEALs. "Load the dead on Two, and take it with the Ensign. *NOW!* The rest of you, go in Raft Three with me and the other wounded. Let's get the hell outta here before we have company!"

On the beach, they had no real cover and were fully exposed. With the rafts fully loaded, they were about to pull out, just as headlights were seen coming down the beach. Graves took out a small box from his pocket, and pushed a button twice. This was a beacon for the submarine. Pushed once meant all clear, pushed twice meant they were in trouble.

Chief Dewalter yelled to Graves, "Sir, the one comm is still on the beach!"

"That's okay, let these bastards open it! *GO, GO!*"

They quickly made it past the small breakers, and started the motors. Graves led the way with a handheld GPS to bring them to the pre-arranged meeting coordinates. It was now 0600.

Graves was scanning the water for the sub. Graves grumbled, "He'd better be close by." Five minutes later, Graves stopped all three rafts. "We're here." A mortar shell pierced the sky, and landed about 100 yards away. All eyes turned to the shore. They could make out about 75 soldiers running up and down the beach. Then something exploded not far from the water.

"Guess they opened the comm box," chuckled the Chief.

After a few more minutes, red and green lights appeared around the point, and started to move quickly in their direction. There was now enough light to recognize the boat as a military vessel. "Crap, a patrol boat!" yelled Graves.

"Holgren, set up your M-107, and shoot where you think the wind- shields and driver are."

Holgren took careful aim above the red and green navigation lights. He fired once, but the patrol boat kept coming. It was only about 150 yards away. They would soon be spotted, if they hadn't been already. They'd have no chance against the heavy guns of a military patrol boat.

Again Holgren took aim, this time a little higher, hoping to hit the boat's cockpit. The patrol boat exploded into a fiery mass. "Good shot!" yelled the Chief. Holgren sat there in disbelief, just as the sub surfaced twenty yards away. "Chief, I think we've got ourselves a little divine submarine intervention," said Holgren.

"Get to the sub now!" screamed Graves. They saw lights in the sky about six miles out, and they knew they only had minutes left. They climbed aboard the sub and sank the rafts.

Graves was the last man through the hatch. He turned and saw the helicopters about two miles out, and then dropped down out of sight into the sub. On the bridge, a seaman said, "Hatch secure, sir."

"We've got company about two miles out and closing fast," said Graves to the sub Captain McClain, who just nodded.

"Prepare to dive on my command," said the captain.

"Prepare to dive on captain's command," another petty officer said over the ship's intercom.

"Dive! dive!" ordered the captain.

"Take us to a depth of seventy feet, all ahead full, bearing 276 degrees. Let's get the hell out of here!"

Chapter 13

At 3:00 Zarar left his office. He drove down Wilshire to N. La Brea Ave. He turned left and after a couple of miles he turned left on Sunset Blvd. He stayed on Sunset for nearly one

hour until he reached Pacific Coast highway. He parked at a restaurant and walked down the back stairs to the sandy beach.

There he took off his shoes and walked to the waters edge. He sat on the moist sand stared at the breaking waves. His mind was reeling from the conversation he had this morning with old man in the parking structure. *What am I going to do, How could they have possible have known how to find me. Should I go the police, And admit my past? Surely I'll go to jail. What about Zawiya, and the boys, Markus and Richard, Richards birthday is in three weeks. He would be devastated if I were in prison. Everything I've worked so hard to obtain would be wiped in weeks or maybe days. What could they want? Money?*

Zarar Got up and went back to the restaurant and put his shoes and socks back on. He made his way inside and took a seat at the bar.

"What can I get for you?" asked the bartender. Zarar thought for several seconds and said "How about Vodka with ice,"

"What kind of Vodka?"

"I don't know, you pick." The bartender picked up a bottle that said 'Grey Goose'. This was the second drink to ever cross his lips in his life.

With the drink in front of him he just stared out the large glass window at the beach. He picked up his glass and smelled the drink. He then drank the entire cocktail in one swallow and started couching.

"You okay?" asked the guy sitting a few seats away.

"I'm fine, thank you." He then got up and paid for the drink and left. He drove up the coast to Malibu, turned on Big Rock and climbed the hill to a large white house with amazing views of the ocean. He parked in the driveway and knocked on the door, after a minute a man answered the door. When he saw Zarar a smile instantly crossed his face.

"Zarar!" He rapped his arms around him.

"I didn't know you were coming my friend."

"Either did I," Zarar replied.

His friend stood back and looked at Zarar with a concerned look.

"Are you okay, Zarar?"

"No, Fahad, things are actually very bad."

"Is something wrong with Zawiya? Markus or Richard?"

"No, their fine. It's me."

"Come in, lets talk." Fahad said.

His house was over 7000 square feet. He owned a number of drug and alcohol treatment estates across Malibu and Santa Monica, which have become so popular with the rock stars and the wealthy.

They sat in his living room.

"Talk to me Zarar, whats wrong?"

He relayed the entire story from training in Iran to this morning's visitor. Fahad never said a word. He hung onto every word that left Zarar's mouth. When he was finished Fahad just sat there almost in shock.

"What are you going to do?"

Zarar sat quietly and shook his head and said, "I don't know I just don't know."

Fahad got up and walked to the front window and looked out to see if anyone was watching his house.

Fahad paced back and forth for a few minutes deep in thought.

Finally he sat back down.

"You are my best friend Zarar, but I have to ask you to leave. You are involved with very dangerous men that I want no part of. By coming here, you may have put my family in danger."

Zarar looked at his friend in shock.

"I didn't mean to upset you, Fahad. I just needed someone to talk to. Please forgive me. I didn't think about that, but you're right." With that said, Fahad got up and opened the front door. Zarar walked out the door and stopped in front of Fahad and put his arms around him and started to cry.

"Good luck, Zarar. I think you should contact the authorities. But whatever you decide to do, please leave my name out of everything."

"Of course."

Zarar walked to his car and left. Fahad stood at the door for ten minutes watching the street. When he was satisfied no one was watching, he closed and locked the door and every other door in the house. Fahad picked up the phone and dialed a number. When someone picked up, he simply said, "It worked, he's scared beyond belief."

Chapter 14

Accompanied by General Gates, Admiral James stalked the White House corridors like a man possessed. They were both in full uniform, bearing rows of medals on their chests.

Gates had a special medal in a position above all the others. It read "Medal of Honor," the nation's highest award. During his first tour of Vietnam, he was a First Lieutenant who risked his life to save thirty other Marines. He had received three wounds in doing so, but had exhibiting valor with disregard for his own life. He carried seven Marines to safety, and went back eight times to help other severely wounded men.

James and Gates approached a set of double doors guarded by three Secret Service agents.

"We need to see the President right now," James said forcefully.

"I'm sorry, sir, but he doesn't wish to be disturbed while he's meeting with the Israeli Foreign Minister."

"What's your name, Agent?" demanded James.

"Sir, Special Agent Yates."

"Well, Special Agent Yates, you better tell your boss that Admiral James and General Gates are here to see him, and it's beyond urgent. Just tell him it's a national emergency." Agent Yates glanced at the other two agents who looked away. No one wanted to challenge two of the highest-ranking officers in the military, both of them Chiefs of Staff.

"Do you have shit in your ears?" growled General Gates through his teeth. "Tell the President we're here, and do it now!" Yates, who was an ex-Marine, stood still for a moment, thinking that this guy would be the perfect D.I. in boot camp. Then again, maybe sometime in his long career he had been.

"Yes, sir," said Yates fearfully. He tapped lightly on the door and entered.

The other two agents took positions at the office entrance, staring directly at Gates and James. They were also both ex-military, and knew who these men were, but they had their job to do. They were willing to take on these high-powered officers if that was their orders. They knew that protecting the President and following his orders outweighed anything these guys could do to them.

A few minutes later, Yates came back through the door, and resumed his position with the other Secret Service agents.

Speaking to Admiral James, he said, "The President will see you in ten minutes."

James nodded his head respectfully and looked at Gates, who was never happy being told to wait. James saw the fury in his face, and didn't want a scene outside of the Oval Office.

They walked out of hearing range of the Secret Service agents, so that James could speak with General Gates discreetly.

"We need to handle this with kid gloves. You and I both know all hell is going to break loose in there when we make our report. I suggest you let me do most of the talking."

General Gates looked down the hall deep in thought. "All right, as long as you point out the urgency of the situation. If we start getting diplomatic on this thing, a lot of innocent people could die."

James asked, "What do you recommend?"

Without hesitation, Gates replied, "Close the borders, shut down trains, put the airports on high alert, and institute martial law on ALL borders"

"The President will never authorize that."

"It's within his powers if he invokes the Patriot Act," replied Gates imperiously.

James mulled this over. "Okay, I'll bring up your recommendations."

Ten minutes later, the Israeli Foreign Minister glumly walked out of the Oval Office. His head was down. He looked like someone who just been kicked to the ground. He glanced up at James and Gates, and merely nodded before walking away with a look of defeat. Both men

now approached the Secret Service agents. "Well, can we see the President now?" demanded Gates.

"One moment, sir." Agent Yates tapped lightly on the door, entered and closed it behind him. He was in the room no longer than thirty seconds before he popped his head out. "Sir, the President will see you now." The other two agents stepped aside to allow them to pass.

Once inside, General Gates and Admiral James saw President Powell behind his desk with his chair turned facing his window. Dick Bresser sat on a couch to one side of the room.

President Powell turned to face them, and said, "I hope you have something positive to tell me." James paused a brief moment and breathed deeply. "I'm afraid not, Mr. President."

President Powell dropped his pen on the desk. "Have a seat, gentlemen."

Both men sat uncomfortably. James sighed. "This is not good news, sir. We got a one-way comm from our SEAL team commander on the ground. It seems that there was only one device at the facility. Our boys took out the compound, and destroyed the device in doing so."

He added, "We have satellite imagery that is quite perplexing. It seems as if the entire compound more or less, well, melted. The satellite indicator reads very abnormal temperatures."

The President looked very puzzled. Dick Bresser finally said, "Melted, Admiral?" The President turned to Admiral James for a response.

"Yes, sir, it seems to have just melted away. That's the only way I can describe it."

The President stood up and walked around the room, pausing at the window.

With his back turned, he said, "How about our men on the ground?"

Gates responded cautiously. "We know very little sir, other than that they are being pursued. The satellite isn't much help. The explosion created some kind of disruption in the area."

The President stood quietly. Bresser added, "Mr. President, we need to consolidate."

"I know, Dick," replied the President tersely.

"Tomorrow morning, 9:00, I want the entire Chiefs of Staff in the Situation Room. Dick, please inform CIA director Holland and FBI Director Holcome to be here. Alan Burns as well. Get Mark Rosen, Pete Harvey and Tony Basillo from NSA, better get Robins from Transportation. I want the Vice-President there as well."

"Yes, sir, I'll get right on it," said Bresser, who quickly left the room.

Chapter 15

It was a beautiful day in Santa Monica, California. The beaches were packed. The boardwalk was filled with bicycles and rollerblades. The pier was bustling with activity, while

the Ferris wheel was completely filled. There was an 80-degree high, hot for September. Everyone seemed to be out to enjoy this last heatwave before fall settled in.

In a parking lot not far from the pier, two men were dressed unseasonably in suits, sitting in a new Mercedes CLS-550. From the car, they watched people strolling on the beach.

Every few minutes, the driver would study his rearview mirrors. He was Antonio Santini--AKA, "Tony the Tank." Tony wasn't a tall man. He stood about 5'10", but he was as wide as two men.

Tony the Tank always wore sunglasses, even indoors at night. He had recently turned 46, but he still felt like 25. He never worked out. His strength came naturally.

After a while, the man in the passenger seat took off his sunglasses, and rubbed his eyes. He opened the door and got out, took off his jacket, and carefully laid it on the back seat.

He stood stretching for a moment. Tony asked, "Okay, so, where is this guy? We've been here for an hour. I thought you said he was dependable."

The passenger then turned in a complete circle looking up and down the beach, then back toward Ocean Ave. "Relax, he'll show."

His name was Peter Siegel. Peter was Jewish, and Jews could never be made men. He was tall, 6'2", and very skinny. Like Tony, he dressed well. "Just enjoy this beautiful California day. He'll be here."

Tony the Tank also wished he could take off his jacket, but it wasn't advisable, especially when packing a .45 automatic in his shoulder holster. Peter Siegel got back in the car, and watched the young girls frolic on the beach.

"Oh, to be young again, I'd do them all." Tony looked at him with mild disgust.

"They are about the same age as my daughters, you fucking pervert."

"Relax, I said, if I were young again..." Tony just shook his head.

Tony Santini had been raised in New York on the wrong side of the tracks. At 12 years old, he was already running numbers for the Mob. When Santini turned 15, he did his first stretch at a juvenile facility for aggravated assault. He beat up two Italian boys for whistling at his girlfriend. Even though they were older and bigger, he put one in the hospital with a broken arm and enough damage to wire his jaw shut. The other got off lucky with two broken ribs and a crushed testicle. No one whistled at his girlfriend again. When Antonio was 22, his mother was killed by a drunk driver while she was crossing the street with two bags of groceries. Tony was devastated. The driver received a three-year jail sentence. After six months, he was found dead in the shower, beaten to death.

Tony was questioned at his home in Jersey if he knew anything about the jailhouse killing. He shook his head and said, "How could I? You think I broke into prison, killed the guy and broke out? What do I look like? Houdini?"

"We know you and your kind can make hits in or out of jail," stated the FBI Agent.

"My kind? I have no idea what you're talking about."

At 27, Tony "The Tank" Santini became a made man in the Gambini crime family. They said that when Tony the Tank gave an order, it was always followed with precision.

Nobody wanted to be on Tony's bad side. Even his bosses were secretly afraid of him. If Tony advised you to "Hit the road," you had very little time to comply before something really bad happened.

Now at 46, Antonio, Tony "The Tank" Santini was a captain of the LA branch of the Gambini crime family. He loved being moved to the West Coast where the weather was a definite advantage and the mob wasn't really recognized like on the East Coast. Here he didn't have a reputation, and was able to work more freely. Tony had a nose for set-ups. He could smell a sting a mile away. The Feds took him in for questioning about every two months over a hijacked truck, or about some poor sap that went missing who owed the wrong people money. Tony oversaw the bookmaking and prostitution, and anything else his bosses needed done. Tony was a trusted man in the family.

Today, he had been told to ride along with this Jewish guy Peter Siegel to do a money trade. His bosses didn't trust the Siegel guy with a half-million dollars, so Tony drove and held the key to the trunk where the money was.

After another fifteen minutes, a guy walked up the boardwalk, and sat on a bench looking out to the ocean. "That's him," said Siegel. They both watched him carefully. He didn't seem to be in a hurry, just some 35-year-old guy watching the cute girls on the beach.

Peter kept his eye on the guy, while Tony used his power rearview mirrors to scan everything behind them. "Why don't you honk, and let him know we're waiting?" said Siegel.

"Why don't you shut the fuck up?" Tony just kept moving both side-mirrors, watching the condos on Ocean Ave. for anything that seemed not right.

After a minute, Tony said, "Why don't you walk over, and sit with your friend? When I honk, you both come back."

"Is something wrong? What's up, Tony?" Siegel looked nervous, and turned in his seat to glimpse at the condos on Ocean Blvd. But he didn't see anything out of the norm.

"Just do what I say. There's nothing wrong."

"Can I ask you a question, Tony?"

"Yeah, make it quick." Tony didn't like where this conversation was going, and put his hand in his jacket.

"I'm just dying to know why they call you The Tank."

"If you fuck this up, you'll find out. Now get out of here!"

Siegel looked at Tony for a moment. "Okay, you're the boss."

Tony couldn't help but think, *No shit, Sherlock, and don't forget it.*

Peter got out of the car, rolled up his sleeves and started to walk to the boardwalk. Tony knew that if this was a set-up, the Feds would be close. Real close. He looked at every car in the parking lot and saw nothing unusual. Again he moved the mirrors to see behind him.

Nothing. Tony knew if the Feds were going to hit, it would be swift and final. They usually got you when you were behind the wheel where you had limited movement.

Peter got to the bench, and sat next to the guy. It looked like they were making small talk. Every now and then, one of them would look over his shoulder at the car.

Tony kept watching the parking lot for anyone who looked out of place. After ten minutes, Tony figured that if this was a set-up, then it was a really good one, so he honked the horn.

Both men stood up and started walking toward the car. Tony pulled out his .45, and slid it between his legs. As both men approached the car, Tony lowered his window. "Hey, come here a minute!" The men looked at each other, and walked to the open window. As Tony looked up at the new guy, he thought, *What a Jew! A nose the size of Brooklyn.*

"Lift your shirt all the way to your shoulders."

"What?" said the new guy.

"You heard me! Lift your fucking shirt!"

"Okay, okay, no problem." He lifted his shirt revealing nothing but a fat belly.

"OK, now turn around," The new guy did a circle. No bugs, yet.

"Doing great, handsome! Now drop your shorts."

"You fucking kidding? This is a public place, I could get arrested!"

Tony pulled the gun out and showed it to the new guy and said, "You could also get dead." The new guy unbuckled his belt, and dropped his shorts. He wasn't wearing underwear, and had a slight erection from watching the teenaged girls.

"You sick fuck! Turn around, and then pull your shorts back up." Finally Tony was satisfied that the new guy didn't have any bugs on. "Get in."

Both men got into the car, and Peter sat in front with the new guy in back.

"Where we going?" asked Tony.

"The Marina. The funny money is on my boat at the Marina." They sat in silence for a moment while Tony took one last look around. "By the way, my name is Hal." He offered his hand over the seat to Tony. Tony said nothing, ignoring his hand.

He pulled out to Ocean Ave., turned right for a half block, then left on Pico. Traffic was heavy, as it always is in this part of Los Angeles. Not a word was spoken. Soon they were driving down Lincoln in bumper-to-bumper traffic.

Peter turned toward the back seat, and said, "Hey man, you're sitting on my fucking jacket."

"Oh sorry, man." Hal pulled the jacket out from under him, and neatly hung it from the clothing hook over the door. Tony looked in the mirror at Hal. The guy looked really nervous, maybe way too nervous.

"The Marina's a big place. Where's your boat docked?"

"Turn down Fiji Street, I'm on berth HH."

Twenty minutes later, they were headed down Fiji Street. "Hey, we just passed the dock," said Hal from the back seat.

"I know that, just taking a little scenic tour."

Tony drove to the end of Fiji Street, and said, "Let's walk from here."

"But there's plenty of parking by the boat," Hal said, sounding scared.

"Better yet," said Tony, "You two walk. I'll meet you there in ten minutes."

Peter said, "Whatever you say, Tony. It's your party," and got out of the car with Hal. They both started walking toward the dock. Occasionally, they would look back over their shoulders at the parked Mercedes.

Tony watched the street for a few minutes, and noticed a man and a woman riding bikes down the street. They didn't talk, just rode as if enjoying a sunny afternoon.

He then saw two men cleaning a large sailboat on the docks near HH. He noticed they would occasionally look up at Peter and Hal standing at the base of the pier. Two people sat placidly on the grass in front of the yacht club. They rarely spoke, just sat watching the boats come and go in the Marina.

Tony took out his cell phone and dialed a number. "Hello?" said a lady's voice.

"It's me, put the boss on," said Tony.

"Please hold." Seconds later a man came on the phone. "Yeah, is it done?"

"No, something's not right. I'm at the marina. This guy says the stuff is on his boat."

"Okay, do what your instinct tells you. You've never been wrong. Just don't make a mess."

"Got it." He then hung up the phone, and put it back in his jacket pocket.

Tony watched the street for any signs of surveillance. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a yellow Volvo turning into the boat launch area. "Odd, I saw a yellow fucking Volvo on Pico. How many yellow Volvos are there?"

He took out the phone again, and dialed a new number. After several rings, a man answered, "Dale here."

"Hey, Dale, it's me." The line was suddenly very quiet.

"Dale, you still living on your boat at Marina Del Rey?"

"Yeah, what's up?"

"I'm going to need another favor. This one could be sticky. I need transport for some items, and disposal for another."

After a minute of silence, Dale said, "I thought the Oxnard deal was my last favor."

"Well, shit happens, my friend, and I need your help. There are ten big ones in it for you. But we gotta move fast."

Again a moment of silence. Then Tony said, "This one is important for the big guy, and you know how pissed he can get." Again silence. Then Dale said, "Twenty big."

This time, Tony was quiet for two minutes. Sounding nervous, Dale broke in and said, "Fifteen. No less, if there's a disposal."

Tony capitulated. "Done. Here's the plan..." They worked out the details for about ten minutes, and hung up.

He reached under his seat, pulled out binoculars and looked at the Marina Park, then at every boat on pier HH. He put them back and waited, and watched Peter and Hal.

Hal was definitely scared, and kept looking around. Tony whispered to himself, "This is a bullshit setup!" Again he watched the couple in front of the yacht club who didn't hold hands or talk. Tony thought, *If I was with that babe, I'd have my hands all over her. It's a fucking set-up!*

Tony thought about just leaving Peter and Hal and making a break for it. But if it was a set-up they'd force him over and confiscate the money. Tony didn't like the idea of telling his bosses he lost half-a-million of their cash.

Trying to shake off his apprehension, Tony started the Mercedes and slowly drove to the parking area for dock HH. He got out of the car, went to the trunk, and took out two briefcases, holding them in one hand close together so that from a distance they appeared to be only one. He watched the guys cleaning the boat, and the couple on the grass through the corner of his eye. The guys on the boat were definitely watching him. So was the couple on the grass.

Tony confronted the two men. "Let's get this over with, I'm getting hungry." They walked down the dock past huge beautiful boats of the rich and famous. Their colorful names included "Mermaid Chaser" and Bond, James Bond." The men came to a 32-foot Carver that was almost new, and all three men climbed aboard.

Tony was no longer looking around. If the Feds were here, he didn't want to alert them to his suspicion.

"Nice boat, Hal," said Tony. He almost sounded friendly, and both men seemed a bit surprised.

"Thanks!" replied Hal.

"So where's is the funny money?" asked Tony.

"It's in the cabin on the bed," replied Hal.

"Well, what the fuck! Open up the cabin! Let's have a look!" Hal pulled out a plastic float with three keys attached, and opened the access hatch to the compartment. Seeing the keys, Tony smiled slightly to himself. Tony then followed Hal into the cabin.

Peter started to follow, but Tony turned. "Why don't you just wait out here, and give us a whistle if anybody comes this way? You can whistle, can't you?" Peter replied, "Yeah, I can whistle like a frigging parakeet."

"Good," Tony said, he closed the hatch behind him. He looked around the cabin for signs of any surveillance. He went to the bed on which were two suitcases.

"Here's the 500K," he said, and handed the briefcase to Hal, keeping the other.

Hal looked relieved when he actually had the money in his hands. He put the case down on a counter, and opened both locks. It was filled with crisp, new one-hundred-dollar bills.

He pulled out several bills from various regions and examined them in the light. He did a brief count of the money. It sure looked like five- hundred-thousand to him.

Tony didn't bother to examine the counterfeit money in the suitcase on the bed. He knew it was bad money. Two million dollars in phony money to be exact. He did make sure it was all in twenties. They even appeared to be well-used.

This is nice good shit! I'd even take this stuff at a quick glance, thought Tony.

He again looked around the cabin, and didn't see any trace of surveillance. There was a bathroom, a small kitchen and a ten-inch iron skillet on the stove.

He then looked out the window, and said, "Hey, who the fuck is that?" Hal bent down and looked out the window, and said, "Who? Where? I don't see..."

Tony came down on the back of Hal's neck with his .45 as hard as he could. He could hear his bones crush. He walked over to the stove, picked up the iron skillet and hit Hal square in the face. "Fucking snitch!" He brought it down again, this time on his head, killing him instantly. "Fucking pervert!" He reached into Hal's pocket, took out the boat keys, then his wallet, half expecting to find a badge. Nothing. He didn't look any farther, and replaced the wallet in Hal's back pocket.

Tony climbed out of the cabin to find Peter. "Hal wants us to take the boat out while he counts the money. Why don't you untie us?"

"Yeah sure, Tony." Peter figured Hal was probably dead but he knew better not to cross Tony. As he untied the boat, Tony started the engines.

Looking over the side of the boat, Tony noticed the boat-cleaners watching them closely. He also saw that the hot lady and her boyfriend were now walking down the dock toward them, hands behind their backs, as if holding guns.

He didn't even give the engines time to warm up. He yelled to Peter, "Let's go!" as Peter scrambled back aboard.

Chapter 16

Senior Special Jill Mayfield observed the Mercedes out of the window of the apartment the FBI had leased for the assignment. Coleman was there, with a camera equipped with a sensitive zoom lens. Tony Santini had evaded arrest so many times. It was her personal goal to catch him red-handed and put him behind bars, hopefully for the rest of his life.

The apartment was a small unit with tinted windows that kept the summer sun out. It was a typical studio apartment with cheap paintings on the walls. It had two twin beds and a coffee table by the window, with perfect ocean and beach views. On the table sat two walkie-talkies and Jill's handbag, a .38 snub-nosed, and a pair of binoculars.

This assignment was her operation and she wasn't about to blow it.

"What the hell are they doing?" asked Jill. "Nothing," replied Special Agent Coleman as he watched the Mercedes through the telephoto lens. "Looks like they're just sitting and talking."

Peter Coleman was a dedicated FBI agent. He was only five-feet-eleven inches with curly brown hair. He was clean-shaven and some would say very handsome. His girlfriend thought he looked like Kirk Douglas because of the large dimple in his chin.

Jill wore a short plush terrycloth wrap over a skimpy bikini. This was her "cover" if she was to get close to the three men. It would have been conspicuous if she'd worn business attire to a California beach on a nice summer day. Coleman was wearing cutoff shorts and a loose tank-top shirt, baggy enough to conceal a weapon underneath.

Mayfield's weapon was tough to conceal. She opted for a small snub-nosed .38 special, which she hid in a small holster just beneath her breast.

Jill badly wanted Toni Santini's ass. He was notorious for always managing to cover himself. They had tried IRS audits, just like Al Capone's slipup in the 1930's.

But Antonio Santini paid his taxes. He was on the board of directors for a concrete company in Las Vegas and a few other small corporations. He was very meticulous about them, so the IRS couldn't find any non-declared accounts.

Jill and Coleman continued to watch the Mercedes.

"Why didn't we bug our informant?" asked Coleman.

"Santini is too good. He would have figured it out right off the bat."

They saw the passenger door open and a tall man get out, taking off his suit jacket. He opened the back door and carefully laid it on the seat. Then he stretched, and looked up and down the beach. He gazed in their direction and then got back into the passenger seat of the Mercedes.

"Well, well, there's Peter Siegel! I shoulda guessed he was part of this," mused Jill.

Coleman snapped digital pictures every few seconds.

Half an hour passed. Jill said, "There's our guy. He just sat down on the bench on the boardwalk." They watched Siegel get out of the car and walk toward the boardwalk. He sat on the same bench next to the informant who was wearing shorts and a Hawaiian shirt. Looking out at the beach and the ocean, they appeared to speak occasionally. Their attention was mostly on the girls playing volleyball on the sand.

"Why the hell are they just sitting there?" asked Coleman. His eyes roamed his boss's perfect body.

Jill rolled her eyes. "Because Tony Santini is smart, he's looking for a set-up. A year ago, we thought we had him for sure. He was going to buy automatic weapons from one of our guys at ATF. Instead, he took him to an expensive restaurant, bought him dinner and never even mentioned the guns. Santini paid for dinner and left a hundred-dollar tip. And, by the way, keep your eyes on the perp, not me."

"Did he know it was a set-up?" Coleman was embarrassed. Quickly he turned his attention back to the Mercedes.

"We don't know. Santini can smell a wire from 30 feet. The guy's just suspicious and probably doesn't trust his own mother," said Jill.

She raised her binoculars and studied the entire scenario.

"I'll be damned! Look at the rearview mirrors. The bastard's looking for us."

Coleman raised the camera, and zoomed in on the driver's mirror.

"Think he'll pick up the mobile units?"

"No. They have clear orders to stay completely out of sight until I give the word."

Five minutes passed. Occasionally, one of the guys on the bench turned his head, and looked back at the Mercedes. Then Santini honked the horn. Both men got up from the bench and walked back to the Mercedes. They stopped at the driver's side and appeared to be having a conversation with Santini.

Hal Fischman, a.k.a. the FBI informant, raised his shirt up to his shoulders, and did a slow circle. He looked nervous. Hal looked around and unbuckled his belt, pulled his shorts down to his ankles and did another circle. "Jules will like these porn shots," said Coleman.

"Just shut up and keep taking pictures," snapped Jill.

Hal Fischman pulled his shorts back on, and went around the car and got into the back seat while Peter got into the front. The Mercedes slowly pulled out. Jill picked up her radio.

Hal Fischman was a two-time loser. Two weeks earlier he was busted for selling a large amount of cocaine to an undercover agent. It was his third strike. In California that was an automatic twenty-five-year sentence. The FBI convinced him to work as an informant in trade for a reduced federal sentence.

"Santini's moving! We know where he's going, so keep way out of sight! I don't want this operation screwed up. Does everyone understand?" said Jill.

A male voice came back. "Got it, Unit One, out."

Then another voice came on.

"He'll never see us, Unit Two, out." Mayfield watched the Mercedes pull out of the parking lot and turn right onto Ocean Ave.

"Let's go!" She quickly lifted her wrap and holstered her gun. Both agents ran down the stairs to the silver Lexus parked at the curb. Agent Coleman pulled out onto Ocean Ave.

"Command, this is Unit One. Black Mercedes just turned left onto Pico, out."

Good, thought Jill. Pico will take him to Lincoln. Both streets have a lot of traffic. Spotting a tail in heavy traffic is almost impossible, but then again, this is Tony Santini.

"Command, this is Unit One. Santini just turned right on Lincoln. We'll go straight. Unit Two, he's all yours, out." Even if Santini spotted the first surveillance car, he would see it go straight through on Pico.

"Command, this is Unit Two. We are turning right on Lincoln. We're about an eighth of a mile behind the subject's Mercedes, out."

Coleman also turned right onto Lincoln. Traffic was bumper-to-bumper, nothing new in this part of town. Ahead of them a truck was towing a boat.

"Stay behind the boat for a while. When we get close to Fiji, we'll take over."

"Command, Unit Two here. Suspect just turned right onto Fiji Street."

Jill responded. "Continue straight on Lincoln, we'll take over. Wait five minutes and park both units in the landing area out of sight, and wait for further instructions," said Jill.

Coleman pulled out around the truck towing the boat. They made their way to Fiji and turned right toward the Marina. The plan was to park behind the yacht club and pretend to be a newlywed couple enjoying the warm summer day.

Once they were parked, they walked around the building. Jill placed a radio receiver in her ear with the transmitter inside her wrap. They sat on the grass and watched the boats for a few minutes.

"Something's wrong. Peter Siegel and Hal are at the bottom of the pier. I don't see Santini!"

A voice came back on her receiver. "He's sitting at the bottom of the street just watching," said an undercover agent.

Jill casually looked down the street at the black Mercedes.

"Got him," said Mayfield. After fifteen minutes, the Mercedes pulled up to the pier parking lot. Santini parked the car, got out, went to the trunk and took out one or two briefcases. She couldn't be sure because of the way he held them. He then walked up to the two men. They talked for a few seconds, and then made their way down the ramp to the pier.

The boat which the FBI was using for the sting operation had been seized by the Coast Guard several months earlier for drug smuggling from Mexico into the US.

Once aboard, they talked for a few minutes. Then Hal unlocked the cabin and both he and Santini went in. "Everyone ready to move, on my command!"

Twenty minutes passed. No one came out. Then Santini appeared without his suit jacket and said something to Peter Siegel. Siegel looked confused for a second. He climbed over the side of the boat, untied both mooring lines and jumped back into the vessel. Santini got behind the wheel, started the engines and began to pull out of the slip.

"Shit!" yelled Mayfield. "They're on to us! MOVE, MOVE!"

The two men cleaning the boat pulled out guns that were concealed under the canvas cover. They jumped out of the boat and ran toward dock HH. Jill and Coleman also pulled out their weapons. Coleman noticed that when Mayfield pulled her gun, part of her bikini top got caught on it, briefly exposing both breasts for a fleeting but delicious second.

Both mobile units came full speed down the street and slammed on the brakes at the bottom of pier HH. But they were too late. Santini was already about 75 feet from the dock, headed toward the marina fueling-dock across the harbor.

“Get the Coast Guard on the phone! I don’t want any boats leaving the Marina. Do it NOW! And call Harbor Patrol. Get their asses here! Who the hell left the ignition key on the ring with the cabin key?” yelled Jill.

Phones came out and rapid calls were made. As Jill watched the Carver move across the harbor, she thought, *What is Santini doing? I can’t believe this crap!*

One of the agents turned his phone off. “Coast Guard said the marina is as good as closed, and will send us help ASAP.”

“Good. Get back to your units and take positions on the other side of the Marina. He’s headed to a dead end. We still have him!”

Santini turned and waved at the agents standing on the dock. Behind the fueling dock were some enormous yachts, many over 100 feet long. Santini drove the boat behind the largest yacht disappearing from view.

Jill watched the huge yacht and then heard the sirens of the Harbor Patrol and a Coast Guard cutter approaching. She waved her arms and showed her badge to the Harbor Patrol officer as he pulled up to the dock.

Jill and Coleman jumped aboard and pointed to the yacht. “He pulled in behind that big black one.”

“Got it.” The officer picked up the radio and said, “Coast Guard, this is Marina Del Rey Harbor Patrol. Suspect is by the fuel dock behind the Aladdin Princess.”

Suddenly, Santini came out from behind the yacht and floored the dual engines of the Carver, and made it 250 yards before he ran smack into the Coast Guard cutter.

Three men on the deck of the cutter held M-16 rifles. “Turn off the engines NOW!” ordered the Coast Guard over a blaring intercom from the bridge. Tony turned off both engines. “Get on your knees with your hands on your head and lock your fingers together. If you hesitate, we will open fire!”

Chapter 17

After Jill and Coleman jumped aboard the Harbor Patrol boat, Jill turned to the other two agents who were cleaning the boat on the next dock.

“Secure the perps’ vehicle! Call district command, and bring them up to speed. That boat and the Mercedes are now a crime scene. I want a forensics team here ASAP!”

Jill turned back to the driver of the Harbor Patrol boat who was staring at her shapely butt in the tight terry cover-up. “Get me out there, officer, and quick!”

“You got it,” he replied.

Jill shook her head, and privately wished she had chosen a different scenario which wouldn't have required such a provocative costume.

Within a minute, they were at the cutter. "FBI, may we board the Carver?" yelled Jill to the Coast Guard crew. A Chief Petty Officer studied the two agents on board with a questioning look. He'd never seen an FBI agent in a bikini and her partner in cutoffs.

He leaned over the side and studied their IDs. "We're here to assist you, Special Agent. This is your gig."

"Keep Santini and Siegel covered. Where's the third guy?" asked Jill.

"We haven't been aboard. Would you like one of my men to conduct a search of the vessel, ma'am?"

Jill looked over the Carver for a minute, trying to see any movement in the cabin. She said, "Go ahead, but don't touch anything."

The Chief nodded and ordered a Petty Officer on the deck to conduct the search. He handed the rifle to another seaman on the deck, who pointed the rifle at the two men on their knees. He climbed down onto the Carver, pulling out the .45 from his holster. Keeping the gun raised, he slowly walked around the two men on the floor of the boat, entering the cabin.

Two minutes later, he came out of the boat's cabin and said, "Chief, no one else is onboard, and I didn't see any weapons. There's a little blood on the deck."

Jill didn't like this news. Thinking fast, Jill shouted, "Shit, officer, get me around that black yacht NOW! Chief, hold the prisoners. We'll be back in ten."

The Harbor Patrol boat sped off to where the Carver had disappeared for a couple of minutes.

As they rounded the front of the boat, they saw that the next dock was empty. There was a pickup truck at the bottom of the pier with the driver's door open.

Jill reached into her handbag and brought out her radio. "Units One and Two, come to the black ship behind the fuel dock. Our informant is gone. I want a search warrant for every boat in the vicinity. Get on the horn with Wilshire and get a dive team here ASAP! There's also a truck at the end of the dock. I want it held and checked out, got that?"

"This is Unit one. I'll be there in three minutes. Unit Two is right behind me. Out."

Jill looked at the officer's badge. "Officer Robela, get us back to the Coast Guard cutter."

They quickly made their way back to the cutter and the Carver. "Chief, okay with you if we have a look around?" "Go right ahead, Agent. Like I said, we're only here to help."

The Harbor Patrol boat pulled alongside of the Carver, and both Jill and Coleman jumped aboard.

Tony Santini was watching Jill. "Wow, nice! You can bring me down anytime, or should I say go down any...." Before he could finish, Jill kicked him forcefully between the shoulder blades. He dropped to the deck of the boat hard, face first.

"You bitch!" gasped Santini.

"Keep your hands locked, asshole!" yelled one of the Coast Guard holding an M-16.

“Coleman, cuff these pieces of crap, while I’m going to have a look around.”

Jill went to the open hatch of the cabin. She looked around everywhere but didn’t see the suitcase with the counterfeit money supplied by the Secret Service. She did notice the small amount of blood on the deck and the briefcase on the bed. She decided not to enter the cabin, in order to preserve the crime scene.

She walked back to the Coast Guard cutter and asked, “Hey, Chief, do you guys have a holding facility at your base?”

“Yes, ma’am, we do.”

“Can you take this boat in, and secure it along with the suspects?”

“That’s a can-do, ma’am. What do I tell the captain? I’m just a pissant who happened to be on duty when your call came in, not the officer in charge.”

Jill replied, “We’ll take these two slimeballs off your hands in an hour or so. I want Forensics to go over this boat while it’s at your dock. And Chief, please guard the boat until my teams arrive.”

With that, the chief gave his orders, and three men got on the Carver. One got behind the wheel and two held guns pointed at the two handcuffed men, lying on their sides.

Santini had blood flowing from his mouth and nose. “Hey, FBI girlie, see ya soon! Maybe you can show me what you’ve got concealed under that bikini!” said Santini with a bloody laugh.

“Don’t bet on it, asshole! So what’s in the briefcase?” She fired back, stepping back onto the Harbor Patrol boat.

“Your dirty panties!” said Santini.

Five hours later, Santini and Siegel were taken into federal custody.

An FBI forensics team combed through the boat. Agents armed with warrants boarded all the boats near the fuel dock. Divers were preparing to search the water for the missing body of Hal Fischman.

“Nothing here, Mayfield,” said Special Agent Claudia Perez.

Special Agent Perez was a petite 5’2” Hispanic. She could be described as a Mexican bombshell. She had no body fat with a perfect shape. She looked to be about 28 years old. Her breasts were done and paid for by her ex-husband. She had coal-black hair and big almond eyes. Claudia could turn a man’s head at a bullfight.

Jill shook her head. She thought for a few moments and said, “Tell me, what was in the briefcase?”

“Just like he said, used panties, and oh, they were nasty. We bagged them, and we’ll run a DNA analysis tomorrow,” Agent Perez said.

“Worn panties? No sign of the money?” Jill asked.

Perez looked out over the water. “Nada. No sign of any money. Just the blood on the cabin floor and more blood on the back deck of the boat.”

"The blood on the back of the boat is Santini's. He resisted arrest." Jill turned and looked Perez in the eyes. They held their gaze for a moment.

"I've got to get to Wilshire and start my report," Jill said. Before she turned away, Claudia asked, "Free tonight?"

Jill again looked into Claudia's eyes for a long moment. Her heart beat a little harder. "Not tonight. This fiasco is going to keep me in Wilshire until at least ten. How about another time? Soon?"

Brightening, she added, "How about Friday? I'll make time. Your place or mine?" Jill asked.

Perez thought for a second. "How about mine? No cats. I'll even cook us dinner. Besides, I have to pack. I'm going to San Diego on Saturday for four days."

"A little get-away?" asked Jill with a slight smile.

"I wish. Going to a forensics seminar at the university. Monday and Tuesday."

Jill nodded, then turned and walked down the ramp, feeling more satisfied than she had all day.

Agent Perez watched her leave and smiled. "By the way, nice bikini! What did the guys think?" Jill turned around again, and said, "Who the hell cares? They're all pigs."

Chapter 18

At 7:00 a.m., President Powell got into the presidential limo for the trip to the Pentagon 3.4 miles away in Arlington, Virginia. Inside with the President were Vice President Melissa Hamilton and Dick Bresser, Secretary of Defense Pete Harvey and Pete Harvey's top advisor Patti Loverski.

Patti Loverski was a professor of Foreign Affairs at Harvard prior to being selected by Harvey. She just couldn't pass up the chance to be part of world affairs instead of just teaching the subject.

The President said, "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen! Hope you didn't have to get up too early." Each person greeted the President.

Two black Lincoln Navigators led the procession while two more followed. The ride, with Washington police holding traffic, took only 10 minutes to reach the Pentagon.

The President asked Bresser, "Is Secretary of State Hirschheimer on the ground in Israel yet?"

"Yes, sir, I believe he was scheduled to land in Jerusalem at 0400 hours, our time."

"Good. I want him on a secure link as part of this meeting."

“Yes sir, Mr. President. I’ll take care of it.” While Bresser took out his phone and started punching numbers, the President looked over at Patti Loverski. “How do you like working in the Washington trenches, Ms. Loverski?”

“So far, so good, Mr. President,” she replied. Pete Harvey smiled and said, “Don’t let her fool you, sir. She’s the best advisor I’ve ever had.”

Everyone was silent for the rest of the short journey.

Arriving at the Pentagon, they went into an underground parking area beneath the building. It stopped in front of a bank of elevators. Twenty Pentagon police guarded the route from the limo to the elevator.

The President and his staff got out of the limo, and waited for the Secret Service detail to catch up. The Secret Service agents gave the elevator a quick inspection and the agent in charge nodded to the President that the elevator was okay to enter.

President Powell, his staff, and six more Secret Service agents all rode up together. There were no buttons to select a floor. A military officer swiped a card in a slot and punched in a code.

When the elevator doors opened, Admiral James was waiting. “Good morning, Mr. President.”

“Good morning. Admiral, is everyone here?”

“Yes sir, this way, sir.” One can travel from one end of the Pentagon to another in a matter of ten minutes, due to the way it was designed in a pentagon shape.

James led the President to a set of double doors guarded by four Marines. As they approached, two of the Marines opened the doors, while the remaining two saluted the President.

James stepped aside. “Mr. President.” He bowed, allowing the President to enter first.

They entered a large room with a circular table. Everyone at the table quickly stood at attention. “Please sit down, everyone. We have a lot to discuss today.”

At the table were all the top-brass members of the Joint Chiefs, the NSA, the CIA, the FBI, and the Transportation Secretary. Also present were the Director of the National Security Agency and the Director of National Intelligence.

James took a seat near the far end of the table, while the President and the Vice-President took seats at the top of the circle. There were no guards in the room but one could just imagine the security outside. Two F-16 fighters were in the air circling the airspace around the Pentagon, and the Pentagon Police were on full alert.

The entire facility was in lockdown. Many of the lower level employees had been told not to come to work that day.

“Do we have Secretary of Defense Hirsheimer on the line?” asked the President.

“Yes, sir,” said James as he pushed a few keys on a computer. A large flat screen lit up. It focused slowly. Within a few seconds the face of Lou Hirsheimer appeared.

"Good morning, Mr. President. Ladies and Gentlemen, I'm going to get right to the point. I don't know how much you have been briefed, but let me say that this is top-secret material. If I find there has been a leak, WE WILL find the individual or individuals and they will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the Patriot Act."

The President looked at each person in the room. They all nodded in agreement.

"Okay, I'm going to turn this over to Dick Bresser."

"Thank you, Mr. President." Dick stood and collected the papers in front of him.

"On September 6th of this year, the Israelis tested a new form of energy, a weapon, although they are sticking to the term "energy." They conducted a test 500 feet underground somewhere in the desert. After the detonation, an area of an eight-of-a-mile melted into the earth. There appears not to have been any noticeable explosion, just some sort of chain reaction. That's probably why our satellites didn't pick it up. Again, it was underground. Our scientists have estimated that if it had been detonation aboveground, the affected area could have been as much as one mile."

He continued, wearily. "After the test, there were no signs of radiation. The temperature at the surface thirty seconds after detonation was 3,000 degrees. In 40 seconds, it rose to 3,850 degrees. In one hour, it was 4,500 degrees."

"For the first eighth-of-a-mile, the ground melted 250 feet from the point of detonation. Its base became a hard glass shell. The next eighth-mile gradually rose back to its original level, but with glass-type rocks on the surface. Secretary of State Hirschheimer is now in Israel. He will bring back samples of this material for analysis by our people at Langley. He'll also return with one of their top scientists who has worked on the project since its beginning. Are there any questions?"

The Director of National Intelligence Mark Rosen, stood and said, "How could there be no radiation? Obviously, this was some sort of nuclear device."

"The Israelis are claiming that no plutonium was used, or any other material which is part of a nuclear detonation. The energy emitted from the device seems to be related more to the rearrangement of atoms, not their destruction.

We'll know more once their scientist arrives," replied Bresser.

The room was silent for several minutes. Then Secretary of Defense Pete Harvey rose. "How many of these 'devices' do the Israelis have exactly?"

Bresser explained. "That's where our problem lies. It seems that one of the Israeli scientists was a mole, and three of the devices went missing. The Israelis have assured us that the remaining three have been safely destroyed. Each device had a GPS tracking system installed in them, and they were tracked to a bunker in the Blusher Province of Iran. Israel then scrambled two fighters to take out the bunker, but the Iranians were waiting. The fighters didn't have a chance." Bresser looked around the room.

The Director of Homeland Security, Cole Manion asked, "I understand the concern, but Iran is pretty far from our shores. Are we planning any action to take out the devices ourselves?"

"Admiral James, why don't you answer that question?" suggested Bresser.

James was slow to get up. He stood for a few moments collecting his thoughts before speaking.

"On September 12th, a heavily armed SEAL team of fourteen men were dropped off the coast of Iran by submarine. They made it to the bunker undetected, then infiltrated it. Fighting ensued, and three members of the SEAL team were killed along with several others being wounded. One device was found, which was destroyed along with the entire bunker. The commander in charge also said that the entire area seemed to have melted, including the bunker itself. The desert around it for an eight-mile radius and a truck in pursuit of the SEALs melted a half-mile away from the bunker. Keep in mind that this detonation took place 50 feet underground in a concrete bunker." James then sat down. Several cabinet members started whispering among themselves with this new information.

Bresser continued for James. "As for the second half of your question, Mr. Rosen, Israeli intelligence has information that the Iranians plan to detonate these devices on American soil, in the guise of Al Qaeda. At this time, we have very little information about how they plan to get them onto American soil, or where exactly they plan to use them. The Israelis believe they plan to bring them from Canada."

It was silent for a while as everyone thought of the implications.

Then President Powell cleared his throat. "Okay. Now everyone in this room knows basically everything there is to know so far, which isn't much. What we need to figure out is how do we stop them. No matter what, we can't allow these thermo devices reach our shores."

The Director of the National Security Agency, Tony Basils, asked, "Do the devices still have their GPS?"

The President shook his head. "The Israelis are saying the signals stopped five days ago. The commander in charge of the mission told us that the device he destroyed was adapted with a pullcord. A perfect suicide dirty bomb."

The President paused and looked around the room. "Obviously, it is our responsibility to stop any form of terrorism from entering the United States. I expect the Chiefs of Staff, the most powerful military officers on the planet, and my heads of every department to give me a game plan as soon as possible. I want every train watched. I want every passenger on every plane checked twice. If an alien crosses any of our borders, illegally, there should be at least five border agents there to apprehend them."

He seemed bleary-eyed, but continued. "If one of these 'devices' pops up in a Louisiana swamp, I want an alligator with a badge there to seize it. Chief of the National Guard, John Girer, I want your men to help patrol our borders. Dedicate 10,000 men to help the Border

Patrol. Create any excuse necessary! I want this country under martial law, without declaring such. Does everybody here understand me completely? If not, speak up now!"

President Powell stood for a moment longer to emphasize his point. "This is deadly serious. It could make 9/11 look like a walk in the park. We are talking possibly about millions of lives at stake."

The room fell silent for a few seconds. The President started to pack up his briefcase when Marine Corps Commandant Gates stood up.

"Mr. President, may I speak?"

"Yes, of course, General Gates."

"Sir, we are going about this all wrong."

The President looked surprised. "How so, General?"

Gates walked back and forth behind his chair a few moments considering his response. Every eye in the room was on him.

"Mr. President, you know I'm a no-bullshit kind of man."

"That's why you're here, General Gates. I prefer a no-bullshit response."

Gates measured every word. "We can't allow anything to leave Iran. That's our answer! Not one Persian rug. Not one drop of oil. We have to create an embargo of the entire country, Mr. President. We all know that we have too many borders to stop them from bringing in these devices. Especially, through the Canadian border. I did my research last night and found that it is five thousand five hundred and twenty five miles long, not counting Alaska. In fact, it's the biggest border in the world. I don't see any possible way of sealing it off. If they do get these 'devices' onto American soil, I believe they could try for a military target. We must take all available measures to protect our installations.

I have 25,000 Marines on the West Coast alone. I am going to start maneuvers to distribute them to different bases. Twenty-Nine Palms is a good safe possibility. We will also help man the Coast Guard boats, as they will be short-handed with assisting other agencies. On the East Coast I'm ordering my division to tropical training in the Caribbean. Admiral James, I would suggest you do the same with your fleets."

James looked a bit upset. "Do you really think they plan on attacking military installations when there are so many civilian targets?"

Gates said, "Yes, sir, they will go for the head of the snake. That means the White House or Congress or the military. That's what I'd do. We all know that one of the planes on 9/11 was headed to the White House and they did hit the Pentagon."

James thought for a moment. He took a deep breath. "I will consider your recommendations. Moving the fleets from both coasts is a serious undertaking and quite expensive."

Gates sighed. "Not as expensive as the loss of American life."

"I will take your advice under consideration, General Gates." The President then addressed General Fratis, Chief of Staff of the Army. "I would like for you, General Fratis,

and your staff to partner up with Homeland Security to reinforce the airports. Work with Manion on transportation matters as well.”

Manion's feathers were ruffled. “Sir, I believe I am capable of handling my department without help from the Army.”

“I’m sure you are, Mr. Manion, but I’ve made my decision and that’s final. You will remain as Secretary of Transportation, but you will do whatever General Fratis requests of you. Understood? We must strengthen our borders more than ever before, and honestly, Mr. Manion, your department just doesn’t have the resources.” Cole Manion was turning red with anger and embarrassment. “Yes, sir.”

The President stood. “This is in your hands now, gentlemen. You know what I want, and I believe I’ve made myself quite clear. Mr. Bresser. Please keep me abreast of any decisions that are made by midnight tonight. Mr. Hirsheimer, when do you meet with the Prime Minister?”

The Secretary of State seemed shocked to be addressed so soon in this conflict. “Mr. President, I’ve only been on the ground a few hours. We should be meeting in an hour or two with the Prime Minister and the key Israeli scientist. When I get the glass sample, we will head back to Washington.”

President Powell had one last thought. “I want definitive plans. I don’t want a circus on my watch as President. Excuse the language, but this is a no-bullshit situation, gentlemen. I want a perfect plan!”

Everyone in the room watched President Powell and Vice President Melissa Hamilton exit the room.

Chapter 19

The four men rode in silence for several hours in the 2009 Lincoln Navigator with Canadian plates. The driver looked in his rearview mirror at the men in the back seat. None of them had shaved in several days. Judging from their body odor, they hadn’t showered either.

The driver, Mohammad Kolhemi, rolled his window down a few inches for some fresh air.

He had lived a quiet life in Edmonton, Canada for over twelve years, and owned a small jewelry store in the downtown area. He didn’t make a lot of money, but it was enough to provide for his wife and two daughters. When times were good, he could send money to his family in Iran.

Mohammad stood about five feet seven inches. He had black curly hair and olive colored skin. He was a very handsome man with a square chin and perfect nose. Mohammad was a slender man.

He didn't drink alcohol and was a loyal loving husband. Mohammad was well liked in Edmonton. He was known for selling quality jewelry at a fair price and never taking advantage of a customer.

It seemed like months ago, even though it was only yesterday, when a well-dressed man wearing a three-piece suit and a purple tie walked into his jewelry store. He had a short beard and cane, although he didn't seem to limp. The first thing Mohammad noticed was the carved handle of the cane. It appeared to be made of silver and was fashioned after the head of an eagle. He appeared to have good manners by removing his hat once inside. He inquired about a certain type of bracelet. When the man described it, Mohammad responded that he didn't have anything resembling it in his store. But if the man could draw a picture of it, his jeweler could easily fashion it for him.

The customer then reached into his pocket and pulled out the exact bracelet he described. It was made of gold, and several jade elephants dangled from it. Mohammad stared at the bracelet for several seconds, stunned, then said, "May I examine it?"

"But, of course," replied the man in Farsi and dropped it into Mohammed's hand.

Mohammad was puzzled by the strange man who obviously spoke his native language. He turned the bracelet over a few times, picked his loupe off the counter and studied it more closely. Near the clasp was a flat piece of gold an eighth of an inch long and a sixteenth of an inch wide, on which was engraved the initials "MK." Whenever Mohammad designed a piece of jewelry, he always marked the piece with his initials.

Mohammad's eyes started to well up. "How, where, did you get this? I made this for my sister in Iran six years ago for her birthday!" The man only smiled. "Yes, I know," he replied. "And she has a beautiful son named Kavon. I also understand she is pregnant again."

"Who are you?" Mohammad demanded. He was starting to feel very frightened of this man. "That's of no importance," the mysterious man insisted while waving Mohammad off. "What is important now is that you meet me at 6:00 this evening at the small bakery on 1st and Edmon Ave."

Mohammad gaped at the man and tried to figure it all out. For the first time, Mohammad looked the man over carefully. He was in his late fifties, maybe early sixties. He spoke perfect English as well as Farsi.

The man said insistently, "Do not be late. I am not a patient person." He turned to leave, stopped at the door and turned back. "Oh, you may keep the bracelet. I believe it was yours to begin with. Good day."

Mohammad stood there in utter shock for a good five minutes until his wife came cautiously out of the back room. "Mohammad, are you okay? Who was that man? Did he buy

anything?" Mohammad remembered the bracelet in his hand, slipping it discreetly into his pocket. "No, he didn't. Just another browser," he said flatly. It was now 10:00 in the morning. The hours went by slowly. Mohammed's mind was racing with a thousand questions. *Who was this strange man? How did he come to have my sister's bracelet? How did he know the name of my nephew? How did he know Fayat was pregnant?*

Finally, 5:30 arrived. Mohammad walked into the back room where his wife was cleaning jewelry. "I have to leave early. Mr. Mills called earlier and said he was thinking of having a custom setting made for his wife for their anniversary."

She looked up and smiled. "If more men were that romantic, we could take more vacations."

Mohammad put out the closed sign and locked the door behind him. His wife always parked in the back, and went out the rear entrance.

Fifteen minutes later, Mohammad was at the bakery. There were four tables out front. He sat at one that seemed a bit more private than the rest. A young waitress, maybe seventeen years old and very pretty, came to serve him. "What can I get you?"

"Nothing, thank you," replied Mohammad, his eyes searching the street for the man. The waitress said, "I'm sorry, sir, but these tables are reserved for customers."

It took a moment for her words to sink in. "Oh, of course, sorry. I'll have a cup of coffee and a blueberry scone." The young waitress went back inside to get his order. Mohammad watched every car go by and studied every person on foot. No one seemed to even notice him. He could smell the fresh baked bread from the bakery behind him. He realized that he hadn't had any lunch. His stomach was growling.

From behind came a stern voice. "Glad you could make our appointment, Mr. Kolhemi." Mohammad turned his head so fast that he felt a sharp pain in his neck.

"May I join you?" It was the same man from the store hours earlier, but now he was dressed much differently, in blue jeans and a Western shirt.

"Yes, of course." The man sat opposite Mohammad. They stared at each other for several seconds.

"Is my family safe in Iran?" The man didn't answer.

A minute later the young girl was back with the coffee and the blueberry scone. "Can I get you something, sir?" she asked, addressing the man in the Western shirt. "Yes, please, just a black coffee, thank you," replied the man in perfect English. After she went back inside to get his coffee,

he said, in Farsi, "Yes, today they are safe. But tomorrow could be an entirely different story."

"What will happen to them tomorrow?" Mohammad asked apprehensively. Suddenly, his stomach turned into a tight knot. He felt like throwing up.

"Well," said the stranger. "That's entirely up to you." The girl returned with the coffee.

"I don't even know who you are! Out of nowhere, you come into my business, and you have my sister's bracelet. Now you are making threats against my family in Iran. Do you want to knock off all this crap, and tell me why you're here?"

The stranger did not reply. He lifted his cup and sipped his coffee, then looked out into the heavy rush hour traffic.

He turned back to Mohammed. "It's not only your family in Iran who are in danger."

He then reached into his back pocket and pulled out a handkerchief. Wrapped up inside were several photos.

He handed each photo to Mohammad. The first photo was of Mohammed's youngest daughter Rita, who was 5 years-old, playing on the swing set at the playground not far from where they lived. The next was of Sona, his 7-year-old daughter, walking home from school with two of her friends. The third was of his wife, Izzah. She was locking the back door to the jewelry store, wearing the same clothes she had worn today.

Mohammad felt a raging fire building inside his gut as he had never felt before. He was just about to jump across the table to strangle the man.

"Before you do something stupid, please look across the street." Mohammad looked in the direction the man's eyes were looking. He saw another Middle Eastern man smiling and looking directly at them. The man opened the paper bag he was holding, and withdrew a small dress. He raised it to his nose and took a deep breath.

Mohammad recognized the dress immediately. It was Rita's Sunday dress. "What in the hell is going on here?! I've done nothing to harm anyone! Leave my family alone, or I will kill you!"

The stranger took another sip of coffee, staring at Mohammad. Mohammad looked back across the street. A bus passed and after it passed the man was gone.

"What do you want!?" said Mohammad, about to explode.

"Good, maybe now we're beginning to understand each other."

The stranger pulled out his wallet and put some bills on the table. "Let's take a walk."

He led the way down First Street with Mohammad behind him. At a men's clothing shop, he stopped at the window to look while Mohammad caught up.

"It's amazing that these Westerners pay so much of their hard-earned money for clothes, don't you think so, Mohammad?"

"Why are you doing this to me?" growled Mohammad.

The man turned and continued walking, and this time, Mohammad kept pace with him.

"Why are you doing this?"

Again no answer.

They walked another block. Suddenly, the man spoke again. "Since 9/11, it is very difficult to get our great martyrs into the United States, with their no-fly list and their airport security. We considered Mexico, but they are a rather irresponsible people. Undependable, actually."

The man who had held his daughter's dress passed them, and nodded. The stranger said, "Good, it appears you didn't contact the authorities. If you had, your family here, as well as in Iran, would have been dead by morning. My friend is very good at detecting police surveillance."

"I didn't tell anyone," Mohammad said tensely.

The stranger gave him his instructions. "You are needed to help your people. Tomorrow at precisely 9:00 a.m., you will drive that hideous American car you own..."

"You mean the Navigator?"

"Yes, call it what you will, do not interrupt me again. At 9:00 tomorrow morning, you will come back to the same bakery where we just met, and pick up three men from the old country. They will all have backpacks. You will drive them to a national park near the United States border. You will then drop them off where they tell you."

They walked a little farther. Mohammad blurted out, "All of this to give some people a ride?"

"No! Not just a ride. After you drop them off, you will cross the border into the United States. Once in the US, you will continue down Highway 17 into Montana. You will go to the Motel 6 on Highway 17 exactly six-and-a-half miles from the border. A room has already been reserved for you. I believe it is room number twelve. You will be contacted within a day with further instructions."

Mohammad thought for a while. This definitely sounded dangerous. "What guarantee do I have for my family's safety?"

"If you do as you are told, no one in your family will be hurt. On that, you have my word." The man looked back and saw a van approaching.

The stranger turned to Mohammad abruptly. "I have to go now. As a token of good faith, take this." He handed an envelope to Mohammad.

He went to the parked van, and then turned to Mohammad. "Don't forget, 9:00."

The van took off. Mohammad just stood there as if in a trance. He looked down at the envelope in his hand, and opened it.

Chapter 20

"How much farther to the border?" asked the man sitting next to him in the passenger seat. "About a half-hour, maybe a little more," Mohammad replied as he rolled down his window and took a deep breath of fresh air. *These men really stink*, thought Mohammad.

The man next to him pulled out a hand-drawn map and studied it for a minute or two. "Soon we will come to a gas station. It has a large statue of a bear in the parking lot. When we

get there don't stop. One mile past the station, you will drop us off at a trail head, understand?"

Mohammad nodded. Fifteen minutes later, they came to the station with the statue of the large grizzly. Mohammad slowed down after half a mile. The three men were watching both sides of the road for the trail that was supposed to be there.

At exactly one mile, he stopped the car. Fifty feet ahead was a trail leading into the Akamina Province Park.

The men got out of the SUV, and signaled for Mohammad to open the back. When Mohammad had met the men at the bakery at 9:00, not a word had been spoken. They'd simply put their three large backpacks in the back. They now retrieved them. The man who was sitting shotgun next to Mohammad spoke quietly to the others, and then came to the driver's window. He said in Farsi, "Do you know what to do next?" Mohammad nodded and said in Farsi, "Yes."

The three men walked into the hills with their packs. Mohammad watched them go. He couldn't have been more relieved to be done with them. They terrified him.

He started the Navigator and drove another 20 minutes to the border crossing. He'd been through this same crossing a hundred times over the years to buy precious stones and wholesale jewelry to sell in his store. This time was different.

Usually, there were only two customs officers at the crossing. Today there were two, along with six fully-armed soldiers. Mohammad pulled up to the station and handed the customs officer his driver's license and Canadian passport.

"Are you entering the United States for pleasure or business?" asked the customs agent. "Both. I am going to Billings to purchase gemstones and while I'm there I'm going to meet up with some friends."

The customs agent looked over the passport, then signaled to the soldier standing close by. The soldier nodded. "Sir, could you please pull your vehicle over to the side of the road?"

"Of course, is there something wrong?"

The soldier approached the car. "Nothing is wrong, sir. Just cooperate with us, and you'll be on your way in a few minutes."

Mohammad pulled over to the side of the road where other soldiers were waiting. "Please exit the car, sir," said a soldier with bars on his collar.

"Why, yes, of course, I've nothing to hide. Is there something wrong?"

The whole time he was thinking about the three men he just dropped off and wondered if they had something to do with this increased security.

Once out of the car, he was asked to place his hands on the hood, and was patted down while the others watched. "Where are your keys?"

Mohammad felt his pocket, and then saw the keys hanging from the ignition.

“There, in the car.” One of the soldiers opened the driver’s door and took the keys, then pushed a button to open the rear hatch.

The soldiers searched the car for twenty minutes. During the search, the customs officer went into the guardhouse, and dialed a number. He was reading someone all the information from Mohammad's license and passport. One soldier climbed under the car and spent ten minutes looking through the chassis. Another opened the hood and looked through the engine compartment.

After they finished, they gave Mohammad his keys back, and apologized for the inconvenience. He got into the Navigator and headed into the United States. His nerves were pushed to the limit. He kept thinking about the increased security and if it had anything to do with the three men who smelled so bad.

He watched the odometer and soon spotted the Motel 6. Sure enough, it was exactly six-and-a-half miles from the Canadian border. It was a typical two-story motel backed by pine trees and mountains.

Mohammad walked into the lobby where a bearded pot-bellied man sat behind the counter. He was watching some sort of soap opera on TV. Mohammad cleared his throat.

The bearded man said, “Be with you in a minute. There’s gonna be a commercial any second now.” Mohammad waited patiently. Sure enough, a commercial started about how healthy corn flakes are for your heart.

“Guess you want a room?” said the burly man.

“Well, yes. I believe my business partner has already made the reservation.”

“Name?”

“Mohammad Kolhemi.” The bearded man seemed suspicious as he typed the name into the computer. He looked up at Mohammad over the top of his glasses.

“I reckon you’ll be leaving tomorrow?”

“Why, is the motel that crowded?”

The fat man stroked his scraggly beard as he looked over Mohammad. “No, no. I just can’t have desert towel heads in my motel for any length of time. It’s bad for business. Lots of people around here would rather not be in the room next to you people. Some even freak out, thinking that they’re gonna have to use the same crapper after your kind. Nothing personal, you understand.”

The guy punched a few more keys on his computer. “There you go, Room 12.” He reached under the counter, programmed a room keycard, and handed it to Mohammad.

“Ice is down the hall from your room. This is a quiet establishment. No loud TVs and no hookers.” Mohammad stared at the man and said dryly, “I’ll keep that in mind.” Mohammad was accustomed to being treated shabbily. He understood that in the mountains of Montana, Iranians were rarely welcome. He was still offended, but said nothing to the gross man’s insults.

Chapter 21

Jill was back in her office on Wilshire Blvd. She had changed into a smart business suit with a skirt and heels.

Jill was always careful to dress appropriately. As a senior agent, Jill always had to think politically, as the male agents would file a complaint at anything to discredit her. She was always the best dressed, and looked elegant for every conference.

Jill had started writing her report on the failed operation. She sat looking out the window, trying to figure out where everything went wrong. *We had the dumb bastard! How did he get away with this crap? That was my first mistake. He's no dumb thug.*

There was a soft tap at her door. "Come in." It was Maggie Dalanie. Maggie was the head administrator.

"Sorry to interrupt you, Agent Mayfield, but Assistant Director Jules wants to see you right away." Jill nodded, and mumbled something like, "I knew this was coming."

She went up to the 24th floor. The receptionist looked at Jill as though she had never seen her before. "I'll let the director know you're here, Ms. Mayfield." "That's Senior Special Agent Mayfield." Jill hissed at the snooty receptionist and had an urge to strangle her right there, or at least cuff her to her chair. This bitch needed a lesson in manners and respect.

Jill had earned her title over the years. Women normally didn't climb the ladder as fast as men. She had had to work twice as hard as her male colleagues to earn her title. She wasn't about to let this little nobody receptionist disrespect her.

"Please have a seat. I'll let the director know you're here, Senior Special Agent Mayfield." Jill clearly heard the sarcasm in her voice.

Jill Mayfield sat in a chair next to a table with several magazines and picked up a recent Time magazine. She had just started to read an interesting article about Mayan temples when the receptionist interrupted. "The director will see you now, Special Agent Mayfield." She walked past the receptionist and went through the double doors.

Jules had the best office in the Federal building. His corner office had views of downtown and the Wilshire business district. All the walls had custom built-in oak bookshelves filled with law reference books and accounting rules and regulations. He also displayed his golf trophies and family pictures. On the wall behind him hung a framed picture of himself shaking hands with then President George Bush. Jules had been a Special Agent in those days. Jill seriously doubted that he had ever actually opened any of the law and accounting books. They were simply there to impress.

Director Jules' chair was turned to the window. He was looking at the Wilshire business district. Jill then saw Agent Coleman sitting on the couch, not looking very happy. He was still wearing the shorts and beach shirt he had on earlier that day.

"Well, I'm so happy you could make it, Agent Mayfield."

"I was told you wanted to see me a few minutes ago. Here I am."

Director Jules turned his chair around to face Jill. "Have a seat."

He continued on. "Well, this is a real mess. The Secret Service wants to know where the funny money is that they loaned us and we've lost an informant. Santini is in custody for the moment. We'll have to release him soon. He has some high-priced lawyer demanding that bail be set. So far, all we can try to get him for is grand-theft boat. But he's claiming that Fischman gave him the keys and told him to take him across the bay to the dock behind the black yacht, as he had business to do there. Peter Siegel has backed up his story. He claims Fischman left the boat and told Santini to pick him up in one hour." He looked defeated.

Jill instantly defended herself. "This is complete bullshit! How did Santini know this was coming down? And where's the money?"

"The divers came up blank, so he didn't throw it overboard. My guess is someone was at that dock waiting for him."

"Did the divers search the area around dock HH? It's possible he could have dumped everything before he even left," ventured Jill.

"As a matter of fact, they did. They searched everywhere the boat had been. No money and no body. The divers did find a gun, a .45 automatic. Hell, the guy didn't even have a cell phone on him we can run." Jill felt ever so slightly sorry for Jules. He was struggling so hard.

Jules continued. "This is going to rattle some cages, and I don't want to be on the receiving end. This was your operation, Special Agent! I expect you to take full responsibility!"

Jill stared Jules down. "You had full knowledge of this entire operation. You authorized every aspect. I will not take all the blame!" she sputtered. "Now, if you don't mind, sir, I've got to get back to my report. No, as a matter of fact, I'm going home. You'll have my report completed by 3:00 tomorrow afternoon. Will there be anything else, sir?"

She started toward the door.

"Mayfield, be very careful of who you fuck with. This could become a very sensitive situation if the media gets a hold of it."

Jill was flabbergasted and her face turned red. "And who would leak this to the media, SIR?"

"I'm just making an observation, Mayfield."

Jill retreated to her desk and collected some papers. She wanted to read over her report once she cooled down. She picked up her cell and dialed a number. It rang three times.

"Claudia?" Jill asked.

"Wow, didn't think I'd hear from you so soon," Claudia said delightedly.

"I'm suddenly free. Let's say my place at eight?"

"Eight it is. I've missed you."

"Me, too," Jill said.

Book 2

The Devices

Chapter 22

Mohammad parked his car in front of Room 12. He had only a gym bag with toothpaste, toothbrush, a clean shirt and underwear. He had been told by the stranger in Edmonton that he would be gone only a few days at the most.

He looked around the room. It had a king-size bed with small nightstands on each side. There was a dresser across from the bed with a Motorola TV. Over the bed was a dreary framed landscape print like so many that you'd find in a motel.

Mohammad put his bag on the bed, walked to the TV, and turned it on. He flipped through the channels until he found the news. He went into the bathroom and turned on the shower. He needed that shower. He could still smell the stink of the three men from today clinging to him.

At 6:00 Mohammad put on his clean shirt, locked his room, leaving the TV on, and got into the Navigator. He drove south looking for somewhere to eat. He ended up at a diner five miles away. It was a typical diner with a dirt parking lot, filled mostly with pickup trucks.

The sign on the roof said "Al's Cafe" except the 'l' was missing and someone had spray-painted an "s" where the "l" was, so now it actually read "Ass Cafe." He went inside and sat at the counter. A large woman came up to Mohammad and placed a glass of water in front of him. She reached under the counter to give him a menu. "Let me know when you're ready, honey."

The menu itself was disgusting. Every page bore the residue of previous specials dripped on it. On page 3, he guessed the smears had probably been chili.

Mohammad looked around the cafe, and saw that the booths were actually pretty clean. Most of the other patrons were all men with big bellies. All had beards and flannel shirts.

When the waitress returned, he asked, "So how's the chili tonight?"

"We serve the best damn chili this side of St. Louis," she bragged.

"Well, I think I'll play it safe and order the Cobb salad. Hold the bacon and I'll have a root beer, thank you."

"It'll just take a few minutes, honey."

After she left, Mohammad pulled out his cell phone from his coat pocket and pressed #1. The speed dial started to ring. A few seconds later, his wife answered.

"Hello?"

"Hi, honey, it's me."

"Where are you?" she asked.

"I'm at a five-star restaurant not far from the border."

"Really?"

"Yeah, they even have the best chili this side of St. Louis, and the menu has samples on every page."

Izzah was quiet for a moment, and then said, "Hmm, maybe you can take me there on our anniversary next month. When did you start to eat meat?"

Mohammad laughed. "The only meat I'll be eating is what's alive in the salad I ordered."

Izzah giggled. "I didn't know they served salad in Montana."

They talked about their daughters, the jewelry store, and the part-time employee who worked full-time when Mohammad was away.

"I still don't understand why you had to go to Billings. We have plenty of inventory in the store."

Mohammad did not like lying to his wife.

"I told you. They have some new jade necklaces at really low prices. We should be able to turn them over quickly." The waitress brought his salad over with the root beer. "Izzah, my salad just got here and I'm starved. Give my love to Rita and Sona. I love you."

"Well, enjoy your bug salad. Are you still planning to be back before dinner tomorrow night?"

"I can't imagine why not. I love you and give my love and kisses to the girls. Bye."

"Bye, honey, love you too."

After finishing the salad, he ordered another root beer and a slice of apple pie.

It was after 8:00 by the time he got back to his room. When Mohammad walked into the motel room, the TV was still on as he had left it. On the screen was an old classic black-and-white John Wayne movie.

He got undressed and slipped under the sheets and zoned out on TV. He counted ten dead bad guys in the first half-hour, then slowly drifted off to sleep.

He awoke at 9:00 the next morning when a pickup truck backfired in the parking lot. Mohammad got out of bed, used the bathroom, then went to the window and opened the drapes. The parking lot was nearly empty now. His room offered him a nice view of Glacier National Forest. *Beautiful*, he thought to himself. He made coffee with the small coffee pot in the bathroom and watched a morning show hosted by a retired football player and a blond knockout at his side.

By noon, his stomach was growling. He decided to run down to the diner and grab something quick to go. When he opened the door, the hotel manager fell into his arms, knocking him back into the room with his massive weight. Once splayed out on the floor,

Mohammad could smell rum and sweat. He pushed the manager off him, and back-crawled to the bed, sitting with his back to the mattress.

He stared at the manager's body. Instantly he noticed the blood all over the back of the man's shirt. He looked at the open door, where the three men from yesterday stood with their backpacks on.

They closed and locked the door behind them. One of the men closed the drapes.

"Hello, Mohammad. You don't look too happy to see us," said the leader. Mohammad stared in mute shock at each man, then at the dead man on the floor.

"What have you done?" No one answered. Two of the men took off their packs, and helped the third man to remove his. Mohammad saw that the third man was injured. The entire sleeve of his shirt was covered with dried blood.

The one who appeared to be the leader said, "Watch the parking lot." He then went over to his injured friend. "Lay down on the bed, Ali. You need to rest." The leader went into the bathroom and turned on the shower. Mohammad was still staring at the dead motel manager. When he heard the water running he thought, *Oh, great. At least they won't stink so bad!*

Fifteen minutes later, the leader came out with a towel around his waist, opened his backpack, took out clean clothes and dressed in front of everyone.

He went to the window. "Your turn, Isam. Go clean up. I'll watch the road." Isam headed for the bathroom, ready to wash away all his sins.

"Why did you kill this man?" asked Mohammad fearfully.

"He saw us come out of the woods, and when he heard our accents, he called us turd jockeys with backpacks. I do not accept insults from infidels, especially Americans." That was the end of any explanation Mohammad could ever expect to get. Mohammad's mind was racing. *I'm now a conspirator to murder!*

Twenty minutes later, Isam was apparently cleaner in fresh clothes. He and the leader went to the bed and cut the shirt off their friend.

"Two hours after you dropped us off, Ali slipped while climbing over a fallen tree. He landed on a branch that went through his upper arm." Mohammad could see the branch still in his arm. It went in his bicep about three inches above the elbow and stuck out the other side of his arm. The branch was about one-and-a-half inches thick and six inches long. Pus mixed with the blood oozing out.

"This man needs a doctor immediately. His arm is already becoming infected. The branch has got to be removed," said Mohammad.

No one paid him any attention.

"We'll take off his clothes, and get him in the tub. I want you to go to the manager's office and find a medical kit. Ali is a brave man who walked many miles in pain with this wound and never complained," said the leader. "Oh, leave the car keys here. I have seen sheep like you run before."

As the two men started taking off Ali's clothes, Mohammad dropped the car keys on the nightstand next to the bed. He headed for the manager's office, looking back over his shoulder. He knew he was being watched.

He thought, *They murdered the manager! Now I'm an accessory to murder! What am I going to do? I've got to get away from these men, and go straight to the police. No. I can't do that. They'll kill my family!* His conflict was eating him up inside. On one hand, he knew he was in serious trouble. On the other, if he didn't follow their orders his entire family could die for his fear.

In the managers office everything looked the same as the day before, except for the missing manager. Mohammad looked frantically for a medical kit. Nothing. He opened all the drawers and in the last one he found a white box with a red cross. He grabbed it, and hastily made his exit. Knowing the manager lay dead in his room creeped him out.

He looked at the phone on the counter and thought desperately about calling 911. *If they killed the manager so easily, surely, they would murder my Izzah and my sweet Rita and Sona. I'll just have to do what they want and go back home and just forget that this ever happened.* He returned to room 12 with the medical kit. The door was locked. He tapped lightly on it. First the drapes opened slightly, then the door.

"Good, you found a first-aid kit. You didn't make any phone calls, now did you?" The leader reached into his pack and pulled out a pistol.

"For your's and your family's sake, I hope not."

Mohammad was relieved that he, in fact, had not called the police.

Mohammad looked grim. "No, I did what you told me, and that's it." He noticed a map on the desk. It was a map of California.

In the bathroom, Ali slumped over, bleeding in the tub while the two men bathed him. They lifted him out of the tub, towed him dry, and then propped him up on the bed.

The group's leader opened the medical kit to take care of his wound.

The bleeding had stopped, but the wound was a nasty red and beginning to reek of infection.

The leader snapped, "We gotta get out of here now! We can sleep in the car."

Mohammad panicked. "Where are we going? I was told this would be the end of my part! You can take my truck! I won't call the police! I swear! I'll figure out a way to get home. My part is over now!!"

The leader looked menacing. "I'll tell you when your part is over! You will do as I say until I am ready to let you go, do you understand? One phone call, and your children will be raped and your wife will be gutted like the whore she is!" Mohammad was inflamed by a sudden urge to strangle this man. He walked two steps toward him with his fists clenched. "Don't even think about it, Mohammad!" snarled the leader as he lifted the .45 up out of his waistband. Mohammad walked over to a chair by the table and collapsed into it feeling helpless and defeated.

After everything was packed up, the men gathered up the backpacks, and put them in the back of the Navigator. Mohammad was about to pick up the wounded man's pack, but the leader yelled, "Put that down! Never touch these packs, do you understand?"

Mohammad nodded obediently. He had noticed that the pack felt very heavy. He wondered if they were going to force the wounded man to carry his own pack, but they did not. The leader carefully placed the third pack in the back of the Navigator. "Let's get Ali," he said.

Both men helped Ali to the waiting SUV. His condition seemed to have worsened in the short time they were at the motel.

Returning to the room, they shoved the dead manager's body under the bed and locked the door behind them.

Once on the road, the leader asked, "Where can we get something to eat?"

Mohammad answered, "There's a diner a few miles down the road. I ate there last night, it's not bad..."

The leader had other ideas. "No, no, I don't think so. They might recognize you. Just keep driving, we'll find someplace else."

During the ride, Mohammad kept thinking, *I am going to die. Best-case scenario is life in prison. Oh my God! My wife and my girls!*

After three more miles, they arrived at a small town with a coffee shop on the corner. Mohammad pulled over and parked in the small lot. The leader ordered, "Go in and get enough food for us to last us a day or two, no pork."

Mohammad entered the restaurant and sat at the counter. A waitress came over who looked about 80 years old. Her name-tag read "Betsy." She handed Mohammad a menu.

"I'd like a large order to go. How about four turkey sandwiches, two chicken salad sandwiches, and four cheese sandwiches, and six bags of potato chips? Do you sell bottled water?"

The elderly waitress replied dully, "You must have a car full of hungry kids? Poor guy. We have bottled water, mountain spring."

"Good," said Mohammad. "I'll take 12 bottles."

"There's a Circle K just down the road. You could save yourself lotta dough by going there instead."

"That's okay. I'm in kinda of a hurry."

"Suit yourself." The waitress wrote up the order, and clipped it on a spin wheel in front of the kitchen.

"This is to go, so bag it!" said the waitress, not even looking into the kitchen.

Mohammad grabbed a newspaper left on the counter. He looked around the restaurant and saw a pay-phone by the bathrooms. He turned to see his passengers watching him closely. He wanted to just jump up and yell, *Those men in the black Navigator just killed one of your*

friends, the manager of the motel up the street! He figured most of the patrons were probably armed.

Distractedly, he tried to read the front page. On the second page, he spotted a photo of the man from Edmonton who had started this insane mess. His name was Omar Kuddafi, a native of Iran. He had been in Canada on a work visa. He was found decapitated in an alley in Edmonton. The story got worse. Detectives said that they found evidence of torture before being brutally murdered. Mohammad felt suddenly very sick. He went to the men's room and vomited. With his composure partially regained, he splashed water onto his face as he looked into the mirror.

How did this happen? I've never bothered anybody. I only wanted to raise my children and grow old with Izzah. Mohammad started to cry.

A few minutes later he came out of the bathroom. The waitress had brought him a glass of ice water while he was gone, and he gulped it down.

"Sir, your order is ready," said the smiling Betsy. Mohammad walked to the cash register. "That'll be \$64.42, including tax."

Mohammad handed her a hundred-dollar bill, one of many given to him by the man, whom he now knew was Omar Kuddafi. The envelope contained \$8,000 US dollars. He had hidden \$7,500 of it in his sock drawer and brought only \$500 with him. "Keep the change." Betsy looked surprised and pleased.

"Thank you, sir! I don't see many good tippers in these parts, you know, with times bein' tough and all."

"Don't mention it." Mohammad picked up the four bags of food and two plastic bags of water and went out the front door to the Navigator. He got into the driver's seat. The leader roughly grabbed the bags, and handed each man a sandwich and a bottle of water. Mohammad watched them devour every crumb like hungry dogs. He thought, *Their packs were so heavy, I assumed they had lots of food... unless they weren't carrying food.*

"Where are we heading?" asked Mohammad. The leader said pointedly, "Billings, Montana." Mohammad got back on Highway 17 South. They were still in Glacier National Park. The road was very steep and full of hair-pin turns. The scenery was spectacular. No one seemed to notice.

After many miles, the leader said. "I gotta piss. Pull over where there's room." Mohammad pulled over at a dirt turn-around area. Two of the men walked over to the bushes to relieve themselves, talking quietly to each other.

Mohammad also needed to stretch, and got out of the car. Walking to the edge of the woods, he was twisting his stiff neck when he felt someone behind him, and spun around. The leader was pointing his .45-caliber pistol at him.

"You thought I didn't see you looking at the map in the motel room? You've seen our faces and now you know where we're going. We'll take it from here. Thanks for the ride!"

He pulled the trigger and shot Mohammad in the chest. Mohammad's last thought was of his beautiful wife and two children. For some reason he couldn't remember their names. Then everything went black.

Chapter 23

Lieutenant Commander Graves arrived at Little Creek Naval Base, the East Coast amphibious command for the Navy SEALs. It was September 18th. He had been debriefed three times and had written a complete classified report on every aspect of the mission.

The weather was hot and muggy at 9:00 in the evening. It was still 85 degrees, and oppressively humid.

Commander Graves walked down the boardwalk, thinking about a lot of things--the men he lost on the last mission, the daughter he would never see--the nightmares that haunted his dreams.

An hour later, Graves was in the officer's club enjoying a cold beer and socializing with the other officers he'd known and served with for years. John needed some relief from the ghosts that haunted him.

They never discussed their missions while at the club. Instead, their conversations usually focused on training, girlfriends, or the good ol' days in the Philippines before the Suva Bay base was closed. The older officers remembered the nightmare of June 15, 1991, when Mount Pinatubo erupted only 20 miles away from their base, followed by hundreds of small-to-large earthquakes. The volcano had been eight times more powerful than Mount St. Helen. To top things off, Typhoon Yunya hit at the same time. By morning, the base was under one foot of slushy ash. All dependents had been evacuated. It took six Navy ships, dozens of cargo planes plus two aircraft carriers, the Abraham Lincoln and the Midway, to carry out the evacuation. The SEALs were in charge of security due to the massive chaos.

Graves was about to get up and head to the officers' quarters for a much needed night's sleep, when a shore patrol officer came in to the club and looked around for a minute. He spotted John and walked up to him.

"Hi, John." He extended his hand. They had known each other for several years.

"Hey there, Chris, can I buy you a beer?"

"Naw, I'm still on duty. I'm not here on a social call. A message just came in that some big brass wants you at the Pentagon right away."

Commander Graves shook his head. "What ever happened to the idea of R&R?"

"Sorry, John, just doing my job."

"Yeah, I know. I need to get some stuff from the officers' quarters. Clean uniform, razor, deodorant wouldn't hurt."

“Sorry, they want you there right now. My men are packing you up as we speak. Just glad you were on base. Helicopter is waiting at the east pad. My men will meet us there with your belongings.”

“Us?”

“Yeah, the message came in that you are to be escorted to the Pentagon ASAP.”

Graves was perturbed. “What, am I under arrest?”

“Hell no, those bigwigs just want to be sure they get you as quickly as possible. Maybe they heard about that big dong you got hanging, and how the ladies do anything to keep you in the sack.” The other officers listening perked up. They had all been summoned in this manner after important operations. It was all part of being a SEAL team commander.

“Well, I guess we have a date. Let’s do it,” said Commander Graves.

Forty-five minutes later, Graves and two shore patrol officers landed at the Pentagon. Three Marines saluted him and helped him with his duffel bag.

They piled into a government-issue black sedan. The Master Sargent handed the Commander a badge.

“Sir, please wear this at all times when you’re not in your own room.” Nothing else was said as they drove around the Pentagon. They parked underground. “Temporary quarters have been set up for you, sir. I’ll have one of my men take your bag to your room.”

“Thank you, Master Sargent. Exactly who wants to see me?”

“Couldn’t tell you sir, that information is above my pay grade.”

Commander Graves knew that the Master Sargent was basically not going to give away any information. It was probably a habit from working in one of the most secure buildings in the world.

They rode the elevator up to the third floor. When the door opened, a sergeant picked up the duffel bag and walked off with it towards Graves' new quarters. The Master Sargent ushered him in a different direction.

“This way, sir, you’re expected.”

They made their way through several corridors, and came to a set of double doors at which stood two Marine guards.

The Master Sargent said, “Please wait inside, sir. I’ll let the brass know you’re here.” “If you don’t know who wants to see me how are you going to tell them I’m here, Master Sargent?”

The Master Sargent didn’t answer his question, but instead said,

“Sir, in the meantime my men have to run hand scans to be sure you’re not armed.” Two other Marines used wands to check for any possible weapons.

“What’s up, guys? I’ve got top secret clearances!”

“Just following protocol, sir.”

Graves was ushered into a room, which had a large flat screen TV. *Maybe they invited me here to watch a movie*, thought John. Actually, it was more like a fancy conference room. On a table against the wall were bottles of water in ice. In a small kitchen was a fairly well-stocked bar.

He looked at his watch. It was now 11:30, and he was tired. He sat down at the table.

He was thinking about getting up to make himself a drink. *What the hell*. John got up and made himself a Ketel One on the rocks. John then sat down sipping his drink waiting to see what came next.

Twenty-five minutes later, the door opened and General Gates walked into the room. Graves instantly recognized the Four-Star Marine Corps General, and jumped to attention. General Gates didn't even acknowledge him. Behind him was Admiral James, whom Graves also recognized. There was no need to salute indoors with no cap on.

Graves' mind was spinning. *What would the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Commandant of the Marines want with me?*

"At ease, Lieutenant Commander Graves. Please take a seat," said Admiral James.

Graves sat down with his back straight, almost at attention in a sitting position.

Both officers studied him closely. Gates spoke first.

"John, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, John, I read your entire file, even the classified parts. You're one hell of a soldier."

Graves was tempted to correct the commandant by saying that he was actually a sailor. But he thought better of it.

"Yes, very impressive. But, General Gates, Commander Gates is a sailor," Admiral James said with a smirk.

"I am curious about how you pulled off that raid in Somali and took out that ass General Abul right under their noses, then got you and your men out without injury. My understanding is that the Somalis lost almost a full platoon," remarked Admiral James.

Graves said, "I'd like to tell you, sir, but that's classified." Admiral James laughed, "Come on, John, you're talking to the highest ranking officer in the United States military!" Now General Gates was smiling.

"Yes, Commander, I'm curious as well." A voice boomed out, startling Graves. He turned his head and saw the President of the United States coming through a hidden door built into the oak-paneled wall.

Graves started to get up but the Admiral waved to him to remain seated. With the President was Dick Bresser, FBI Director Paul Holcome, and Israeli scientist Dr Tova Mazel, an attractive woman in her thirties. Her long black hair was tied in a bun and she wore oversized glasses with thick lenses.

Everyone took seats around the table.

"Well?" asked President Powell.

“Sir, let’s just say my men performed beyond expectations. We also had a lot of C-4, Claymores and a good plan with excellent backup from the Navy and Marines.”

President Powell nodded and said, “I notice you don’t take much of the credit. I like that in a man.”

“Sir, it’s late, and I know Dr Mazel is jet-lagged,” said Dick Bresser.

“Yes, of course. Dr Mazel, would you begin?”

“Thank you. I brought some samples of the sand-glassing which the Thermo Displacement Device created. Mr. Hirsheimer was kind enough to get me here as fast as possible so I might be able to assist you in any way possible.”

Tova Mazel looked directly at John for what seemed like a long time. He looked at her with the same intensity. Oddly, he was slightly attracted to her. She wasn’t beautiful by any means, but there was just something very sexy about her. “Commander, as I understand it, you destroyed one of the devices stolen from my country?” Her English was almost perfect.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Could you please describe the device that you destroyed? I need a complete description.”

“Yes, Ma’am. It was a square box apparently made out of some kind of metal. Judging by the weight, I would venture to guess iron. It was about twelve-inches wide by twelve-inches long and sat about eight-inches high.”

“Excuse me, Commander, you picked it up?” Tova asked.

“Well, yes, ma’am. I intended to destroy it, so we wrapped it in the C-4 that we were using to blow the bunker. Am I in any danger?”

Tova Mazel stared at Commander Graves. “I don’t know. Please continue, Commander.” Suddenly, Commander Graves got nervous. All he could think about is what he might have been exposed to.

“It was located in a secure room underground. Under the table were three digital timers.”

“Excuse me, Commander, there was no timer on the device?”

“No, ma’am, it looked like it had been replaced with a pull cord. It resembled a seatbelt with a handle.”

“You did see three timers, or more appropriately, detonators?”

“Yes, ma’am, three to be exact.”

“Do you remember seeing any wires on the removed detonators?”

Graves had to think about this. “Yes, I did. I don’t remember how many, but I did see several wires attached to it in various colors. I do remember seeing red, green and black wires.”

Mazel looked at the President. “Our detonators are very sophisticated. The Iranians would never have figured out the sequence. It would make sense that they had to find another means to detonate the devices.”

The President queried Mazel. “But you made it easy enough to replace the detonator with another means of detonation?”

“Mr. President, we never considered that they could be stolen. They were in a very highly secured facility. Mossad is currently making major security checks on everyone in the facility, and is doing everything in its power to find out where they plan to use the devices. We have picked up some information that they plan to possibly hit your West Coast.”

“And what makes you think that they could even get these things into the US? Let alone hit the West Coast!” President Powell asked, suddenly becoming very irritated that the Israelis had more information than what they were sharing. Israeli secret intelligence certainly has been busy.

“Is there anything else that the Prime Minister may have omitted?” asked the President in a resentful tone.

Tova looked the President straight in the eye and replied, “I really have no idea, sir. I’m a scientist, not a spy.”

“Well, you certainly had information that we didn’t have.” President Powell was trying hard to pry any additional intel from Tova.

Dick Bresser made a point. “But someone did steal three of these devices right out from under your nose.”

Tova stared at Bresser with a look of contempt. “Yes, that is true. He was paid a lot of money. He also had help getting himself and the devices out of our country. As of two days ago, Mossad neutralized everyone involved, even the main thief in Iran. From what I understand, everyone involved was questioned under extreme conditions.”

Bresser asked, “You mean tortured, don’t you?”

Tova looked nettled. “You have your terms, we have ours. At least our methods get results. You Americans think water-boarding is torture, but I guarantee that is nothing compared to what Mossad can do. But as I said, we get results.” She paused. “I live in a small world surrounded by enemies. We don’t worry about human rights because invasion by our enemies can be even crueler than anything you could comprehend.” The President cleared his throat. “I think we need to move on, Dr Mazel. What exactly was your involvement in the making of these things?”

“I was the lead scientist. I have a Doctorate in Chemical Engineering from your MIT, and a Masters in Physics from Harvard. I was part of this project since its inception. We have been working on the development of these energy sources for close to five years.”

“Please explain in plain English what we’re dealing with here,” interjected the President.

Mazel sat back silently for several minutes, gathering her thoughts.

“A nuclear weapon is the splitting of the nucleus of the atom. In simple terms, we found a way to electrify the atom, which makes it shake at something like...” Tova paused. “One hundred thousand motions per 1/100th of a second. This makes the atom heat up, and creates energy. When you electrify one billion atoms the size of a pinhead, you have a possibly new form of energy. These devices, as you call them, can create a massive form of heated energy. We tested one device 500 feet underground, and found we could not control the chain reaction

and we were unable to contain the energy with modern technology.” Tova paused for several seconds. “For this process to work, we would need metals that have not yet been discovered to contain the reaction. This is the simplest explanation I can give.”

The room was quiet while everyone thought about her words. The President finally broke the silence. “Why was Israel working so hard on a new energy source?”

Tova answered sharply. “That should be obvious, Mr. President. If we could discover an alternate source of energy to oil, it would bankrupt our enemies. We would share it with the entire planet at little or no cost.”

James asked, “Can one of these devices be disarmed?”

“Yes,” she answered. “But it takes special tools and knowledge of the device. I have brought with me the necessary tools, and I know these devices better than anyone else alive.”

Holcome asked the next question. “How long would it take for you to teach our people how to disarm these things?”

Tova thought about this and said, “Maybe a few days to a week, depending on the individual. I’ve worked on this project for five years, and I don’t completely understand everything.” The room remained silent.

Finally, General Gates said, “Well, I guess we keep to our game plan.”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

The President cleared his throat and looked directly at John. “Mr Graves?” said the President. “The reason I address you as Mr Graves is that I am ordering you honorably discharged from the Navy, with full benefits of course. As of this moment, you are no longer in the Navy, nor are you a Lieutenant Commander. I am asking for you to do a special service for your country.”

Graves turned white. *Out of the service? What is going on?* He wondered if this was real.

“Mr President, you are the Commander-in-Chief. Of course I accept your order without question. But with all due respect, sir, the Navy has been my entire life.”

The President responded, “I understand that the SEAL teams are about to lose one of their most valuable leaders. Unfortunately, I have no alternative. The safety of the American people supersedes all other considerations. And you, Mr Graves, are perhaps the only American who has actually seen what the device even looks like, let alone, handled one. You even experienced what they are capable of.”

President Powell turned to FBI Director Paul Holcome. “Mr. Holcome, please continue.”

Director Holcome said, “Mr. Graves, since you are no longer in the Navy, by Presidential decree, I’m appointing you Assistant Director of Special Operations of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. You will have full classified clearance.”

John Graves was floored. One minute he was in a meeting with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the President of the United States for a mission debriefing, the next second he was

thrown from the only life he knew. Now he was an FBI Assistant Director. In the back of his mind he thought, *Maybe now the nightmares will finally stop.*

Director Holcome continued, "I want you to go to your quarters and take this all in. You will need to go through indoctrination and processing and you'll be issued a weapon and proper identification. Your first assignment will be to assist Dr Mazel in finding these devices so she can disarm them. You're the only American who got a good look at one and the detonation system, so it seems you're the only choice we have. Besides, we feel Dr Mazel will be safe with you around. A car will be here to pick you up at the main entrance at 0700 hours tomorrow to bring you to 1000 E Street. For the time being, that will be your new base of operations. Any questions?"

Graves looked at the Director and then the President, and said, "You said a weapon. Only one?"

Chapter 24

After Tony "The Tank" Santini was bailed out of federal custody, he went to his 12th-floor condo in downtown Los Angeles. His wife and kids lived in a nice home in the Encino Hills. This was Tony's private place. Very few people knew of its existence other than his crew.

It was a high-rise apartment of two-thousand-square-feet with 180-degree views of downtown. It had three bedrooms and two baths. It wasn't well furnished. The living room had an eight-foot couch with a coffee table that had seen better times. On the wall across from the couch was a 52-inch flat screen TV. Tony loved to watch old gangster movies and classic Westerns, anything with violence and death.

The doorman was paid on the side to warn Tony if anyone decided to make a surprise visit.

Tony showered, put on slacks and a polo shirt. He went to the kitchen and looked in the refrigerator. The leftover lasagna from Mazzarino's in Valley Village had white spots of mold growing on it. He shook his head. *Damn, the best lasagna in the city, spoiled while I sat in the can. Now that's a true crime,* thought Tony. He threw the lasagna in the trash and opened a beer instead. He went into the living room and noticed several things out of place.

The gas fireplace doors were open. He never used the fireplace. Its glass doors were always shut. The easy chair by the fireplace was not in the same position it had been when he was here last.

He walked into his den, which also served as an office, turned on his computer and noticed the mouse sat above the keyboard. He always left it to the right.

He smiled. "The Feds were definitely here. Dumb shits, did they really think I'd have anything in my pad that they could actually use?" He looked at the cordless phone and assumed it had been tapped. He pulled out a new cell phone out of his pocket and dialed a number. After two rings, a woman answered. "Hello?"

"Hey, babe, it's me."

"Tony! Where have you been? I've been worried sick about you, honey."

"Ahh, it was nothin'. The Feds arrested me. I spent four days in their crap-hole and it turns out I was the wrong guy. Go figure."

"Oh, Tony, what can I do to make you feel better?"

"Right now, I need a lift to the impound to get my Mercedes out before one of those pigs lifts the stereo."

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes, is that okay?" she asked.

"Great, I'll meet you out front in fifteen. Thanks, babe." He put the phone back into his pocket.

Tony found his spare keys and looked around his condo. *I'll have to get this place swept for bugs tomorrow.* He went to the window and looked out at the other condo project across the street. *They probably have a camera on me right now.* He closed the drapes, then went to every window in the condo and closed them all.

Tony left his apartment and went down the elevator to the lobby. He went over to the doorman, an elderly man with a fancy uniform and a red hat. "Was anyone in my place in the last few days?"

"No, sir. Not during my shift anyway. Is anything wrong, sir?"

"No, no, just curious."

Tony walked casually out to the street. He was ten minutes early but he wanted to study the area to try to identify the surveillance team that he was certain was there. Nothing seemed out of place. But he was still sure they were out there, watching him.

After ten minutes, a red Porsche Boxster pulled up to the curb. "Hey, buddy, want a date?" The passenger door opened. The driver was a beautiful 25-year-old blonde, her hair cut short with a streak of orange on the side. She wore a tight mini-skirt and midriff top that showed her belly. She had big breasts that didn't seem to quite fit on her small frame.

"Hi, Tony, I missed you," said the blonde. Tony leaned over and gave her a nice long kiss while stroking her breast through her top. He then took out the release form the Feds gave him when he was released. He handed it to the woman. "Stick this in your GPS, and let's go get my car." She pulled away from the curb.

"After we get your car, wanna have some fun?"

She took one hand off the wheel, and reached over and caressed Tony's thigh. Then she moved her hand higher and gave him a gentle squeeze.

Tony was getting aroused. He pulled her hand away. "Maybe later, Michelle. I've got business to attend to. I gotta meet some guys. Also, let me borrow your cell. Mine got dumped in the ocean. My new one doesn't seem too reliable and the battery is low."

Michelle reached into her purse and took out her new phone that Tony had bought her. He dialed a number and someone answered immediately. "Pub bar and restaurant."

"Wild Willy there?" he asked.

"Hold on." After about thirty seconds, a man came to the phone. "Yeah?"

Tony knew the voice. "It's me."

"Hey, how ya doing?"

"Like shit! Remember that place that Murphy the Mick took us a few months back in the middle of fucking nowhere?"

"Yeah, so, what about it?" asked Wild Willy.

"I want you and my best buddies to meet me there in three hours. By the way, I feel kinda hot in this LA heat."

Willy paused and asked, "Any chance of it cooling down anytime soon?"

"Probably not. See you in three," said Tony.

"Got ya," replied Willy.

Michelle drove in silence for a while, when she asked, "Are you in trouble?"

Tony laughed and said, "Nah, no more than usual."

Tony thought about his meeting. He couldn't take the Mercedes. It was most likely rigged with a tracking device. Again, he dialed a number on Michelle's cell.

"Hello?" said a male voice.

"Hey, how you doing. No names, okay?"

"Sure, what's up?"

"Need a switch," said Tony.

"Okay, when and where?" Tony thought for a few seconds.

"How about that burger joint in North Hollywood? The one with that hot young brunette who leans over way too far when you get your food. You remember?"

"Yeah, that's a nice piece of ass. When?" Tony looked at his watch.

"Let's say one hour."

"Good as done," was the reply. Both parties hung up quickly.

They made it to the police impound yard, and it took Tony half-an-hour to fill out the paperwork. When he was finished, the cop said, "I'll have someone bring it up. Cash or credit?"

Tony pulled out his wallet, and handed the cop behind the Plexiglas an American Express. Ten minutes later, his Mercedes pulled up to the front of the building.

He went back to the Boxster, stuck his head in the window, and said, "I owe you, Michelle. I'm gonna be real busy tonight but how about my place at 9:00 tomorrow morning?"

"Well, I'm working tonight at the club, but yeah, I'll be there at nine."

"Don't overdo it tonight. I want that box of yours smelling sweet. I'll make up for any lost wages."

"Fair enough, sweetie. See you at nine."

Tony got on the 101 Freeway and headed north. He didn't see any surveillance, but he knew if they had put a tracking device on the car, they could stay a mile behind.

He got off the freeway at Lankershim Blvd, turned right, and then to Burbank Blvd, made another right and then turned left on Califa, and parked in a crowded apartment parking lot. He waited for fifteen minutes and didn't see any surveillance team following. The hour was up, so he drove down the street to Oxnard Blvd, turned left at the corner of Lankershim and Oxnard, parking in the back of In-And-Out-Burger.

He got out and started walking to the order window. He passed a thin long-haired man carrying a bag of food. When they passed, the thin man dropped a key onto the pavement. Neither man looked at the other.

Tony ordered lemonade. Walking back to his car, he dropped his keys and bent over to pick them up at the same time that he picked up the key dropped by the stranger. The car was a Lexus. There was only one Lexus in the lot. Tony slipped in the key, and took off heading north on Lankershim.

The surveillance team was one block away.

"He's at the In-and-Out. Valdez, walk over, and order something. As a matter of fact, get three burgers with cheese and three drinks. I'm starved. Make sure he's not playing any games. Then get back here." With that, a Hispanic undercover officer got out of the van, and walked quickly to the In-and-Out.

There was no indoor dining, just a walk-up and two drive-throughs. He saw the Mercedes and went up to the walk-up window. No sight of Santini anywhere. He asked the employee at the window for a bathroom key.

The kid handed him a key attached to a ridiculously heavy stick. He ran behind the building and looked in both bathrooms. Empty. He threw the key to the ground, and ran full speed back to the van. "We lost him!"

Tony got on the 405 freeway northbound. Traffic was bumper-to-bumper, which is normal for the 405. He didn't like his new cell phone. He was glad that he now had Michelle's. When he'd left the dock four days earlier, he'd dropped his phone over the side so the Feds couldn't trace his past calls. His attorney had given him this one. It was an older flip phone. His attorney assured him it wasn't bugged, nor could it be traced.

He drove past Canyon Country, a suburb of Los Angeles County. He kept going for 20 minutes or so, exiting the highway at Agua Dulce, a sparsely populated area that looked more like a desert than a mountain region. The dashboard thermostat read 102.

He drove for two more miles, then turned off onto a dirt road and pulled up behind some tall shrubs. He sat and waited. *Well, no tail*, he thought to himself. Then a black Porsche turned onto the dirt road and passed him without looking.

"Mmm. That's Pete."

He waited ten more minutes and continued down the road, every now and then looking up for a surveillance copter. Again, nothing. He came to an old building with a sign in front that said "BAR." In the parking lot were the Porsche he'd seen earlier, a new Cadillac, a Jeep Cherokee and an old beat-up Ford pickup truck. He parked the Lexus and walked in.

There were six people in the bar, not counting the bartender. One guy at the counter looked like a freak from the 70s, who had seen way too much sun. His skin was wrinkled like a leftover raisin. At a table sat four men staring at Tony. He walked over and said, "Bet you didn't think I'd invite you back to paradise so quick!"

Each man mumbled something incoherent. Tony sat down and looked around the table.

"So, where's Randy?" asked Tony.

Willy answered, "He's in Nevada, be back tomorrow. Heard you had a little trouble with our Fed friends?"

"Yeah," said Tony. "Ain't shit. They're trying to get me on grand-theft-boat crap." They ordered beers and waited till the bartender was back behind the bar.

Tony said, "That brings up the next subject. Willy, I want you to go see our friend in Oxnard at the Channel Islands Marina."

Willy knowingly nodded. "Oh, yeah?"

"He has a nice big package for us. Pick it up and take it to a safe place. Cut him 15 big and pay him out of the briefcase. The suitcase is funny.

Got it?" Tony ordered.

"Yeah, I got it," replied Willy.

They sipped their beers awhile, and then Tony said, "I'm kinda hot for a while. I'll need a new cell. The one I have is total crap. Also, have Louis sweep my condo."

"Done," said Pete.

"What's Randy working on?" Tony asked.

"He's got a line on some smugglers with a truckload of counterfeit junk, and maybe a bunch of smack onboard as well. He'll be back tomorrow."

Tony thought for a second and said, "Good, we can always use some more cash flow."

Again they sat silent for a minute, and then Pete said, "What do you want to do about Lopez in East LA? He hasn't been paying for his meth sales and he told my collection guy to go fuck himself." Tony looked at Pete for a few seconds.

"Do we have someone to take his place?"

"Yeah, sure. One of his own top guys wants in," Pete said.

"Okay. Check out the new guy with our Fed connection. If he's good, dump Lopez in the ocean, put his balls in a jar and give them to the new guy. That should keep him loyal for a

while.” After another hour of business, they paid the bill with a hundred-dollar tip. “You never saw us,” said Pete.

“Saw who?” grinned the bartender.

Chapter 25

At 0700 hours on Saturday morning, Assistant Director Graves stood outside the main entrance to the Pentagon in his full dress white Naval uniform. He hadn’t slept well the night before. He had his normal nightmare and anxiety attack. He didn’t have much in the way of civilian clothes, so he figured this would be more appropriate for his new job. A black Cadillac Escalade pulled up to the curb and a man in a suit got out of the passenger side and opened the back door.

“Sir, I’m Special Agent Scott and this is Special Agent Emmons. We’ll be escorting you to the Fed building at 1000 E Street.” Graves got into the car. They drove through the Pentagon’s front gates, and after a minute or two, the agent sitting shotgun turned around and said, “So you’re the new Assistant Director. Why the Navy uniform?” Graves looked out the window, and wondered if this was really happening. He’d spent half his life fighting for his country in conditions these men could never imagine.

“Let’s just get to E Street. Okay?”

“Whatever you say, Commander.” Graves looked out the window and pondered President Powell’s words from the night before. *Discharged from the Navy, it was my entire life. Years and years of training and for what? To be some FBI guy like these two goons in the front seat?* John knew that it should be an honor, but it didn’t feel like one.

“So who did you have to do to become an Assistant Director?” asked Agent Emmons.

Graves just turned and stared out the window at the passing city, trying to come to the realization that his career was probably over. *Maybe if we can get rid of those damn devices I can get back to my SEAL team. Maybe.* John tried to grasp the reality of the whole situation.

“Hey, Graves, do you know how to talk?” John looked at the agent who was turned around in his seat to look at him.

“What’s your rank?” asked John.

“Well, at the Federal Bureau we don’t go by ranks. I’m a Special Agent on the anti-terrorism task force.”

“It sounds like I out-rank you, so why don’t you just shut up and get me to where I’m going? I’m in no mood for chit-chat.” The agent turned around and looked straight ahead feeling resentment that John wouldn’t converse. He was just trying to figure out why this Naval Officer was suddenly an Assistant Director.

“Whatever you say, sir.”

John sat quietly looking out the window thinking about his dream. He thought, *Maybe now I can get some medical treatment for PTSD.* They pulled into the underground parking at 1000 E Street. When they got out of the car, the agent who had been driving walked over to John and said, “You’ll need this.” He handed John an FBI visitor's pass. “You must wear this at all times while in the secure areas of the Federal building. After you’re processed, you’ll get a different one that allows you unlimited access.” John clipped the pass to the lapel of his uniform.

They walked to the elevators. One agent swiped a card in a slot next to the doors and then pressed in a five-digit code. The doors opened and the other agent entered yet another five-digit code inside the elevator and pressed the first-floor button.

“Processing will take most of the day. The director wants to see you in his office at 4:00 sharp.” The doors opened on the first floor. They went down a hallway to a set of double doors and again, one of the agents entered a five-digit code. He opened the doors. Inside sat a nice looking woman in her thirties. She looked up when the men entered.

“Ahh, you must be the new Assistant Director John Graves.” She stood up and extended her hand. John shook it. She said, “Nice to meet you, Assistant Director Graves. You men can leave. I’ll start the processing.” The two agents were more than happy to leave and be done with Graves’ attitude.

The woman sat back down. On the front edge of her desk was a name plate, Sylvia Rozales. She reached into a drawer, pulled out a clipboard and handed it to John.

“You can use that desk over there. There are a lot of forms to fill out. When you’re finished, I’ll take you to the fingerprint lab.”

After he finished filling out what seemed to be a mountain of forms, he noticed Sylvia looking at him as though he was a prime steak. She took John down the hall to a room that resembled a police booking room. She walked up to a man in a white coat and handed him some papers.

“He’s all yours. When you’re done with him, call me, and I’ll come get our boy and take him to Medical for his physical.” Sylvia turned and smiled at John, “I’ll see you in an hour or so.”

“I don’t think I really need a physical.”

Sylvia looked at John from head to toe. “Well, I don’t think so either, but it’s protocol for all new agents.”

A young woman fingerprinted John on a scanner. “Please, sit over there while I input your info.” John sat down while the tech typed in information from the forms she was given.

John asked, “Is there anywhere to get something to eat around here?”

Without looking up, the tech said, “There’s vending machines on this floor. It's down the hall to your right. They take bills.” John went to the vending room and bought a bottle of

water and an egg salad sandwich. He sat at the table and started to eat when a woman walked in and bought a Coke. She turned and studied John for a couple of minutes.

"Something wrong?" asked John.

"No, I'm sorry. I'm Linda Curtain. I work in Records. May I join you? I'm on break."

"Sure, be my guest." John continued to eat.

"You know, you're kind of a celebrity around here."

John stopped mid bite. "Why's that?"

"It's not often we get a decorated Navy SEAL Commander here on the first floor. We usually just get new agents fresh out of law school. Besides, Sylvia's right. You are really cute!"

John turned a little red and said, "Okay well...I better be getting back to processing."

He got up, took another bite of his sandwich, threw the rest away and went back down the hall. He sat back in the chair he'd been in before.

The tech said, "Over here, please." John walked over to a white curtain. "We need a complete photo profile. Stand still and the digital camera will do the rest."

John stood still while the tech punched in some numbers. A mechanical arm swung around, and took what seemed like a hundred images at every possible angle.

"How come so many pictures?"

"Just in case we have to identify partial remains."

"Great," replied John.

"We're almost done. Come over to this keypad and choose a five-digit number. This will be your pass code to any FBI facility in the country."

John thought a moment and entered five numbers. "Thank you," said the tech. A card slid out of the box under the pad. The tech took out the card and handed it to John.

"Follow me, please," said the tech, approaching a steel door. "Swipe your card, please, and enter your code." John did, and heard a loud click. "Great, now you're all set. I'll call Sylvia and she'll take you to your medical evaluation." A few minutes later, Sylvia appeared.

"This way, Assistant Director." They started down another corridor, and John said, "So I hear you're spreading rumors about me."

Without stopping, she said, "What do you mean?"

"I met Linda Curtain in the vending room."

She stopped and turned to him. "And just what did she say?"

"She said you're telling everyone that I'm cute!"

She looked at him a second, and said, "Well, it's true. Actually I said you are a hunk. This way, Assistant Director."

As she walked, there seemed to be a little more swing to her hips than before. Once in the medical area, he was told to go into a dressing room. Then he put on a hospital gown with no back. For the next hour, he was probed and prodded. Every inch of his body was examined. The doctor asked him about every little scar. John provided general explanations about which

were bullet wounds, shrapnel or knife wounds. When the doctor asked for any details, he would answer, "That's confidential information." When the doctor was finished taking notes, he looked up at John and said, "You've been wounded over eight times."

"Yeah, so?" answered John.

The doctor handed him a cup and said, "I'm sure you know the drill. Just leave it on the shelf over the sink and then you can get dressed."

John went into the bathroom, filled the cup, and put back on his uniform. When he came out, Sylvia was there waiting.

"Hungry?" she asked.

"As a matter of fact, I'm starved. The food in the vending machine sucks."

"No wonder, it's probably been there since the Hoover Administration."

She smiled and said, "Here, you're buying me lunch." She handed John an American Express card with his name on it.

"That was quick, did you run my credit?"

"Nope, all directors get Amex cards. Field agents only get Visas. It was ordered by the Director himself to process you on a fast track. Normally, what you will finish today takes a week. Let's eat."

They left the building and went to a deli across the street. John ate a pastrami sandwich. Sylvia had a salad. After lunch, they started back, but Sylvia stopped him, and said, "We have one more stop first." They walked two blocks and came to a men's clothing store.

Sylvia opened the door. John just stood there.

"You need some suits. You're a civilian now and as an Assistant Director of the FBI, you have to look the part." For the next hour, two men measured John and chose the fabrics with help from Sylvia.

After picking out four suits, six shirts and eight ties, he asked, "How long till they're ready?" The Italian man looked at him a bit surprised. "Another ten minutes, why? While you were shopping for the ties and shirts, we had four men tailoring your suits. All standard procedure for the Bureau."

Ten minutes later, all four suits were ready. He picked the dark navy suit, a white shirt and blue tie, and got dressed. The shoes he was wearing were military dress shoes and they would have to do. He could buy more shoes later. He paid with his new Amex card.

Walking back to the Bureau, he said to Sylvia, "I'm really in a bit of shock. Yesterday at this time, I was at a Navy officer's club enjoying a cold beer. Today I'm a Special Agent, and a Director at that, with a major expense account."

"Assistant Director, be careful with the Amex card. Accounting is more dangerous than the Mafia."

While he walked, John was deep in thought. He then asked, "How many people know why I'm here, being rushed through the entire process?"

Sylvia said, "I've no idea. The Director and most likely his staff. It's obviously something big enough to pull you out of the service. We got orders to process you ASAP. You'll notice how you're the only one being processed. On a normal day, there would be eight to ten agents in each station. You must be something special! I've been working in Processing for three years, and this is the first time I've seen anything like this."

It was now 2:00. When they got to 1000 E Street, they walked into the lobby. Sylvia reached into her purse, took out her badge and clipped it onto her blouse. She looked at him a moment. John nodded, took out his visitor's pass, and clipped it on. They walked up to a set of double doors. Sylvia stopped, and said, "Try out your new access card and code."

John took out the card, swiped it and pressed in his five-digit code.

Sylvia opened the door and they went into the secure area. In a few minutes, they were back in her office.

There was an envelope on her desk with his name on it. She opened the envelope, and took out a small wallet and handed it to him. He opened the wallet to see a badge and FBI credentials. She also took out a new pass, and clipped it onto his shirt. The new pass had his name, photo and title, Assistant Director of Special Operations.

"By the way, if I'm the Assistant Director of Special Ops, who's the Director of Special Ops?"

Sylvia smiled and said, "There is only one Director and as you know, that's Director Holcome. The Bureau is comprised of Assistant Directors who are actually in charge of each station."

"Does that mean I'll get my own station?"

"I don't know, that's between you and the Director."

At 3:45, John made his way to a meeting with the Director of the FBI. He stopped at a bathroom, looked in the mirror and had to admit he looked pretty sharp in his new custom suit. He washed his face, combed his hair and continued on his way.

The Director's office was on the fourth floor. His new card got him in the elevator and through several security doors and finally to the receptionist desk.

"I'm here to see Director Holcome." The male receptionist looked up at John and said, "Name?"

"Commander... I mean John Graves."

"I'll let him know you're here. Please take a seat."

When he sat down, he noticed Tova Mazel sitting in another chair near him. He nodded to her.

"Nice to see you again, Mr. Graves, and may I say, you look great in that suit?"

"Thank you, Dr Mazel."

The receptionist picked up the phone, and said a few words while studying John. After a few minutes, the double doors opened, and Vice Admiral Paul Shanks walked out of the Director's office. Immediately, John jumped to attention. The Vice Admiral said, "No need,

son, you're not in the Navy anymore. I just tried to get you back. But this appears to be your new job. When your mission is finished, you will be given the choice of returning to your SEAL team or staying with the FBI. That was the best I could do."

Admiral Shanks was met by an agent at the door to escort him out.

The receptionist said, "The Director will see you both now." John got up, straightened out his new clothes, and walked into the Director's office. The receptionist closed the doors behind them.

"John, Ms Mazel, please have a seat." The Director cleared his throat. "Did everything go smoothly in processing, Assistant Director Graves?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I'm going to get right to the point. We have very little time to waste. Two days ago, a Canadian national of Iranian descent crossed into the United States. The name on his passport was Mohammad Kolhemi. His vehicle was searched by an army unit at the crossing. It was clean."

He went on. "Yesterday, police found a motel manager not far from the crossing, stabbed to death. The room he was found in was registered to Mohammad Kolhemi. Twenty miles from the motel, they found Kolhemi on the side of a road, shot in the chest by a high-caliber handgun." Director Holcome looked down at his notes and continued.

"Fortunately, he lived. He was flown to Billings General, where two agents were there waiting to interview him. Mohammad spent three hours in surgery. The bullet had grazed his heart and caused too much damage. It was amazing that he lived as long as he did. When he was conscious, he half told and half wrote that he had indeed brought three Middle Eastern men to the border. They backpacked into the US, across the border, after which he met them at the motel, where they murdered the manager. We have confirmation that he bought a large amount of food at a nearby cafe. Kolhemi said that the man who shot him had maps of California. He also said that one of the men was badly injured."

The Director pressed on. "Shortly afterward Kolhemi fell into a coma. Now we have discovered a body five miles out of Las Vegas, another Iranian. This one had a bad wound from what appeared to be a branch of a pine tree. It went right through his arm. Someone cut it off on either side of his arm and left most of the branch inside. They didn't realize that humans can't live with pine trees in their arms."

Graves interrupted, "Did he die from the infection?"

"I was getting to that. It looked like it was more of a mercy killing. We immediately analyzed the pine and it only grows in Canada and Montana, primarily in Glacier National Forest. We scraped his boots, and the soil is also from the same general area. We're sure that he was one of the three men that Mohammad was talking about."

The Director took a deep breath. "Well there you go. You now know what I know. I want you both on a plane to LA tonight."

The room was silent until John asked, "Did Mohammad see the thermo devices?"

“Good question, but the answer is no. He said they had three backpacks that they were very protective of. My guess is one had weapons and the other two had the devices. Or, the third pack could have been food. But judging by the amount of food Mohammad bought at the café that’s unlikely.”

Everyone just sat there for several minutes. Then Tova said, “Did you run infra-red over Los Angeles and look for the signs I described to your scientist?”

The Director nodded and said, “Yes, we did. We also ran scans over half of California from San Francisco to San Diego and came up blank.”

Tova said, “Do you think they are still on the road?”

“Well, it’s five hours to Los Angeles from Vegas by car. We have an APB out on Mohammad’s Navigator. They will most likely jack another car in Vegas. Hell, we’re not even sure they’re going to Los Angeles. They could be headed to San Francisco or San Diego. We’re not ruling out Silicon Valley either. California is a big state, and this Mohammad fell into a coma before we could get anything else out of him. He did, in fact, die about an hour ago.”

John thought about all this and asked, “Granted, sir, I’m new at this sort of thing. But if I was trying to avoid detection, which I’ve often done, I’d hole up somewhere least expected and leave after several days. I would bet they’re still in Las Vegas. There’s a lot of Middle Easterners coming and going there.”

Director Holcome considered this, and asked, “So, you think they’ll spend some time in Vegas?” John nodded, and said, “What better place? You won’t find these guys playing blackjack. They’ll hole up in a room and order room service. Thousands of hotel rooms and thousands of foreigners. That would be my choice.”

“Well then, let’s still start with Los Angeles. I’ll alert our Las Vegas branch and put them on standby. We don’t even know what these guys look like. It’s like looking for a ghost in a graveyard.”

Director Holcome stood up and offered John his hand. “This meeting is concluded. Assistant Director, please go down to the secure armory on Sub-floor 2 and check out some weapons. And by the way, with your credentials, you can board any flight in the country. Just check in at the TSA office. You’re to report to our LA office in the Federal Building at 11000 Wilshire Blvd. I’ll let them know you’re coming. I’ll instruct Assistant Director Jules to have someone pick you up in the morning. We’ve reserved rooms for both of you at the Doubletree Inn near the airport. Any questions?”

“Only one, sir,” John replied.

“Yes, Director Graves?” John still hadn’t gotten accustomed to being addressed as a civilian. “I need one of my men from my SEAL team for assistance.”

Director Holcome looked hard at John. “I want Juan Rodriguez from SEAL Team Four for a back-up. He’s a good man and he’s from Los Angeles. He will know his way around.”

“The Navy’s not too thrilled about losing you, but I’ll see what I can do. This will have to be authorized by the President.”

Chapter 26

Jill lived just a block from Venice Beach and shared a two-bedroom, one-bath apartment on the second floor with her two cats Shadow and Lilly. It was nicely furnished with a cozy feel. Jill thought contemporary furniture was sterile and downright uncomfortable.

Her bed was king-size with a large circular oak headboard. Her walls were attractively decorated with framed paintings and prints, mostly of beautiful women and cats. Her bathroom was typically feminine, with toiletries and makeup lined up on the counter.

Showcasing her love for the ocean was a beach scene shower curtain showing a breaking wave with seagulls flying over. From her kitchen window, she could see the beach, and on quiet nights when there was no traffic, she could hear the soothing sounds of waves breaking against the rocks as they lulled her to sleep.

It was 8:00 Thursday morning. Jill was sitting at her kitchen table doing the LA Times crossword puzzles, drinking a cup of coffee.

Claudia walked into the kitchen with a towel wrapped around her wet head. Even with no makeup, she was beautiful.

“Hey, Claudia, what’s ‘Green Gable girl,’ four letters, the second one is ‘n’?”

“Umm... ‘Anne’.”

Claudia walked over to the coffee pot and poured herself a cup, and then sat down at the table across from Jill.

“What time are you going to work?”

Jill looked up at Claudia, smiled affectionately and said, “I’m still pissed off at that asshole Jules.”

“Get over it. Everyone knows he’s an arrogant prick,” said Claudia.

Just then, Shadow jumped up on the table, walked over to the crossword puzzle and laid down on it. “Well, I guess I’m done with this puzzle,” she said.

She scratched Shadow on the head. Jill looked up into Claudia’s eyes and smiled.

Jill’s duty cell phone rang. She looked at it for a moment then picked it up.

“Special Agent Mayfield,” she said. On the other end was Director Jules.

“Listen, Mayfield, sorry about yesterday. I didn’t mean to piss you off.”

Jill just sat there for several seconds. “That’s okay, but it’s not like you to call me on this line for an apology.”

“Well, you’re right. I just got briefed by the Director himself in DC. Something big is coming down. I need you back on the job. I’ll be sure you get that time off that I promised later on down the road.”

He paused and continued.

“Sounds like a major terrorism plot. They have reason to believe that LA is a possible target. I need you and Agent Coleman to be at the Doubletree on East Grand in two hours, Room 442. There you’ll pick up Assistant Director Graves. Bring him and some scientist back here to Wilshire.”

“I haven’t finished my report on the Santini mess.”

Jules said, “Scrap it, this takes priority! For God’s sake, Mayfield, the Director himself called me!”

“What kind of terrorist plot are we talking about?”

“I don’t really know. The Director said that this Assistant Director Graves will brief us when he gets here. That’s about all I know.”

“I’ll call Coleman when we hang up, and have him pick me up here.”

“No need. He’s already been notified. He’s on his way to your place right now. He’ll be there in maybe half an hour to an hour, depending on traffic.”

Jill took a sip of coffee. “Is this big shot Assistant Director from the DC office?”

Jules laughed. “Actually, Mayfield, that’s one of the odd things. I think he’s been on the job for only a day now.”

“I beg your pardon, sir?”

“I’ll explain everything later. I’m not quite sure I completely understand myself.”

After they hung up, Jill went into the bedroom to get dressed. Claudia followed her.

“Something big going down?” asked Claudia. Jill went into her closet.

“Sounds that way, Coleman will be here in a bit. I’ll meet him downstairs so you don’t bump into him.”

As Jill got dressed in the walk-in closet, Claudia stood at the door watching her.

“So, can you let me in on what’s going down?”

“I don’t know myself, just got to go retrieve some guy in El Segundo, an Assistant Director in from DC. Sounded like he just got promoted to AD in the last few days.”

Jill walked to the mirror wearing a green dress. It was fairly tight and left no doubt that she had an amazing body. She started to put on some makeup. Lilly, her other cat, jumped up on the counter, sat down and watched Jill apply her makeup, as though she knew how to do it herself.

“Well, I’d better get dressed, too. The DNA should be back on those panties that Santini had.”

Jill went back into her closet and came out carrying green Brunori high heels with straps. She sat on the bed and put them on.

“You don’t mind letting yourself out?”

“No, it’ll give me some time to find and read your old love letters.”

Jill smiled at Claudia. “If you find any, leave them on the kitchen table so I can read them!” Then Jill said, “Let me know what the DNA comes back with.”

Jill kissed Claudia for a few long seconds, smiled and went out the door. Agent Coleman arrived ten minutes later, and Jill got into the car.

“Morning, Coleman.”

“Good morning, Agent Mayfield. You look more relaxed today.” She just gazed out the window without responding. “Did Jules call you?” Jill asked. She sounded a bit peeved.

Coleman looked at Jill for a few seconds and answered, “No, his assistant did. Did he call you?”

“Yep, said he was sorry, and that he needs us to fetch this big shot AD in El Segundo. Something about LA being a possible terrorist target. The odd thing he said was that the guy we’re getting is an AD, but has been on the job only for a day. I guess he meant the guy was recently promoted.”

They arrived at the Doubletree at 9:00 and pulled into the valet and parked themselves. The hotel was two blocks from the airport. As they were walking away, a guy in a red valet jacket yelled, “Hey, you can’t just park there!” Agent Coleman pulled out his badge. “Official business.” The valet guy nodded and went back inside.

Once in the hotel, they went straight to the elevators. Coleman pushed the button for the fourth floor.

They rode the elevator in silence. When they got to the fourth floor, they found Room 442. Jill knocked. They waited a few moments and then she knocked again a little harder.

“Maybe he went to breakfast,” said Coleman.

“Maybe,” said Jill.

They were about to go back to the elevator, when the room door opened.

“May I help you?” Standing in the doorway was John Graves. He had a towel wrapped around his waist and his hair was dripping wet. He had huge chest muscles with a six-pack stomach. His biceps were enormous. Even his leg muscles were oversized.

“Yes sir, Special Agents Mayfield and Coleman. We’re here to accompany you to FBI headquarters on Wilshire.”

They both showed him their IDs. He barely glanced at them and said, “Come on in, I’ll only need a few minutes to get ready.” They entered the room. Jill watched Graves walk back to the bathroom and she thought, *Oh my God, what a hunk!*

They looked around the room. On the bed were three weapons, a 9mm, a Colt .45 and a .38 snub nose with an ankle holster. Beside the guns were several extra magazines.

A couple of minutes later, Graves came out of the bathroom in a nice new looking black suit with a light blue shirt and a dark blue tie. Jill did notice his shoes looked a bit worn for Assistant Directors who spent their time behind a desk. It was just her cop instinct surveying all aspects of a person. He had short brown hair with brilliant blue eyes. John walked with a demanding swagger and you felt his presence in a room. He walked over to the phone and dialed another room. After a few rings, Tova answered.

"Our escort is here. You ready?" He hung up the phone, went to the bed and strapped the .38 to his ankle. He put the 9mm in his jacket holster. The .45 went into his new briefcase.

They walked into the hallway. The door to Room 444 opened. An attractive woman stepped out.

"Dr Mazel, this is Special Agents... I'm sorry I've forgotten your names."

"I'm Mayfield, and this is Agent Coleman."

"Nice to meet you, please just call me Tova."

Walking to the elevator, John couldn't help but notice Jill's perfect figure.

Once in the car, Jill asked, "I heard you were just promoted to Assistant Director. Congratulations."

John thought about this, and said, "Promoted? I guess that's one way of putting it."

They rode in silence for a few minutes. Then Jill turned to look at Tova.

"Is your accent Israeli?"

"Yes, it is."

Jill was getting more curious by the second. "So, Assistant Director Graves, how long have you been with the Feds?" John looked at his watch and said, "About 37 hours now."

Jill thought that he was being a wiseass, and turned back around and watched the traffic out of the front windshield, a bit insulted by his answer.

The northbound 405 freeway was packed. The average speed was ten to twenty miles per hour. That's why it's called the 405. You can usually only go 4 or 5 miles an hour.

They made it to 11000 Wilshire by 11:00. They took the elevator directly to the 24th floor to Jules' office.

On the way, John asked Coleman, "How am I supposed to address him? I mean this Jules guy."

Everyone stopped and stared at John.

"You're serious?" said the surprised Coleman.

"Yes, I'm serious. I told you I've only been on the job a little over a day. What, did you think I was joking?"

Jill answered, "Actually, yes, I did." She just stared at John for a moment and said, "Well, you're both Assistant Directors, so I would say by first names. What division are you in charge of as an Assistant Director?"

“Special Operations,” said John.

“And what exactly is Special Operations, may I ask?”

“Good question, Agent Mayfield. I’ll let you know when I figure it out myself.” Jill and Coleman just stared at Graves for a few seconds.

“We'd better get moving. Assistant Director Jules is expecting us,” John said.

When they arrived at Jules' reception desk, an attractive woman in her forties looked up from her desk. She acknowledged both Coleman and Mayfield, but she couldn't keep her eyes off John Graves. At 6'1", he was built like a gladiator.

“The Director is waiting for you. Go right in.”

Jules was sitting at his desk with a file folder in front of him. He closed the file and placed it in a drawer, then stood up and walked around his desk and took John's hand.

“It's a pleasure to meet you, Assistant Director Graves.” John looked at the nameplate on the desk and said, “Richard, nice to meet you. Director Holcome sends his regards. And this is Dr Mazel from Israel.”

Jules' expression dropped. Whoever this man was, he was connected to people in high places. He thought, *I'd better be careful of what I say.*

“Yes, I was told by Director Holcome that you were bringing a scientist. Please sit down, everyone have a seat.”

Now that the introduction was over, Jules said, “Can you give us some idea of what we're dealing with here? I was told by the Director himself that we have a serious, viable terrorist threat.”

“That seems to be the case,” answered John.

Director Jules studied John for several minutes and asked, “Am I to assume that you are part of some Federal terrorist task force?”

John looked Jules in the eye and said, “Actually, two days ago I was a Lieutenant Commander in the US Navy.” Everyone in the room looked at John. No one said a word for several seconds.

Jules said, “Is this some sort of a joke? Who authorized you to the post of Assistant Director?”

John smiled. “Well let's see, President Powell, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Secretary of Defense, and Director Holcome. I'm sure you could take up any objections you might have with them.”

Director Jules cleared his throat. Jill was doing her best not to smile.

It felt good to see this asshole put in his place.

Tova said, “Director Jules, I assure you this is no joke. My presence is proof of that. We are dealing with a situation that could compromise the lives of thousands, maybe millions of Americans.”

Jules just stared at John. He was obsessed with who this man was.

“Then I take it you were with Naval intelligence?” Jules seemed intent on figuring out who John was.

John shook his head. “No, but I’ve worked with them on many occasions. Let’s just say I was more into the field work. To be frank, I was the Lieutenant Commander of SEAL Team Four, most recently during a classified mission. I came in contact with the same material that is a threat to us now.”

Everyone took this in.

Jill asked, “What is this threat?”

John looked at her and suddenly noticed how attractive she was and asked, “Maybe formal introductions are in order.”

Director Jules said, “Of course. This is Senior Special Agent Jill Mayfield. She is the head of the anti-terrorism task force and a senior agent in the organized crime unit of the Los Angeles office. She will be working closely with you. And this is Special Agent Pete Coleman. He’s Mayfield’s partner. Now, please let us know what threat we seem to be facing.”

John looked at Dr Tova Mazel and nodded. Tova stood up and walked around the room. “What I am about to tell you is highly classified.”

After a half-hour of detailed explanation about the Thermo Displacement Devices, she sat down.

The room was silent.

Then Jill asked, “Why do you think they will turn up in California? Why not New York or Chicago?” “Good question, Mayfield,” John said.

He took a deep breath and told the whole story of how the devices got into the United States and about the trail of dead bodies pointing to California.

Again, Tova took the floor and said, “We can get their faint signature with infra-red satellite imaging. The CIA is looking for these signatures as we speak. They’re not 100% reliable, but they’re all we’ve got. Mr. Graves thinks the terrorists will hole up in Las Vegas for a few days to throw us off.”

John nodded and said, “I would suggest we monitor every stolen car in the Las Vegas area and try to locate the Navigator they were driving.”

Jules said, “Okay, I’ll let our Vegas branch know and have them make it a top priority. In the meantime, can you describe what it is we’re looking for?”

John opened his new briefcase and took out 8 x 10 photos showing four cubes lined up side by side. The photos were courtesy of Tova Mazel.

He handed each person a photo. “The digital timers you see have been removed. The cube I destroyed had a pull cord instead of the Israeli timer. Dr Mazel thinks they were too complicated for the Iranians to figure out.”

Everyone looked at John.

Jill said, "You destroyed one of these things. Where did this happen?"

John looked at Jill. "That's classified, but I can tell you it wasn't on American soil."

Everyone in the room just stared at Graves.

"Thank God," said Jill.

Chapter 27

The three men had been traveling for 13 hours, stopping only for gas and fast food. Isam and Imaad took 4-hour shifts behind the wheel. It was pouring rain with regular bolts of lightning and shattering claps of thunder as though Thor was taking his vengeance out on the world. The sign on the side of the road said they were 30 miles away from Las Vegas. It was 5:00 pm and Imaad was tired.

Imaad said, "Isam, wake up." Isam opened his bloodshot eyes. He looked around only to see the desert storm.

"Is it my turn to drive?"

"No, check on Ali."

Isam looked in the back seat. The infection had gotten much worse. Ali was mumbling something in Farsi. His face was white as a sheet. Isam could smell the infection from the front seat. "He's bad. I don't think he will make it to Los Angeles."

Imaad pulled the car over to the side of the road. "Give me a hand."

They pulled Ali out of the car and carried him a few yards from the road into the Nevada desert. Within seconds all three men were soaked to the skin. "What are you going to do?" asked Isam, with worry on his face. Imaad bent over Ali and whispered in his ear.

When he stood up Ali looked up at Isam. Ali whispered, "Allahu Akbar!" The leader, Imaad, took the gun from his waistband, put it to Ali's head and pulled the trigger. The gun went off just as a bolt of lightning ripped across the sky.

Imaad started to walk back to the car, but Isam just stood over the dead body.

Imaad turned and said, "Let's go. Ali is a martyr with God now."

Isam looked up at Imaad, and said, "Ali was my little brother. We planned to die together!" Isam fell to his knees in the wet mud. He wrapped his arms around his dead brother. He wept quietly.

Imaad walked back to the body. "I didn't know he was your brother. It couldn't be helped. His infection would only slow us down and draw attention to us. We have a very important mission bestowed to us by God. Soon we will join Ali in God's paradise. But now we must

go.” Isam looked up at Imaad, who still was holding the gun in his hand. Isam thought, *I’d better be careful! Imaad is insane and dangerous.*

Isam nodded, and said, “We should at least have the decency to bury Ali.”

Imaad looked as though he was getting impatient. “There is no time. Besides, any car driving by will see us and wonder what we’re doing.”

Isam got back on his knees in the mud and started to dig a grave for his brother with his bare hands.

“Suit yourself. You have five minutes or you’ll need a grave for two!”

Imaad walked back to the SUV and looked up and down the highway. *At least there isn’t too much traffic.* He looked west toward Las Vegas and saw the sky growing darker by the minute. Imaad looked at Isam digging and thought, *I should kill him, too. He’s weak, but I’ll need his help in Los Angeles.*

Imaad got back into the car. He watched Isam bury Ali. He opened the passenger window and called out to Isam.

“Hurry up. The storm is getting stronger!” Isam laid his brother into the shallow grave and covered him with a few inches of mud. He then bent over and said a silent prayer.

They drove for another twenty minutes, passing a sign that read “Las Vegas, 5 miles.” The rain was coming down so hard they could barely see the road.

“We need to find a small motel and get rid of this car. By now, the police must have found Mohammad’s body and will be looking for it.”

“Do you think the authorities know we are in the country with these bombs?” Imaad looked at Isam and said, “We must assume the worst at all times. I’m working on the assumption that they will be looking for us.”

They drove past Las Vegas and found a small motel near the Nevada/California border.

Imaad went in the manager’s office and paid cash for a room for two days. They unloaded the backpacks into the room. Imaad stood on the porch and scanned the flooded desert. When lightning lit the barren terrain he saw an old barn about a half a mile away.

“After dark, we’ll put the car in that barn and find another car tomorrow. For now, let’s put on dry clothes and get some rest.” They went into the room and locked the door. After they showered and changed, they emptied the backpacks.

Two of the packs contained the iron cubes that they had carried so far. The third pack held two Israeli Uzis with several reserve clips. Also in the pack was a prepaid cell phone.

Imaad gently stroked both devices as though they were precious gems. “These boxes will guarantee us a place on the right hand of God forever. Hopefully, we will kill many infidels to show our worth. We will make what our martyrs did on September 11th look like child’s play.”

They then drove the Navigator to the deserted barn. Imaad threw the keys deep into the back of the barn.

Back at the room, Isam watched Imaad and knew that he was completely insane. He killed just to kill, with no remorse. *He killed my brother without any hesitation. He also killed Abdul in Edmonton. He tortured that poor old man for hours before cutting off his head and he seemed to enjoy every minute of it.*

They were low on food, but still had two stale sandwiches and a bag of chips.

Isam didn't believe that Allah would want tens of thousands of innocent people killed just because they didn't share his beliefs. *I only came along on this mission because of Ali. He was much more radical than I am and he believed with all his heart that all infidels must die.* Isam felt tremendous guilt over the death of Ali.

Since he'd left Iran, Imaad had only slept when time allowed. He'd flown out in a civilian charter aircraft modified to carry additional fuel to make the long journey to Canada. Most of the seats were removed to make room for the large fuel tanks. They'd flown for ten hours and landed at a deserted airstrip in northern Canada. A few hours later, a smaller plane landed and they moved the packs onto it that Imaad had brought. From there, they flew to Edmonton where he was met by Abdul Kuddafi. They went to a hotel where Abdul had a room. When they entered the room, two men sat on the couch watching TV.

Abdul said, "Imaad, please meet your fellow martyrs, Ali and Isam. They have sworn allegiance to our cause." They shook hands.

"We have much to do and discuss before morning. Come sit at the table."

Abdul opened up a map of Canada and started to diagram what was expected of them. "Once you are safely in the United States, you will have to kill your driver Mohammad. He can't be trusted," said Abdul. Each man nodded.

Abdul opened a map of the United States, and marked their route with a highlighter.

"You must be careful crossing the border. I drove across this morning and soldiers were searching cars coming into the United States, which was very unusual. I have crossed this border many times and never have I seen soldiers."

"Could they be expecting us?" asked Ali.

"No, impossible. Until now, only three people knew about this mission. This is why you must hike across the border on this trail," pointing at a map of the National Park. "It will bring you very close to the motel where Muhammad is staying. He'll be in Room 12, which I reserved for him."

"How can we be sure that Muhammad will be at the motel, if he can't be trusted?" Imaad asked.

"Because he fears for the lives of his entire family. We took special precautions. If he fails us, his family here and in Iran will all die horrible deaths."

"And who else knows of these plans? Who are the other two?" asked Imaad.

"Do not question me! The other two have made all these plans. They are very dangerous men. If you fail to follow their instructions things will not go good for you, that I promise," shrieked Abdul.

Imaad pulled the gun from under his shirt. "We must be absolutely sure. Just as Muhammad must die, so must you, old man. But first we must be absolutely sure that we have not been deceived about these plans."

With that, Abdul's eyes widened. He looked to each man hoping for someone to come to his aid. Both Ali and Isam just stared at Imaad.

Imaad then pulled out a large knife, swung the blade with amazing speed and cut off four of Abdul's fingers which were resting on the table.

"Like I said, old man, we must be sure." Abdul was holding his right hand with the missing fingers.

Imaad said, "Put his other hand on the table." Both Ali and Isam just stared at Imaad. "Do it now or I will start cutting your fingers off as well!"

Back at the motel, several miles outside Las Vegas, Imaad said, "Let's get some sleep. Tomorrow we will get another car and drive to Los Angeles."

"Yes, sleep sounds good," said Isam.

Imaad put his gun under his pillow. He lay down, and was asleep in minutes. Isam lay quietly in the dark.

At 4:00 a.m., Imaad awoke and looked at the digital clock. When he got up to relieve himself, he noticed that Isam's bed was empty. He looked in the bathroom, also empty. He ran back to his bed and got his gun. Imaad ran outside and looked up and down the highway. Nothing. All he could see was the pouring rain. "You cowardly pig! I will kill you!"

He then thought about the two devices and the guns in the room and ran back inside, reached under the bed and pulled out the two heavy boxes and Uzis.

Blessed God! He didn't take these. Imaad sat on his bed to think. If that coward is captured, he will surely talk. He might even turn himself in because I sent his brother to heaven. He might be telling the police where I am right now! I must leave quickly!

Imaad quickly emptied two bottles of water into the sink. He went back outside and saw the room next door with a Jeep Cherokee parked in front. He went to the door and pounded on it hard.

"Hey, what the hell is going on?" said a male voice on the other side.

"There's a fire two doors down, lightning must have hit the motel! We need your help!"

He heard the sound of shuffling and a woman's voice asking questions.

"You must hurry! People are still in the room! They need help!" yelled Imaad. He then heard the man tell the woman to lock the door behind him.

When he opened the door, Imaad threw all his weight into it, and the surprised man fell backwards onto the floor. Imaad walked into the room holding out his gun and shut and locked the door.

"If you do as I say you will not be harmed. You have my word."

“What do you want?” asked the woman who was still naked in bed. She had the sheet pulled up to cover her breasts. The man was looking up at Imaad.

“Is that your Jeep out front?” asked Imaad.

“Yes,” replied the man.

“Where are the keys?” The man looked at the table next to the door. Imaad picked up the keys and put them in his pocket.

“How long did you check into this motel for?” Imaad asked.

“Two days,” replied the man.

“Good, then you won’t be missed.” He took out a plastic water bottle and placed it over the barrel of the gun and shot the man at close range between the eyes. The bottle worked as a perfect silencer.

The woman’s eyes went wide with horror as she was trying to figure out what had just happened. Quickly, he took out the second bottle and shot her in the chest.

A half mile away, Isam was in the barn with the Navigator. He was on his hands and knees feeling for the keys that Imaad had thrown into the back of the barn. Rain was pouring in through the tattered roof. *I won't be able to find them until morning!* He opened the passenger door, got into the SUV, and closed his eyes, thinking, *If Imaad thinks to come here, I'll be dead. But I don't think he'll stray far from the bombs.*

Imaad loaded everything into the Jeep. He looked in the direction of the barn and shook his head. He had no time to waste looking for that coward.

One hour after the sun came up, the rain had stopped. Isam woke up still in the Navigator. He gathered his thoughts for a minute, and then remembered the keys. He got out and went back to where Imaad had thrown them. He moved several pieces of wood and some loose bricks. Nothing. He was getting desperate.

He lifted a sheet of plywood and heard the sound of keys sliding down the top. He dropped the plywood and found the keys. They had landed in some hay on top of the plywood.

He ran back to the Navigator and started the engine. He was starting to feel better now that he had transportation. He thought that he should go back into Las Vegas and steal some new license plates.

Then Isam thought about where to go after that. He was an exile from Iran, and soon would have a price on his head for abandoning Imaad on this important mission. He would soon also be wanted by the Americans, if not already.

Isam figured Florida might be a good place to start over, as it has a lot of Iranians. He could blend in until he could come up with a plan. He would soon have to figure out in which country he would be safe. Isam felt alone in the world. Ali had been his only living family. At least there was no threat that they would kill his loved ones back home.

Isam started the Navigator and just sat there for a few minutes. He then turned on the radio and tuned into a news station and listened for about half an hour. He had heard nothing about

his dead brother, nor Mohammad, nor the dead hotel manager. Isam started to feel a little better. He wanted to get as far away from Imaad as possible.

Chapter 28

It was a quick one-hour flight from LA to Las Vegas. Graves and Tova Mazel sat in Row 12 of the small American Airlines shuttle. Jill and Agent Coleman were in Row 16.

On landing, they were met by an FBI field agent who escorted them to a waiting SUV. Within twenty minutes, they were in the Las Vegas Federal Building sitting with the Station Assistant Director.

"So far, we have nothing. We have Vegas PD stopping every black Navigator they see," said Charles White, the Las Vegas Assistant Director.

Charles was a very large black man in his early forties with a shaved head and a short beard. He wore a custom-tailored black suit. He looked good and he knew it.

"Would it be possible to see the body of the guy you found in the desert?" asked Tova.

Charles nodded, picked up the phone, said a few words, and then hung up.

"An agent will be here momentarily to take you to the morgue."

John looked around the room. He didn't have the patience for sitting and waiting. On one wall, he noticed several framed boxing photos and got up to get a better look. "You've got quite the collection here. Muhammad Ali, Mike Tyson, Smoking Joe Frazier, Ken Norton, Lennox Lewis and Evander Holyfield. All signed to you!"

"Yeah, being the top bureau man in Las Vegas has its perks."

"Who's this one? I don't recognize him."

"That's me a long time ago. As they say in that Brando movie, 'I coulda been a contender!' But I had a weak jaw. So I turned to law enforcement. Been with the Bureau going on 27 years now."

There was a knock on the door. "It's open," said White.

"Ahh, Agent Hastings. Would you be so kind as to escort Dr Mazel to the morgue?"

"Yes, sir, be glad to," said Hastings as he looked over Tova Mazel. He obviously liked what he saw.

John said, "I'll join you. I hear it's a great place for a first date." Tova looked at John and raised an eyebrow.

"We'll stay here in case we hear anything," said Jill.

They were driven to the morgue in the same SUV that had brought them from the airport. Driving downtown, John was reminded why he didn't like Las Vegas or Atlantic City. Just too many people. The sidewalks were packed with tourists and homeless people. The tourists were

there to throw away their hard-earned money and the homeless hoped they'd throw it in their direction.

They pulled up to the main police station. The agent driving said, "How long will you need?"

"Give me about an hour," answered Tova.

They went inside to the front desk. John showed his credentials and asked to see the body found in the desert. They were escorted downstairs to the basement morgue. They went in and were greeted by a small fat man with very thick glasses. His cheeks hung from his round face like a bulldog.

"Hello, I'm Dr Payne. I'm the on-duty coroner today. I was told you were coming. You must be Assistant Director Graves. It's not often we get Assistant Directors here."

"Dead or alive?" John asked.

"Huh?" responded the coroner.

"Never mind, can we see the body found in the desert yesterday?"

"Why, of course, of course. Follow me."

They walked down a corridor and passed several gurneys with bodies.

"Don't you keep these on ice, or something?" John asked.

"These are last night's. Two gunshots, and this guy's luck changed."

"What do you mean?" asked John.

"He won big at Mandalay Bay, quite a lot, I hear. He must have been followed. They found him this morning in a Dumpster down an alley with several knife wounds." He paused a few seconds, as if thinking of more to say.

"Anyway," continued Payne, "they're still being processed. Fingerprints, toe tags and so on. We'll have them in a cooler in the next few hours."

They continued on to a wall with dozens of stainless steel doors stacked three high.

"Let's see," said Dr. Payne. "John Doe, with yesterday's date. Ahh, here he is." He then pulled out the drawer a full six feet. He pulled the back sheet.

"Holy shit!" John said. "I thought he'd been shot. This guy's torn to pieces! Are you sure this is the right corpse?"

"Yeah, we get them like this a lot. It's even worse if they've spent a few days in the desert sun during mid-summer. Coyotes are what got him. They can smell a dead body for miles."

The doctor looked at what remained of the body for a minute.

"That's how LVPD found him. When they see coyotes fighting over a kill close to the highway, they usually investigate. Five out of ten times, it's human."

Tova leaned over the body, and looked it over.

"May I have some gloves, Doctor?"

"Yes, of course," Dr. Payne said. He walked over to a table and took out two pairs of gloves. He handed one pair to Tova, and put on the second pair himself.

"Will you need gloves as well, Assistant Director?"

"No, I'm just here on a first date. I don't put on gloves until the second date."

Payne looked at him, "Beg your pardon?"

"Never mind," John said, as he thought, *This guy needs to get out more often.*

Payne turned to Tova and asked, "Are you a pathologist?"

"I have several degrees and a doctorate. I also have a PhD in Medicine."

"What exactly are we looking for?" asked Dr Payne.

"I need to conduct some tissue tests." Tova opened the bag she had carried since arriving in DC. "I should be able to determine if the subject was carrying what we are looking for."

"And what might that be?" asked Dr Payne.

John answered, "That's classified information, Doctor." Payne thought about that answer and said, "In that case, I'll go to my office and have lunch. My wife packed me a turkey drumstick that I'm dying to eat. Excuse the pun. My office is over there. If you need me, just knock on the door."

Tova said, "I may have some questions when I'm finished. Thank you, Dr Payne."

Again he looked at John with an inquisitive stare. Then he went into his office to eat his turkey drumstick.

"Boy, that guy really has no sense of humor," John said.

"I guess down here he doesn't hear a lot of jokes."

Tova took out several gauge pads, and rubbed them on different parts of the dead man's body. She then took out a vial, and added in three different chemicals. She dipped each pad into the vial, and waited 10 seconds for any reaction from each pad.

"We need to turn him over. I have to check his back, since they were wearing backpacks."

"Shouldn't we ask the coroner first?" asked John.

"Let him enjoy his lunch."

Together, they rolled his torso over. Most of his fingers were eaten off, and his biceps were gone. Again, she swabbed his back and tested the pads. John noticed that the coyotes had gone for the livers.

"Hey, I love a first date as much as the next guy, but this is really gross!"

Tova ignored his comment.

"He didn't come in constant contact with the devices. He shows no viable traces that I can find," said Tova.

"Why didn't you test me? I held one of these things."

"Maybe you're expendable," said Tova. She looked at John and smiled.

"Don't worry. If I felt you were in danger I would have made the test."

Just then John's newly issued cell phone rang.

"Graves here." He listened for several minutes. John's eyes widened as he listened.

He then hung up. He thought about what he had just heard.

Tova stared at John while he formulated his thoughts.

"That was Agent Mayfield. We got one of the bad guys. Alive, along with the Navigator."

“And the Thermo Devices?” asked Tova.

“No, but we must be close. If there were three of them, one's dead, and one's in custody. That leaves one bad guy left, unless...”

“Unless what?”

“Unless they have friends here. The guy has two devices that have to be detonated manually. That doesn't make any sense.”

“Where is he?” asked Tova.

“Conveniently enough, he's upstairs in a holding room. Our troops are on there way here now.”

They went to Payne's office. He was sitting at his desk with a napkin pushed down into his collar and had the half-eaten drumstick in his hand. “Did you find what you were looking for?” asked the doctor with his mouth full.

“I'm not sure yet,” said Tova.

“Will you be coming back for further evaluation? We'll conduct the autopsy this afternoon.”

“No, I think I'm done with it for now.”

They thanked Dr Payne and made their way upstairs. They went back to the front desk and asked the woman behind the counter where they could find the arrestee. She got on the phone and talked to someone for a few seconds. “Detective Donalds will be here in a few minutes. You can have a seat while you wait.” They walked over to a bench by the doors and sat down. Five minutes later, a tall, balding man came into the room from another door. He walked up to John and Tova and extended his hand.

“You must be Assistant Director Graves.”

“That's what they keep telling me,” said John. “Where did you find him?”

“Behind the Mirage, he was trying to steal some license plates. At first, the patrolman didn't know who he was until he noticed the Navigator across the street.”

Jill, Coleman and White came through the doors. The detective knew Director White, and they shook hands.

“This way, folks,” said Detective Donalds. They went back through the door the detective came from. “We have him in a holding room with an observation window. The room's wired for sound.”

They came to a holding room with several policeman interviewing new arrivals, most in handcuffs. The group went through a door into a small room with a large one-way window.

“That's him,” said Donalds, nodding toward the window. In the next room sat Isam. His eyes were red from crying. There was a steel loop welded to the top of the table, and the chain of his handcuffs was attached to it.

“Has he said anything?” asked White.

“No, not a word. We didn't question him. Figured you guys would want to do that.”

“Thanks, Detective, we'll take it from here,” said White.

"Oh, by the way, the door to the holding room can only be opened from the outside. I have a man standing guard outside the door."

"Where's the SUV?" asked Jill.

"It's secure in the impound yard."

White took out his phone, dialed a number and told someone on the other end to isolate the SUV, and to be very careful.

"It could contain explosives," he warned.

"Well, Agent Mayfield, would you like to interview our guest?" asked White.

"No, I think Director Graves should do it. These Middle Eastern men don't respect women very much. We'll have a better chance if a macho guy asks the questions."

"Really, Mayfield? Macho, huh? I didn't think you noticed," John joked.

"I didn't exactly intend to boost your ego," said Jill. They made some eye contact before Jill turned away. She hadn't been attracted to a man in a long time. There was just something about John Graves. For a few seconds, as they looked at each other, she felt goose bumps creeping up and down her arms.

John walked into the holding room. He approached the table and sat down directly across from the prisoner. John didn't say anything. He just sat there and stared at Isam for maybe five minutes. Isam was becoming nervous.

"Why am I under arrest?"

John still didn't say anything. A few more minutes passed and again Isam asked, "Why am I being held here? All I did was to try to fix the license plate on that car. It was falling off. I was just being helpful." John slowly shook his head.

"What's your name?" asked John.

"My name? My name is Isam Ziabari."

"And what was the name of your friend we found dead in the desert?"

Isam's face turned white and he looked away.

John switched over to Farsi. He introduced himself. "Esmam Graves."

Isam eyes opened wide. "You speak my language!"

John added that he did speak a little Farsi. "Man kami Farsi bladadam."

"We know there were three of you, and we know what you planned on doing. You're going to jail for the rest of your life, Isam. Have you any idea what they do to Iranian terrorists in prison?"

"The man in the desert was my brother Ali."

"Well, then you are one major asshole. You kill your own brother, then leave him the desert for the coyotes to eat his face off."

"I did not kill my brother," said Isam.

"Odd, someone put a bullet through his head," glowered John.

"It wasn't me. It was that crazy Imaad."

“Imaad? What’s Imaad’s last name?”

“I don’t know. He spoke very little. But he likes to kill people.”

“Well maybe we can do a tit-for-tat. After all, he killed your brother.”

“Tit-for-tat? I don’t understand.”

“In beh ja ye un.”

Isam nodded his head. “Yes,” he agreed.

“Is that why you smuggled those devices into the United States, Isam? Why don’t you tell me everything you know?”

“Devices? I do not understand.”

“You know, the steel boxes you smuggled into the United States.”

“I did not know what they were called,” said Isam, as he looked up at John with a look of surprise. “How did you know about them?” asked Isam.

“Tell you what. If you cooperate with us we will see what we can do. Where is Imaad now?”

“I don’t know. I left when he was asleep.”

“Where were you when you ditched him?”

“In a motel near the California border. I don’t know the name of it. The buildings are all pink with a lots of palm trees.”

Graves signaled through the window at White to get men to the motel ASAP. He turned back to studying Isam. He could see he was scared.

“Why did you leave Imaad? You’ve come so far.”

“Because he’s crazy! He takes pleasure in killing people, including my brother,” Isam said.

“Who killed the motel manager in Montana?” Asked Graves.

“That was Imaad.”

“What about Mohammad, the guy whose car you stole.”

“Again, it was Imaad.”

“You do realize you’re an accomplice in three murders? Not to mention the terrorism charges! You’re going to spend the rest of your miserable life in prison. You need to tell me where Imaad is headed and what he plans to do with the devices. Maybe then a judge will cut you some slack.”

“I didn’t kill anyone, and you can’t prove I ever had what you call a ‘device.’”

“Weren’t you going to detonate one of the bombs, go to heaven and screw a bunch of virgins? Or was it Ali who was going to do the nasty deed?”

Isam said nothing.

John went in for the kill. “No, it was going to be you. Ali didn’t carry a bomb from Canada. You did.” Isam’s eyes widened.

“How could you possibly know that?” asked Isam.

"Maybe I lied and Ali didn't die like you thought. He could be in the hospital singing like a trained parrot right now."

"You lie! my brother is dead!"

"Where were you headed in California? Los Angeles, maybe San Diego?"

"If my brother is alive, why don't you ask him?"

"I did, and he said only you and Imaad knew the destination."

"You're lying! I saw him die!" said Isam. "Now I know that my brother is dead, because neither of us knew exactly where we were going. We only knew that the target was in Los Angeles." He paused, then started to sob. "Did the coyotes really eat my brother's face?" John could see the horrendous guilt on Isam's face.

"If you have the Navigator, what's Imaad driving?" demanded John.

"I don't know. He was going to steal a car in the morning."

"I have said enough. Can't I request an attorney?" asked Isam.

"Sure, but why did Imaad kill Muhammad, after he helped you get in this country?"

"I am done talking."

"Will you describe Imaad to one of our artists?" asked John.

"Do you have shit in your ears? I said I am done talking."

"Fine, it's your funeral. The boys at the Federal penitentiary are going to love you," John said.

John got up to leave. Isam bellowed, "I should have stayed with Imaad. I now know that I have disgraced my brother by running. I am a coward and deserve to die!"

John looked at Isam a minute, and said, "We have the death penalty in this country, which I am sure you'll enjoy. Too bad we don't use the electric chair anymore. I would have enjoyed watching you fry."

John went to the door and knocked. The guard outside opened the door. Back in the next room, Assistant Director White was on the phone with agents looking for the motel. Donalds came back into the room.

"Are you finished with him for now?"

"You'll have to ask Mr. White when he's done with his call," said Jill.

She turned to John and asked, "You speak Farsi?" John shrugged his shoulders.

Tova then turned to Detective Donalds. "When he's booked, bag his clothes up and send them to the lab in the Federal Building.

I'll need to run some tests."

"Speaking of booking this guy, what are we charging him with? Stealing license plates isn't exactly a felony in this state."

Jill said, "Accessory to murder. We'll be filing Federal charges against him. We also have two other deaths in Montana. That should hold him long enough until we can build a case,

which won't be hard. And detective, no bail! We don't know who they are connected to yet. We'll arrange to have him transferred to Federal custody by tomorrow."

White got off the phone breathlessly. "We found it! The Pink Flamingo Motel! I have two agents across the street, and a half dozen more en route."

They were about to leave, when Tova said, "What the hell is he trying to do?"

Everyone turned around, and saw Isam biting his shirt collar.

"Shit!" yelled John, and ran out the door to the room next door. He pushed the guard out of the way and threw open the door. He was too late. Isam had swallowed the cyanide pill hidden in his collar. He was dead within seconds.

John walked out of the interview room and saw Jill and Director White standing by the door.

"Why'd he kill himself? This makes no sense. He was cooperating. He even asked for an attorney," Jill said.

"Middle Eastern honor, maybe. Could have been guilt. He was pretty upset when I told him about his brother. Probably a combination of both.

Chapter 29

The group arrived at the Pink Flamingo an hour later. They parked a block away. Two men in a black sedan watched the motel through binoculars. Director White went over to the two men.

"Anything happening?"

"No, sir, real quiet. There's three cars in the parking lot and no sign of movement," said the agent in the driver's seat.

"Is the back covered?" asked White.

"Yes sir, Haynes and Kowski are watching the back."

"SWAT should be here soon. When the black-and-whites show up, keep them back. I'm hoping this guy Imaad is still there. He has the potential to blow up this whole area," said White.

"Yes, sir," said the other agent.

White took out his cell phone, called information and was connected to the Pink Flamingo. The phone rang several times. An out-of-breath man picked up.

"Pink Flamingo."

"With whom am I speaking?" asked the Director.

"My name's Kyle, I'm the day manager, and what can I do for you?"

"This is Assistant Director White of the FBI. Did you rent a room yesterday to two Middle Eastern men?"

"FBI! Wow! Uhh... yeah, I did," answered Kyle.

"What room are they in?" asked White.

"Uhh..Lem'me see... room 16 bottom floor," answered Kyle.

"How many rooms are rented in the motel?"

"Looks like six, but most are gone during the day. Why, what's up?"

"Kyle, I want you to leave the manager's office, get into your car and drive west. You'll see us about a block away, and Kyle, do it now."

Kyle hung up the phone, and walked out of the manager's office toward his car in the parking lot. He kept looking over his shoulder at room 16. He got into his pickup truck and drove west. Kyle saw the agents and was told to stay out of the way, behind the police officers.

Meanwhile LVPD's SWAT team arrived. They determined that the best way to approach the motel was from the desert on the east side. Room 16 had no windows on that side. The SWAT van drove a few blocks up, then turned left into the desert.

Six SWAT team members approached with guns raised. One carried a battering ram to knock open the door. They quietly made their way to room 16. They took positions with M-16s raised and ready.

The lieutenant in charge gave the signal, and they broke the door open and threw in a flash grenade. They poured into the room, ready for action. They were in the room for maybe 20 seconds when the lieutenant walked out and spoke into his radio. "All clear, rooms empty!"

A half hour later, the parking lot filled with police cars and FBI agents. One of them walked up to Graves and White. "We found this under the bed." He held up a bag with a long machine gun clip. "That's an Uzi clip," Graves said.

"He could still be here in another room. I want every room of this place searched. The manager's got a master key," said White.

They started at Room 1. When they got to Room 15, they discovered the dead bodies of the man and woman that Imaad had murdered the night before.

"Everyone out until Forensics gets here," ordered White. Graves entered the room. "I don't want anything disturbed, Director Graves, I'm sure you know the routine," White said. Jill smiled to herself thinking, *Actually he's only been on the job less than three days.*

John walked very carefully to avoid stepping on any potential evidence. He pulled a small flashlight from his jacket pocket.

"Seems he left us a message," said John.

"What kind?" asked Agent White from the doorway.

"Our friend is a real sicko. He cut off the woman's breast and wrote 'Allahu Akbar!' on the wall with her blood. He must have used her breast as a pen."

A half hour later, two of the agents came into the manager's office where John, Jill and Charles were sitting. "Their names were Peter Donohue and Lori Stevens. They checked in yesterday. Both married but not to each other. They were from Thousand Oaks, California."

John asked, "Do we know what they were driving?"

"The manager remembers some sort of Jeep. We checked the California DMV, and Peter Donohue owned a 2009 Jeep Cherokee."

Jill said, "Let's get an APB out ASAP on that vehicle! Alert the California Highway Patrol!"

John took a heavy sigh. "Okay, Isam said he sneaked out of the room around midnight. We're assuming Imaad found him missing soon after that and panicked. He needed a car. Somehow he got Donohue to open the door, and then killed them both with one shot each that nobody heard. I saw two blown-out water bottles on the floor."

Jill interrupted, "What's up with the bottles?"

"It's kinda like a silencer. You stick the barrel in the bottle and it kills the sound of the blast."

"And how do you know this?" asked Tova, who was now standing at the door listening.

"Sixteen years as a Navy SEAL, you learn a lot about how to kill people," replied John.

"My guess is he was on the road by 2:00 a.m. How long does it take to drive from Las Vegas to Los Angeles?" John inquired.

"I would assume he stuck to the speed limits, as he wouldn't want to attract attention. Say six, maybe seven hours," answered Jill.

"If we go with seven hours, that puts him in Los Angeles three hours ago," John said. "We need to get back to Los Angeles right away! Agent White?"

White was quick to answer. "We have a Sikorsky 333 at the airport. It'll get you to Los Angeles in a little over an hour. That's if you don't mind flying in a helicopter?"

"Hell, I was born in one."

"Let's go, then," said Jill.

White said, "By the way, the medical examiner just told me he estimates the time of death for Donohue and his, umm, friend to have been between 4:00-5:00 a.m."

John stopped. "That means Imaad isn't as far ahead as we thought! Let's move!"

One-and-a-half hours later, they were back at the Federal Building, landing on its roof. Ten minutes after that, they were sitting in Jules' office.

"Okay. We've got two dead Iranians. But the top guy, some sick piece of crap named Imaad, is running around the city with a couple of devices that could take out a couple of city blocks. Is that right?" asked Jules.

"That's pretty much it, sir," answered Jill.

"Do we even know that he has the bombs, or are we just speculating?" asked Jules.

"I tested parts of the motel room, and my test came up positive from carpet fibers under the bed. He has the devices, or at least they were under the bed," Tova said.

"We need to figure out his target. Any ideas?" asked Jules.

"My guess would be the 32nd Street Naval Station in San Diego," John said.

"Why not this Federal building?" asked Jules.

"The Naval Station would make the biggest headlines."

Jill couldn't help but think that Jules was planning a vacation for the next few days.

"Right now, all we've got is his first name and the make of the vehicle he's driving," John said. "How far away is Thousand Oaks from here?"

"This time of day, with traffic, I'd guess one or two hours," said Jill.

"Do we have a phone number for Donohue's wife?" asked John.

"Yes, but she's probably in shock from the news of her husband's murder, not to mention that he was with another woman," Jill said. "It's worth a try. I have a hunch. Can you get me the number?" asked John.

Jill got up to get it.

"Dr Mazel, would you excuse us, please?" asked Jules.

Assistant Director Jules leaned back in his chair looking at John for a long time.

"Is there something you want to say?" asked John.

"I've been with the Bureau for close to twenty years. I've busted my ass to get where I am. And here you show up like some cowboy who thinks he's in charge. Listen up, Mister. I'm in charge on this post! Understand?" John just looked at Jules for a few seconds and said, "Look, I'm not here to take over your duties. But as far as this case goes, you just keep your nose out of my way or I'll stick your dick so far up your ass you'll think you're bending over for a bar of soap in Folsom. Then I'll be sure to let the President and the Director know that you got in my way and then you'll be Assistant Director in Adak, Alaska. I've been there. It's a very cold and not a very pretty place. Don't make threats to me."

Jill came back with the number and sensed some discomfort in the room, but decided to say nothing.

John then got up, took the phone number and left the office.

"Is everything all right, sir?"

He looked up at Jill and said, "You're dismissed, Mayfield."

Chapter 30

Zarar Raskin sat in his office going over invoices when his receptionist buzzed him on the intercom. "Mr. Raskin, I have a caller who says it's urgent."

"Does this caller have a name?" asked Zarar.

"He said his name is Mr. Zaighum." Zarar froze. "Tell him to please hold for a minute."

"Sir, he did say it was urgent."

"Fine. Put him through in a minute."

Zarar walked around his desk, and sat in the chair in front of his desk. He stared at the phone. In a few seconds, it rang. It rang three times. Each ring seemed like hours. As he

watched the phone, he took a heavy sigh before answering, hoping that the caller would hang up.

"This is Zarar."

"Well, well, Zarar. How have you been? You haven't contacted any authorities since we last talked, did you?"

"No, of course not," said Zarar.

"Good."

"What do you want from me? Money?"

"Zarar, a long time ago you took an oath. Do you not remember? What about your family? You do love your children, don't you, Zarar?"

"Leave my family alone!"

"We have no intention of harming your family as long as you do as you are told."

"What do you want from me?" asked Zarar.

"I want you to go to Chankille Grill. It's a Persian restaurant on Westwood Blvd. Do you know the place?"

"Yes, I know the owner. He's a customer of mine."

"Good. Be in the alley behind the restaurant in two hours." Then the line went dead.

Zarar sat staring at the phone in his hand for a couple of minutes before hanging up.

He was deep in thought, *What could these people want from me? Can I trust them to leave my family alone?*

He dialed his home number.

"Hello," Zawiya answered.

"Hi, it's me," said Zarar.

"Is everything okay? You sound strange."

"I need you to do exactly as I say. Please don't ask any questions."

"What's wrong, Zarar? You're scaring me."

"Just listen and do exactly as I say. Pack a bag of clothes for you and the boys, pick them up from school as usual. Go to the bank and take out all the money from our savings account. Then go to Burbank Airport and get any flight you can to Chicago. Go to your sister's house and stay there until you hear from me. Do you understand?"

"What's wrong? Zarar, are you in some kind of trouble?"

"I can't tell you anything yet. I'll call you tonight at your sister's house. Also, be sure you're not followed."

"Followed? Who would follow me? What's going on? What have you done?"

"I will try and explain tonight. Just do as I say. Promise me."

Zawiya took a heavy sigh. "Okay, I'll do what you ask, but promise me that you will be safe. Are we in danger?"

"I don't know. That's why you must leave. I can't tell you anything yet. I really don't know myself. You just need to leave as quickly as possible. I haven't been completely honest about my past, and it seems to be catching up to me."

They were quiet for a moment, and Zarar added, "Tell the boys that Daddy loves them, and I will join all of you in Chicago in a day or so."

"Okay," said Zawiya.

"Good. I love you, honey," said Zarar.

"I love you too, Zarar, and please be careful."

They hung up. Zawiya started to cry. She had a horrible feeling that she would never see Zarar again.

Two hours later, Zarar sat in his Mercedes in the alley behind Chankille Grill on Westwood Blvd. It smelled of urine and stale alcohol. There were several filled trash Dumpsters lining one wall.

As Zarar sat waiting, he saw a rat jump from one of the Dumpsters and watched it run to an open vent leading into the restaurant. He thought to himself that he would never eat here again.

His mind kept running over the conversation he had with the mystery man. He wondered what they wanted from him after so many long years.

He wished he had never attended the Al Qaeda training camp where he was taught to make bombs from household items and had learned how to use several types of guns. But most of all, he was taught that to die for his faith was the highest honor any man could achieve. He would be sent to paradise and get 72 virgins and a palace of pearls. He was young then and he had wanted to die for Islam.

But that was a long time ago. Now he had a family. He had become an American citizen.

There was suddenly a knock on the driver's window which startled him. He rolled it down to see a pretty, young woman.

In Farsi, she said, "I am Ubah. I will take you to the next destination."

Zarar unlocked the doors and she got in. Zarar noticed how attractive she was. She had olive skin and jet black hair. She was about 5'6" tall with a slender body and a sculpted face. Zarar guessed that she was probably around 29. He could read a seriousness in her expression. She wore blue jeans with white tennis shoes, and a white button-up blouse, buttoned all the way up to her neck.

"Where are we going?" asked Zarar.

"Go down Westwood and turn right on Santa Monica."

They drove up and down the streets for half an hour. Occasionally, Ubah would look behind them and observe the cars. She then told Zarar to get on the 405 Freeway headed north, and get off at Ventura Blvd in the San Fernando Valley. She watched behind them, but no other cars got off the freeway.

She led him into the Galleria parking lot and told him where to park.

She got out of the car, and said, "We're leaving your car here, come with me." They walked toward Ventura Blvd. Suddenly, a white van pulled up beside them and the side door opened.

"Get in the van, now!" commanded Ubah.

They got back on the 405 this time headed south. The driver was a large Middle Eastern man of around 26 years old, with a beard. Zarar noticed the man looking back at him through the rearview mirror. His eyes had a cold malice in them. Not a word was said. The man then reached into the glove compartment and took out a ski mask and handed it to Ubah.

"Put this on backwards."

Ubah handed Zarar the mask and said, "You heard him."

"Why? I mean..." The driver looked into the mirror in such a menacing way it actually took Zarar's breath away. He suddenly became very scared, and put on the mask.

They drove for about 20 minutes. Zarar could feel the van stopping several times. Then the van came to a halt and the engine turned off. Zarar heard the side door open and he was pulled out of the van and led about 30 steps.

He heard a knock on a door and heard, in Farsi, "It's me, no one followed us." Someone grabbed him and led him through the door. Once inside, he heard a voice tell Ubah to make him sit down on the couch. She led him to what felt like an overstuffed, comfortable couch. He then felt hands going through his pockets, removing everything. Zarar heard his keys land on a table, and felt his cell phone being taken away. He then felt someone patting him down. He assumed they were looking for a wire.

A male voice said, "You may take off the hood." Zarar pulled the hood off. There were four men standing in front of him, along with Ubah. Another he recognized as the van's driver.

He looked around and instantly realized he was in the living room of his own home in Laurel Canyon. He half-expected to see his wife and children.

The older man with the beard who approached him a week ago in the parking lot entered the room from the kitchen. Zarar saw that two more men were holding Uzi's at the game table ten feet away.

"Where's my family?" asked Zarar.

The older man sat down across from him and looked into his eyes.

"Zarar, don't underestimate us. You sent your family to Chicago this afternoon. Do you know that Burbank Airport charges a small fortune for covered parking? Your wife left your Lexus there. If it were me, I would have had her park somewhere cheaper. Your wife is extravagant. She left on flight 2002 at 4:15. I considered stopping them. But... they did nothing to violate Islam. I have her sister's address and our people there can take care of them

if necessary. We assumed you would send them away. And you did. Now, we can deal with the business at hand in your nice home which you have kindly volunteered for our cause.”

Zarar took a deep breath. “What do you want from me?”

The older man looked at the game table. Zarar followed his gaze and noticed that on the table were two boxes with Hebrew writing on the sides. The men with the Uzi’s stared back with murderous looks.

“Zarar, it’s now your turn to honor the vows you took years ago. Paradise is waiting for you.”

Chapter 31

Jill found John in the coffee room pouring a cup of coffee. “I’ve never seen Jules that pissed. What did you say to him?”

“Just advised him to stay out of the way. Guess he didn’t take it very well.”

Jill studied John's face for a moment and said, “John, it’s been a long day from Los Angeles to Vegas and back. There’s really not much we can do here tonight. Why don’t I take you back to your hotel? We’ll start fresh in the morning. We have an APB out in Nevada and California for the Jeep. Let’s hope he makes a mistake and gets pulled over.”

“Ooh, I’d hate to be the cop who pulls over this guy Imaad. He’s packing some serious firepower,” John answered.

“The APB says armed and dangerous,” replied Jill.

John said, “Y’know, I’m actually hungry. Let’s stop somewhere for dinner. My treat.”

Jill looked at John and studied his face. She thought his suggestion sounded innocent enough.

“There’s a deli down the street. Really good, actually.”

“Sounds good, let’s go.”

As Jill walked out of the coffee room, John watched her and paid particular attention to her perfectly shaped body. He then followed her to the elevators and to the garage level.

“Is this job always so mundane? Just a constant search for clues? Do you guys ever see any real action?”

“Define action,” answered Jill as they got into the car.

“You know, like in the movies where we get to kick some ass? Maybe an occasional water boarding?”

“Director Graves, this is the FBI, not some undercover SEAL team on a secret mission.”

“Yeah, but we get results, and my way is much more fun.”

“Okay, John Wayne, I guess saving thousands of lives is boring to you! Let’s go eat.”

They drove up Wilshire and parked behind Reuben's Deli. Once inside, they were seated and given menus.

The waitress approached them. "Are you folks ready to order, or do you need a few more minutes?"

"I'm ready," John said.

He then politely waited for Jill to order first.

"Go ahead, I'm going to need another minute," Jill said.

"Okay, I'll have the pastrami-on-rye with Swiss, and a beer. Do you have Coors?" said John to the waitress.

"No problem, Coors it is."

Jill looked up from her menu and said, "I'll have the soup and salad. Make it a Chinese chicken salad and the onion soup. Can you maybe cut down on some of the onions in the soup?"

"Sure thing, honey. Drink?"

"Just water, please."

After the waitress left, John looked at Jill. He smiled. "Onion soup, without the onions. That's an oxymoron."

Jill smiled back and said, "I really just like the broth."

They sat for a minute, fiddling with the silverware, saying nothing.

"Married?"

Jill looked up at John. "No, and you, Director Graves?" Suddenly, John's personal cell phone rang. It was a 305 area code. He knew the call came from Florida.

John listened for a minute and said, "I'll be back at my hotel soon. I'll call you back from there." He hung up.

Jill thought, *He probably has a girl in every port, probably one in LA, or more likely, San Diego.* She felt a twinge of jealousy.

John saw the look on her face and said, "That was my Senior Chief. I guess they're planning to break up my team. He just wants to know what's up. He's a good man. We've been through a lot together. And to answer your question, no."

"Your Senior Chief?"

"Well, I guess I should say he was my Senior Chief until a few days ago."

"Do you miss the service? How much notice did you get that you were going to become an Assistant Director in the Bureau?"

"Honestly, no notice. The President himself relieved me of my command. He said it was in the best interest of the country."

"Wow, you really met the President? What's he like?"

"Nice guy. I even have his direct number for any special requests to accomplish our mission. Or maybe he just wanted to meet for a beer." Jill thought about this, then said, "John

Graves, who are you? You have the President of the United States' private phone number! No wonder Jules is so freaked out when you're around."

"I'm just a SEAL Team Commander who happened to get a mission that changed my entire life. It wasn't my choice."

The food arrived. John's sandwich was about three inches tall stuffed with pastrami. He took off the upper bread slice and spread a generous portion of deli mustard on top of the meat. He put it back together and took a large bite.

"Hey, this is good stuff."

"Yeah, Reuben's is known for their pastrami. This French onion is great. She got it right, mostly broth and hardly any onions." They ate in silence.

"The part I don't like is the waiting. Isn't there something we could be doing to find this guy?"

"What would you suggest?" asked Jill

"Iranian hangouts. Like mosques. Go in and beat some heads together and get information!" Jill was about to explain that his suggestion was a complete violation of civil rights when she looked up at the restaurant entrance and froze. Seeing the look on her face, John turned and saw two men walk in the restaurant. One was a large man as wide as the doorway. The other just looked mean, like some biker with a grudge.

The wide guy was dressed in a suit and sunglasses. The mean one was wearing Levi's with a black t-shirt and a leather jacket.

"Friends of yours?" asked John.

"Not a chance in hell. That's Tony Santini, aka "Tony the Tank" Santini. He's the one in the suit. I don't recognize the other guy."

John watched the waitress seating both men about twenty feet from them in a booth.

"Let me guess, Mob?"

"Yeah, Mob. I had him cold a few days ago and he slipped through our fingers."

Tony Santini noticed Jill in her booth. He smiled at her and toasted her with his water glass. He then rubbed his cut lip from when Jill kicked him to the deck a few days before.

He got up and walked over to John and Jill's table. "Well, well, Special Agent Mayfield, how are you this fine evening?"

"Beat it, Santini, you're ruining our dinner."

"I was just going to offer to buy you drinks. You know, forgive and forget."

John turned in his seat and said, "I believe the lady doesn't want you around our table."

"Hey, it's a free country. And who are you? If you don't mind my asking?"

"Name's Graves."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Graves."

Tony put out his hand. John got up and took his hand and squeezed it hard. He then bent over close enough so that no one but Tony could hear him. "If you don't walk away right now, I'm going to stick this fork up your ass so far you won't take a dump for a week, and that will

be before they take the stitches out." Tony looked down at John's left hand and saw that he indeed was holding a folk.

"That's a hell of a grip you have, Mr. Graves. I believe I'll just excuse myself back to my own table."

He then looked at John and said, "You got a good grip. Maybe someday we could take it a step further. Let's say winner takes all." He looked at Jill with a look that made his comment obvious. John tightened his grip and Tony's face cringed, not expecting such strength.

John said very quietly, "You can leave walking or crawling, your choice, asshole!"

Tony's face turned bright red. He just nodded.

John let go. Santini just stood there looking at John with murderous eyes. He turned and went back to his booth.

"I believe you've just made your first enemy. You don't mess around, do you? Nothing like starting at the top."

"He's all bullshit, just another tough guy who tries to scare people with that macho crap. I've seen hundreds just like him trying to make it through SEAL training. Most don't last a week when the going gets tough."

"Well, let me fill you in on whose balls you just busted. He's the head enforcer for the Gambini crime family. We've been after him for about four years now. He's a smart cookie."

John turned in his seat and looked back at Toni Santini. Tony's eyes were on John, as the waitress arrived at their table. She served Santini a glass of wine and his partner a draft beer. He raised his glass to John and took a sip, as if to say, "We'll meet again."

John called the waitress over and told her he was buying the drinks for Tony and his friend. The waitress went to Tony's table and pointed at John. Tony then poured his wine on the floor and the biker guy dumped his beer on the floor as well. The waitress just stood there in shock. "I hope you're planning to clean up that mess you just made!"

"We're out of here. This place is starting to reek of shit!" Tony reached into his wallet, and put a twenty-dollar bill on the table, and left without looking back. Jill smiled and looked at John in a new light, *This guy isn't afraid of anything!*

After their meal, John felt good paying with his new Amex card. Once back in the car, Jill said, "Santini is a real badass. You ought to watch your back."

"Like I said, he's nothing more than a punk in a suit and tie. Unless he's got an army behind him, I think I can handle this kind of wiseass."

"When this terrorist thing is over, he's my next target. I want him off the streets. He's total scum," Jill said while looking into John's deep blue eyes.

Jill drove since she was just dropping John off. "You know you qualify for a Bureau car of your own?"

"Well I figured that. I just don't know my way around, so what's the sense? Besides, I have the prettiest FBI driver in town!"

Jill looked over at John and didn't say anything. She was thinking *,Well, I guess I don't come off as a total dyke. I'm pretty sure he's hitting on me. How do I handle this? Do I secretly want him to hit on me? God! This man is going to drive me insane!* They drove in silence for twenty minutes. Jill asked what he was thinking, hoping possibly it could be her.

"Just the whole chain of events. First they're smart enough not to drive through the Canadian border with the devices, so they backpack them into the States.

They reunite with Mohammad at the motel and kill the motel manager. Why? Next they get a shitload of food.

Then they kill their driver Mohammad. Again, why?

They drive over a thousand miles, then kill one of their own. That one I think I understand. He would have only slowed them down. Then there's the Vegas murders. Imaad probably freaked when he found Isam gone, so he kills the couple in the next room to get their car. Imaad is not working alone. I can feel it!"

"Isam did say that Imaad enjoys murder. Maybe he's just another sociopath who just happens to have two dirty bombs," responded Jill.

Ten minutes later, Jill dropped off John at his hotel. "I'll be back at seven to pick you up, okay?" "Seven it is. I'm usually up at five. If I'm not in my room, I'll be at the gym or the pool." John then reached over and squeezed Jill's hand and said, "You are a very interesting woman."

As Jill drove home, she thought about how John affected her. *He's a man, just another macho asshole man. I can't let myself fall for this guy. I'll only get hurt again.*

At home, she fed her cats, poured herself a glass of red wine and sat on the couch trying to think about work, but ended up thinking more about John Graves.

Chapter 32

At 4:00 a.m., Jill woke up and decided she couldn't sleep any longer, and watched some silly movie about sisters who couldn't get along.

At 5:00 a.m., she showered and dressed, and got into her federally-issued car and drove to El Segundo. She arrived at the Doubletree Hotel at 6:05 and took the elevator to the fourth floor. She knocked on the door to Room 442. There was no answer.

Then she remembered that John said he worked out early. Jill went to the elevator and pressed the second floor gym-pool level.

Sure enough, there was John on a treadmill, running at a full sprint. It was early, so John was the only one there.

Jill watched him for about five minutes when he finally stopped. His body was covered in sweat and his white tank top was soaked.

He went over to the weights and selected some barbells. Jill guessed each one at about a hundred pounds. He sat on a bench in front of the mirror, and started doing curls. His sweaty muscles flexed with each lift of the weights. Jill watched him for a few more minutes before she announced her presence. She felt hot and flushed.

“Well, Mr. Universe, ready to get to work?”

John turned around and saw Jill standing in the doorway. He was about to ask her how long she’d been standing there, then thought better of it.

“What ever happened to 7:00?” His heart started beating a little faster.

“Couldn’t sleep, thought we could get an early start.”

John picked up his towel and started walking toward the elevator. As he walked he thought, *How long was she watching me? Mmm. Interesting.*

“Meet you in the restaurant in an hour?” Jill said.

“It doesn’t open until 7:00. You can come up to my room. I’ll shower and change and we’ll be in the restaurant in thirty minutes.”

“Fair enough,” said Jill, although she was feeling a bit nervous about going to John’s room.

In the elevator, Jill smelled the male sweat hormones. They had an effect on her.

“What’s the plan?” asked John.

Jill was quiet, wondering what he really meant.

“Not sure, but we have to assume that this bastard has connections here. I think that’s our best shot at finding him and the devices.”

John looked at Jill, and knew that she was having a strong effect on him.

Once in the room, John turned on the morning newscast. He then went into the bathroom, shut the door and turned on the shower.

Jill sat at the writing desk and found a pen and paper. She called her voice mail at the Wilshire Federal building. There were two calls. The first one was Claudia just checking in, saying she hoped Jill was feeling better. She started to feel a little guilty about Claudia. She never dreamed that any man could ever affect her like John.

The second call was from some guy with a New York accent. All he said was, “Hey bitch, better watch your ass. You got two strikes now. After the third, your ass is mine, literally.”

Jill sat there a few minutes when John came out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist. He went to the closet and got out one of his new suits and a white shirt. He looked at Jill. “Something wrong?”

“I had a call on my voice mail from someone with a super-strong New York accent, saying I have two strikes, and after the third my ass is his, literally.”

"Call back. I want to hear it." Jill dialed the number, entering her pin number, handing the phone to John. She forgot about Claudia's message and felt a little embarrassed, although the message implied nothing other than a friend's concern.

John listened to the second call, and replayed it a few times. "One of Santini's goons?"

"Probably, but John, this is a secure interoffice voice mail. Whoever made that call would have to have pin numbers to leave a message. It's not a public voice mail."

"Then how did that woman who called get through?"

"Oh, Claudia? She's with the Bureau."

"Maybe I should pay a little social visit to Mr. Santini to discuss sports, mostly boxing."

"This case with the devices is much more important than some pissant like Santini. Besides, I told you he's number one on my list after this case is over."

"After this case is over, I might stick around long enough to help. That guy really rubbed me the wrong way."

John went back into the bathroom and changed into his suit. Jill sat at the desk not thinking about the threatening phone call, but about John in that towel.

She had a hard time not staring at the obvious bulge in the front of his towel.

Jill suddenly felt both warm and embarrassed for having these thoughts. *I can't believe how this man affects me. I've got to keep this on a professional level. When the case is over, he'll go back to the SEALs and I'll be here in LA. But he really is a different kind of*

guy. John walked out of the bathroom, went to the bed, slipped on his shoulder holster and strapped the .38 to his ankle.

Jill watched him get ready. She could smell his fresh cologne.

"You seem to like your weapons."

"You can never have too much artillery. Ask General Custer."

"Custer?"

"Yeah, the one from Little Big Horn."

"I know that, but I don't follow you."

"Most historians believe that if Custer had waited for the cannons to arrive, the 7th Cavalry would have won the battle. Hey it's 7:00. Let's get a bite on our way out."

They both headed for the door. John opened it for Jill. As she passed, he put his hand on her waist. "Ladies first."

Jill stopped and looked at John with his hand still on her waist. "Watch where those hands go. You're not the only one who's armed around here."

"I'm counting on it." Jill smiled, looking at John's blue eyes for a moment and walked out of the room.

Chapter 33

When they arrived at the Wilshire Federal building, they went straight to Director Jules' office. They approached the director's secretary and Jill said, "We're here to see Assistant Director Jules."

"I believe he's on a call right now, but when he gets off, I'll let him know you're here."

John nodded as he walked around the secretary right into Jules' office! Jules looked up at John with the phone to his ear and said, "Something just came up. I'll call you later, honey."

Jules hung up the phone. "What's the meaning of this? You can't just walk into my office!"

"Looks like I just did. Now sit down and shut up! There's a job to do and time is not on our side. I'm not going to some waiting room while some freak out there has the ability to blow up thousands of people."

John continued. "I want a complete list of any suspected terrorist sleeper cells from the last 20 years within 500 miles. I need 20 agents to check out each one. I want all the mosques on 24/7 surveillance. Give every agent a photo of the devices. We need a break. Any word on the stolen car yet?"

Jules shook his head and took a deep breath. "Not yet, but we have an APB out in four states now. We just don't know for sure where he's going," Jules said.

"How long until I get that list?" asked John.

Jill stood at the door. She said, "Thirty minutes, tops." John turned and looked at Jill. He winked.

"Okay get me some good men. I'll leave that to you, Jill," said John.

Jill turned a little red when John had used her first name so casually.

"Go ahead, Mayfield, you pick the team," Jules agreed.

"Director Graves, I received an email from Washington. The Director was unable to get you the man you wanted."

John nodded and walked out of Jules office.

Forty minutes later, John and Jill were in a large conference room giving assignments to the selected agents. Each agent on the team took twenty names and addresses.

Jill and John took twenty as well. In ten minutes, they were in the car, headed for Glendale to interview the first person on the list.

"What was that about you requesting someone special?"

"I was hoping to get one of my men to help out."

"The FBI doesn't have good enough men?"

"It's not that. He's special, and he's from LA, knows the turf."

They rode in silence for ten minutes.

"So, why no husband? You're a very attractive woman," asked John.

"Isn't that a rather personal question, Director Graves?"

“Yeah. I guess it is. You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to. I’m just, you know, curious.”

Jill smiled and tried to think of the right answer. She definitely was attracted to this man. He had something about him she had never seen. She finally decided to be honest.

“Um, I kinda bat for the other team,” said Jill.

John looked at her for a long time. “Mm, I like that,” said John.

“Really?” said Jill, a little disappointed.

“I like the ‘kinda’ part. Maybe that means the right guy could bring you back to our team.”

“I guess anything is possible.” She looked over at John and he looked at her. They made eye contact and both felt a connection. “Let me know if you ever need a pinch-hitter.”

“I’ll do that, Assistant Director Graves.” Jill turned her head and looked out the window. She felt flustered. It had been years since she felt any emotion toward any man. She wondered if she could ever be with a man. Maybe a man like John could work.

It was getting to close to 1:00. They hadn’t eaten much breakfast at the hotel.

“I’m starved, any good restaurants around here?” asked John.

“Uhhh, it’s not really my part of town. We’re getting off at Brand Ave. That’s a main street, should be something there,” replied Jill.

They drove in silence, each deep in thought.

John exited Brand Ave and turned left according to the GPS in the car. A few blocks down Brand they saw an upscale cafe and John parked in front.

They sat at the counter. John ordered a Philly cheese-steak sandwich. Jill ordered a tuna salad.

John said, “So, is this a first date?”

“Not yet. I’ll let you know when I’m ready for a new base-runner.”

To spare her any embarrassment, he became very business-like. “You know, I’ve been thinking. Something just doesn’t feel right. They haven’t covered their tracks very well. You don’t enter the United States and start leaving dead bodies everywhere and expect no one to notice.”

“I thought about that, too,” said Jill. “My guess is that they don’t think we would be looking for them so soon. Remember, there were two bodies in Montana, and another three in Las Vegas. That’s a pretty good distance apart. Or maybe we’re just over-estimating them.”

“With my experience in Special Ops, I’ve learned that you never underestimate your enemies.”

“Agreed.”

John took a call. He listened for several seconds, then said to Jill,

“They found the Jeep. It’s in Encino. Is that far from here?”

“About a half-hour. Forty-five minutes with traffic.”

Speaking into the phone, he said, “Give me the address. We’ll be there in half-an-hour.”

John wrapped his sandwich in a bunch of napkins.

"This Encino, do a lot of Middle Eastern people live there?"

"Tons," replied Jill.

"Interesting. Any mosques?."

"Yes, as a matter of fact, there's a few in the area," Jill said.

"Maybe we want to get some surveillance on them. I don't think they would hide the devices in one, but you never know," John said, thinking out loud.

"You're starting to think like an agent, John."

When they got to the car, they both reached for the driver's door and their hands grazed one another's.

Jill tried to brush it off. "If you're going to finish that disgusting sandwich, let me drive. You'll probably get a coronary within the hour and I'd rather you weren't driving when that happens."

"Then maybe we should try something before my time's up."

John leaned over and kissed Jill softly. She didn't stop him nor did she encourage him. Jill's mind was racing a mile a minute.

"Was that okay with you, Agent Mayfield?"

"I don't know. I need to process everything. This is happening too fast. But what the hell? We could be fried eggs any minute if this guy Imaad decides to set off one of the things." John nodded, and sat in the passenger seat. He called FBI Wilshire, and got Agent Coleman on the phone.

"It's me, we're headed to Encino. Agent Mayfield and I think we should put some round-the-clock surveillance on all the mosques in the Encino area. How's Tova Mazel?"

"Already done, Jules thought the same thing," said Coleman. "But Tova Mazel is climbing the walls. She thinks we should be doing things Mossad would do, like bring in a hundred Iranians, and stick needles into their penises to get answers. I just sent her to the Encino location with two good agents. She should be there in about thirty minutes. Boy, that's one tough scientist."

John thought, *I'm not so sure she's just a scientist.*

"Sounds like my kind of girl."

"Yeah, but I wouldn't let her catch you cheating," said Coleman.

"No doubt," replied John. "I agree with Tova to some extent. I wish we could torture a few known radicals and get some answers. I hate this detective stuff. I wish we could play cowboys and Indians and just go ballistic on these guys. I'm also shocked to hear that Jules is still making decisions on this case. I didn't think he thought about anything but his own career."

"No comment," replied Coleman.

"Good. Mayfield said we should be there pretty quick."

They arrived at the intersection of Ventura Blvd and Balboa. Part of the intersection had been taped off by the police. There were a dozen LAPD squad cars and a black SUV.

They got out of the car, showed their badges and were let through. The Jeep was parked behind a bank. They walked around it, looking in the windows. The vehicle appeared to be empty, except for a lone backpack in the back seat. "Has anyone opened any doors?" asked Jill.

Two agents walked over to Jill and John.

"We got here a half-hour ago. We happened to be in the area checking on some of the names you gave us when the call came in so we ordered the area secured. No one has touched the vehicle."

"Good. By the way, this is Assistant Director John Graves. He is in charge of this investigation. John, this is Agent Ross and Agent Kimber." Everyone shook hands.

"Let's wait for Dr Mazel before we do anything," John said.

Then John asked, "Agent Kimber, will you go into the bank, and check their surveillance cameras? Maybe we'll get lucky." He spotted a trash-filled area behind some trees not too far away. It appeared to be a homeless campsite. There were food wrappers, empty water bottles, and rolled-up filthy blankets. He walked over to the blankets, and looked back at the Jeep. From this spot, someone might have got a good look at the suspect and might have seen who he met up with.

He saw Tova Mazel arrive with the FBI escort, he walked back to the Jeep.

"Jill, there's a homeless campsite over by those trees. Why don't you talk to these cops, and see if they know who sleeps there? Maybe someone saw something. This way, Dr Mazel." John led her to the Jeep.

Tova looked in the windows and at the pack. John looked at the lock on the door. It was unlocked. He looked in all the windows to see if he could see any sign of a trap. Jill walked back to him and said, "Two of the police officers said there's an old crippled guy who sleeps there. He doesn't bother anybody so they let him

stay. They're going to drive around a few blocks to try and find him. He's probably pretty close by. Forensics are also on the way along with a bomb squad, in case the car doors are rigged."

"We don't have time to waste. Stand back. I'm going to open it."

"What if it's rigged?"

"Jill, I've been a demolition expert for over sixteen years. I don't see any signs of tampering."

With that, John opened the door of the Jeep with a tissue. Nothing happened.

He got in the car and looked over the seats. He then unlocked all the doors. He got out and opened the back door, using a pencil to open the top of the backpack, and peered inside. Empty. He looked all around the pack, and didn't see any wires.

"We need to get the pack out for Dr Mazel to run her tests."

“John, use these,” said Jill as she handed him latex gloves.

Tova Mazel looked at Jill and John and said, “First names, huh?” She felt a little jealous.

“The forensics guys are going to be really pissed off that you opened the doors and entered the car,” said Jill. She then looked at Tova, and shrugged her shoulders as if to answer her question.

John put on the gloves and carefully lifted up the pack and set it on the ground outside of the door. Tova opened her bag, dipped a Q-Tip in some fluid and rubbed it on the inside of the bag. She then put it in a second vial of fluid, watching it for several seconds. She repeated the process with a different part of the pack.

“Negative. They didn’t use this pack to carry the devices.” John then looked into the pack.

“Maybe not, but I have a pretty good guess what was in it.” Still wearing the gloves, he reached in and took out a bullet. “This came from an Uzi, just like the clip we found in Vegas. We need to put all agents involved on high alert. These people are very dangerous, and will probably not hesitate to kill who ever tries to stop them.”

Jill pulled out her cell and called Coleman at headquarters. Meanwhile, Kimber came out of the bank. “We may have had some luck. There’s a camera on the roof, and the branch manager thinks it covers this area.”

“Does it have a monitor we can watch it on?” asked John.

“I believe so,” replied Agent Kimber.

“Well, let’s get some popcorn and watch the movie,” John said.

“Shouldn’t we take the video back to Wilshire? We have better equipment there,” said Kimber.

“No, not enough time. After we see it, then we’ll take it in. Besides, the guy we’re looking for could be at a market up the street. Or whoever picked him up could be just around the corner watching us right now.”

All three agents went into the bank. They asked the manager to rewind the video back every hour until the Jeep appeared in the picture.

“I left work at 6:00 last night, and the parking lot was empty,” said the manager.

“Okay. Start at 9:00 and then stop it every hour.”

They watched the screen stop every hour. By 2:00 a.m., the Jeep had finally appeared in the picture.

“Go back to 1:00, and play it back at a fast pace,” said John.

The manager did so. At 1:20, the Jeep pulled into the parking lot and parked. The driver just sat in the car. It looked like he was on the phone. At 1:40, a white van pulled into the lot and parked beside the Jeep. Both drivers got out and shook hands. They talked for a few minutes. Then the driver of the van opened the side door. They reached into the Jeep, pulled out two backpacks and put them in the back of the van.

The driver of the Jeep reached in and took out what looked like two Uzi machine guns and several extra clips. He shut the door and looked up and down the alley. As he did so, the camera got a good shot of his face.

They got into the van and drove off.

"Okay, now we know his name and what he looks like. Get this tape back to Wilshire and get photos out to every agent and police department in the state," said Jill.

A police officer came into the bank and said, "We found your homeless guy. He was down the street digging through some trash in a Dumpster behind a restaurant."

They went back to the parking lot, where they saw an old guy in his sixties sitting in the back of a police car. He looked scared. He also looked like he hadn't showered in about three months. His gray hair was long and matted in every direction. He could have been any child's nightmare.

John opened the door and let the old man out. He immediately knew he was wrong. The guy probably hadn't showered in six months.

"Can we have a word with you?"

"Am I under arrest?"

"No, nothing like that. Did you sleep over by those trees last night?" asked John. The old man looked suspiciously at John.

"Yeah, I do every night but I clean up my mess. At least I usually do. I don't bother anybody. I just mind my own business."

"What's your name?" asked Jill as she took a step farther back to avoid the stench.

"People call me Moe."

"Did you see who was in that Jeep last night, Moe?" Jill asked. He looked her over for a minute.

"In case you're wondering, we're with the FBI," said Jill.

"Tell us about the Jeep, Moe," ordered John.

"Yeah, it was pretty late and things are usually real quiet at night. That's why I like it here. I get a good night's sleep. I don't know what time it was. Some punk stole my watch right off my wrist about a year ago. Hey! You fellas might be able to find the guy. He was a big Mexican kid...."

"The Jeep, Moe," said John a little more forcefully.

"Oh yeah, like I said, I don't know what time it was, but I heard car doors opening and closing. At first I thought they were going to rob the bank, so I stayed real still."

"Why'd you think that?" asked Jill.

"Because they had guns, little ones. But then they got into the van and left."

"Did you hear anything they said, like where they were going?" asked John.

"Yeah, I could hear them pretty good, it being so quiet at night. Did I say that's why I stay here?"

"Yeah, you did... the Jeep!"

"Like I said, it being so quiet at night, I could hear them, but it was some sort of code talk."

"Code talk?" asked John

"Yeah, but it wasn't Spanish. Never heard it before."

John said in Farsi, "Ahtaaju an atadarraba 'ala al Arabia." Did it sound like that?"

"Yeah, yeah it did. Is that Indian or something?" asked Moe.

"Something like that," responded John.

Kimber came out of the bank with the DVD in a bag.

"Agents Kimber and Ross, why don't you take Tova Mazel back to Wilshire, and get that DVD into the techs? Maybe we can get the license plate number of the van with some better resolution. Director Graves and I will meet you there," Jill said.

"Yes, ma'am, Agent Mayfield," said Ross, as he opened the rear door to the sedan they were driving for Tova.

Jill got onto the 101 Freeway going east toward the 405 Freeway. They didn't say a word for a long time. Then John said, "Sorry about that kiss. It was wrong of me. I seem to be attracted to you. I'll behave better from now on."

Jill didn't say anything for a few minutes. Then she said, "You're forgiven. It just threw me off a bit. I haven't been kissed by a man for a long time."

"That goes for both of us," said John.

Jill smiled at his joke. "That's good to know, John Graves, that's good to know." She then reached over and squeezed his hand for a second or two.

They arrived at the Wilshire Federal building at 2:30.

"What now?" John asked.

"Now we wait and see what the techs can do with the bank's DVD."

They went up the elevator to Jill's office and were met there by Agent Coleman.

"I hear we finally got a break. We might have got a quality pic of the guy's face," said Coleman.

"We got the guy from the Jeep, but didn't get much of a shot of the guy who picked him up. We're hoping for a shot of the license plate from the van they left in. How long does it take your techs to do their magic?"

"They're pretty quick. They have top-notch equipment and this is top priority. Maybe another half hour."

Jill got up. "It's already been a long day, and I need a cup of coffee, anyone else?"

"Sure," said John.

"Me, too," said Agent Coleman.

When Jill left the office, John turned to Coleman and asked, "How long have you worked with Agent Mayfield?"

"Oh, about two years now."

"Is she as tough as she acts, or is she just a great actress?"

“Oh, she’s tough, all right. I’ve seen her take down guys twice her size. Her father was a Bureau man, one of the best. He was killed in El Salvador a long time ago. I think Agent Mayfield is trying to fill his shoes.”

“All I can tell you, Director Graves, is that Mayfield lives for the FBI. It’s her entire life. I’ve never met a more dedicated and devoted agent.”

Just then, Jill came back into the office and handed each man a cup of coffee with cream and sugar on a cardboard tray.

She sat down at her desk and took a sip. A few minutes later, a tech knocked on her door.

“Come in, it’s open.” A small woman in a lab coat came into Jill’s office, walked up to her desk, and laid out two photos. “I was able to get these two shots of the guy you’re looking for. This one has better resolution and is a perfect frontal view. This one is a different angle, more of a side profile. I thought it might help. We were lucky that the parking lot was so well lit. We’re still working on the other guy. He didn’t actually turn completely toward the camera.”

“Thank you, Mindy. These are great. How about the van’s license plate, any luck?”

“Roger Cohen is working on that. If anyone can pull out the plate, it’s Roger.”

“Make fifty copies of these pictures, and get them to our field agents. Be sure to email them to the LAPD, and the sheriffs. Let’s also get them to the Highway Patrol and the TSA as well.”

“Got it,” Mindy said. When Jill looked up, she saw that the tech was staring at John with lust in her eyes.

“Thank you, Mindy. We’ll take it from here,” Jill said, feeling a bit competitive.

With that, the tech left the room.

“Well, we now have a name and a photo. We just need this guy to make another mistake. I just wish we could anticipate where their target is going to be,” Coleman said.

A few minutes later, Jill’s phone rang and she picked up before the first ring even finished. She listened for a few seconds, then said, “No need, we’ll be right there.” She hung up the phone. “That was the tech department. They’re done with the license plate imaging.”

When they arrived at the tech department, they were greeted by a geeky-looking guy with super-thick glasses.

“Agents Mayfield and Coleman, great to see you!”

“This is Assistant Director Graves. He’s here from D.C. for this case.”

“Director Graves, I’m Paul Lansing. I’m head of the Imaging Department, nice to meet you.”

“What did you come up with?”

“Well, good and bad. Come over here. I’ll show you.” He sat at his desk and pressed a few keys and the face of the guy from the Jeep appeared on the screen. It was perfect. He pushed another key and a profile of a face came on. “This was the best we could do with the driver of the van.” They all stared at the screen.

“It’s going to have to do,” John said.

"I was hoping for better. What about the van's plates?" asked Jill.

"That's a yes and a no." He hit several keys and a license plate appeared, but they could only make out five of the numbers.

"It's my opinion that whoever was driving the van put mud on the plates. We ran the five digits through the DMV database and got fourteen hundred hits of possibilities. But we only came up with seven white vans from San Diego to Humboldt County."

"How many within, let's say, 25 miles of LA?" asked John.

Paul Lansing turned his chair back to the keyboard and typed for about ten seconds.

"Two. One in South Central and the other in East LA."

Chapter 34

"Well, let's check out these leads, Jill," John said.

Jill looked at the addresses, and said, "We can take the one in East LA but we'll need another team for South Central."

"Why's that?"

"You have a lot to learn about Los Angeles. White people don't go over very well in South Central. I'll send in a black team."

"Oh, I see," replied John.

Once back in the car, Jill took the wheel while John sat shotgun.

"How long will it take to get there?" Jill was loading the address into the GPS.

"South Duncan and Whittier Blvd. Probably about half an hour."

They rode in silence for ten minutes.

"I'm told your father was with the Bureau?"

"Yes, he was, and he was a good man and a great father."

"And your mother?"

"She remarried after a few years and moved to Florida. We really don't talk. And you, John, where are you from?"

"Iowa."

"That's it, just Iowa?"

"I grew up in a small farm town between Waterloo and Cedar Rapids. My father was a farmer. We grew mostly corn and raised some cattle. All in all, it was a boring childhood."

"Are your parents still alive?"

John was quiet for a few minutes, then said, "My dad died at 56, basically worked himself to death. I didn't know it at the time, but when I went to Annapolis, he couldn't afford my tuition, and mortgaged the farm to the max. He took odd jobs from neighbors at night to pay back the bank, which he never did. After he died, the bank foreclosed, and took the farm."

That's when I found out, basically, in essence, that I killed my father. So I joined the SEALs. Guess I wanted to punish myself. I volunteered for the most dangerous missions but always survived. My mom died a couple of years later of cancer. Except for my ex, I've never told anyone about this stuff."

Jill reached over and squeezed his hand gently for several seconds.

"Any brothers or sisters?"

"Yeah, I have an older brother, Pete."

"Where does he live?"

"Iowa State Penitentiary, serving a life sentence."

Jill looked at John. Then she turned her attention back to the road.

"To save you the trouble of researching it on one of your databases, he was convicted of murder. Pled guilty from the beginning. He killed the bank manager who did the foreclosure. So, in a way, I ruined his life as well."

Jill didn't have a response. She was thinking of the guilt that John has been carrying around for so many years. This would also explain his tough façade.

They drove again in silence. They were now on the 710 Freeway, getting close to their destination. "So you went to Annapolis. Isn't that a hard school to get into?"

"My dad knew a Congressman, a home town boy, and he gave me an appointment. If I knew then what I know today, I would never have gone. Where did you go to college?"

"Penn State. Some of the best years of my life. That's where I met my husband."

"How long were you married?"

"Eight years. The first four were heaven. But one night, he came home drunk and hit me. After the shock wore off, I kicked the crap out of him."

"I have no doubt. But you stayed married four more years?"

"After that night, I moved into the spare room and we never slept together again."

"That explains no kids."

"After the divorce was final, I decided to try women. They're more compassionate, and way more loving. Never been with a man since. Never met a man that I wanted to be with, until now."

Now John looked at Jill. Their eyes locked.

They exited the freeway and made their way to Whittier Blvd and turned left on South Duncan. John immediately noticed that everyone on the streets was Hispanic. Most of the business signs were in Spanish. Only a few had both English and Spanish.

"One of my men, Rodriguez, is from here. He used to tell us stories about the gangs and how life was here."

"If he grew up here, he must be one tough dude."

"You have no idea. I called him our ghost. He could get into places no one else could. If he was spotted, well, pity the poor guy who saw him."

"And I thought my life was interesting. But you take the cake."

They continued down South Duncan. On most corners stood groups of young men watching their car pass with great interest.

"Most of these kids here are gangbangers, heavily-armed crack dealers."

"Wonderful."

"There it is. 11513 South Duncan," Jill said.

"I don't see a van, but it looks like they're having a party. There must be twenty people in the front yard," John said.

"Maybe we should call for backup. Those aren't kids. These guys are some very dangerous-looking dudes."

"Just pull over, and let me do the talking."

"You're sure about this, John?"

"Yeah, no problem."

Jill pulled the car next to the sidewalk and parked. Everyone in the yard turned to look, wondering what these white folks dressed like detectives wanted.

"What's our guy's name?"

"Manny Hernandez, according to DMV records."

"Okay, let's go join the party."

"John, are you sure about this?"

"Yeah, they look like a nice bunch of guys."

Jill opened her purse, and checked her weapon before getting out of the car.

These were not kids like they had seen on the corners. Most were in their late twenties and thirties, and many had prison tattoos on their faces and necks. As John and Jill approached, they saw one go into the house, while the others formed a group at the gate of the picket fence.

John walked up to the gate, and said, "How's it going?" One of the tattooed ones stepped up to the front of the group and said, "I think you're in the wrong neighborhood, amigo!"

"No, this is the right address. Is there a Manny Hernandez here?"

"What's it to you, pig?"

"Now, that's not a very nice way to speak to a new guest, and the last time I checked, I'm not a pig. But you have some really bad manners."

"Go fuck yourself! I'll give you five seconds to leave."

"Not until I can speak to Manny."

"What are you going to do if I say no, pig?"

"I'll have to kick the crap out of you."

"Oh, this is gonna be fun!" said the tattooed guy. He stepped through the gate, reached behind his shirt and pulled out an eight- inch knife.

"I'm going to fuck you up bad! After that we'll take the bitch!"

John shook his head, grabbed the guy by the wrist, and spun him around and twisted it, until the knife fell and he pushed his face over one of the pickets of the fence. Another guy

jumped over the fence and John whipped the guy he was holding around and smashed them face-to-face and both went down. Jill now had her gun out, and the other guys were reaching for their own.

“STOP THIS SHIT!” said a voice from the front door. Everyone froze.

“What do you want from Manny Hernandez?”

“Only a few questions, nothing more,” said Jill.

The man at the door looked at John and Jill a few seconds and asked, “Are you Feds?”

“FBI,” said John.

“Let them in. I’ll give you five minutes, understand?”

“Five minutes should be all we need.”

“Okay, let them in.”

Everyone in the front yard stepped aside. John and Jill walked through the crowd to the front door where a tall Mexican stood with a red bandana around his forehead. He had long hair tied in a ponytail. He wore a white wife-beater and was barefoot. Once inside the house, John looked around. Sitting at the kitchen table were four more tattooed gang members.

“Have a seat,” said Manny Hernandez. John sat down and Jill said, “I’d prefer to stand, thank you.”

“Suit yourself,” Manny said and he sat down across from John.

“If you’re looking for a snitch, you came to the wrong place.”

John studied the men at the table. They all had one hand under the table.

“We’re not looking for trouble. We’ve just got a few questions. Why don’t you put your hands where I can see them? If we were here to arrest anyone, we would have brought the 7th Cavalry.”

They looked up at Manny. He studied John and Jill for a few seconds.

“It’s okay. These Feds sure have some real balls coming here.”

The men raised their hands, and sure enough, they each held a variety of handguns which they placed on the table in front of them.

“You’ve got four minutes left.”

“Okay, I’ll get right to the point. Do you own a 2005 white Ford van?”

Manny’s eyes widened. “What’s it to you?”

“I’m now going to reach into my jacket pocket just to get some photos.”

John reached in his jacket and took out several photos. They were stills from the bank camera. He handed them to Manny. “Is that your van?”

“It could be.”

“When was the last time you saw it?”

“Hmm, maybe four days ago. I loaned it to a friend. Then he disappeared.”

“Why didn’t you call the police and file a report?”

“I don’t do cops. We deal with things differently here.”

"I see. Have you ever seen the men in this picture?"

Manny was sure of his answer. "No, but if I find them, they will be in a world of hurt. Since you're here, I assume they used it in a heist or something. Are they trying to stick it on me?"

"No, not exactly. It's not what they did, it's more like what they plan on doing."

Manny looked again at the photos. "They're sure not Mexicans."

"True, they're not Mexicans," said John.

"Arabs?" asked Manny.

"Something like that. If you do happen to bump into these guys, just so you know, they are heavily-armed and extremely dangerous."

"So are we. Can I keep these?"

"Sure, I've got more."

"Well, Mr and Mrs FBI, your five minutes are up."

"Thanks for your help," said John as he got up. Manny walked to the door as Jill and John walked down the front steps. Several of the gang members blocked John's way, including the guy he'd taken down five minutes ago.

"Let'em go, bro." The guy had a lot of blood on his shirt.

He moved out of their way, along with everyone else. Once they were back in the car, Jill said, "You really like doing things the hard way, don't you?"

"How would you have handled it?"

"With the 7th Cavalry."

"But then he never would have talked. We now know the license plate number, and that our little friend has it for four days. He probably killed the driver."

John's phone rang. "Director Graves."

"Coleman here."

"What's up?"

"Just got a call from our Chicago office. It seems some lady called them an hour ago with some story about her husband sending her out of town unexpectedly with their two kids."

"Yeah, so? The guy's probably banging some chick and didn't want his wife around."

"Well, there's more. He had her withdraw their entire savings, over two hundred and fifty thousand. He said something to her about not letting herself be followed. And, Director Graves?"

"Yeah."

"He's on the list." John wrote the address down.

"Let's check this out. How far is Laurel Canyon from here?"

"Not far. Maybe half an hour," Jill said.

"Great. Maybe we have a lead," John said.

"What's up?" asked Jill.

"I'll explain on the way. Let's go. The address is 1944 Laurel Canyon."

In the car, John told Jill what Coleman said.

"I have two questions," Jill said.

"Shoot."

"First, is that what you asshole men do? I mean, do you send your wives out of town to bang some chick?"

"Excuse me. I've spent a long time in the service. Pardon my blunder. I would never even think of doing anything like that." John reached over and squeezed her hand. Jill looked at him for a few seconds and thought, *How could I fall for this guy? He's arrogant and self-centered, and plain and simple, he's a man.*

"Second question?"

"What would you have done if Manny hadn't stopped his gang?"

"Easy. Kick some ass. Besides, you had your gun drawn."

"How are you so sure it wasn't aimed at you?"

They drove up Laurel Canyon. When they got to 1944, there was a white van in the driveway.

Chapter 35

It was 2:30 in the afternoon, and the bell finally rang. Jenny gathered her books, put them in her backpack and went into the halls of Beverly Hills High School.

Jenny was of Iranian decent. Her real name was Jawa, which means "passion" or "love" in Farsi. She went by Jenny to blend in better with the other students.

Jenny was a social butterfly. She was 17-years-old with long, straight black hair, and deep brown eyes and a slender body. When Jenny walked the halls she turned every boy's head. She was truly beautiful and always wore a smile.

She had dated a couple of boys now and then, but always ended the relationship when they got fresh. Kissing was fun, but she never went any further. Jenny wanted to save herself for marriage. She knew other girls went much farther than she did, but she didn't care.

Her friends would talk about how they let boys touch them and sometimes do even more. Not Jenny. She was raised by very conservative parents and believed that purity was special.

Walking down the crowded hall, a girl yelled, "Hey, Jenny, wait up!" Jenny turned and saw Lisa, one of her best friends.

"I'm so glad school is over! It's Friday night and I'm going out with Jake Hamilton to the movies tonight! Can you believe it? Jake Hamilton! He's to die for!" said Lisa.

"That's awesome, Lisa. He's really cute."

"What are you doing tonight, Jenny?"

“Nothing, I’m just going home and spend time with my family. Probably help my mom cook dinner.”

“No date, huh?”

“That Keith Perkins asked me out to the movies again, but the last time we went to the movies he tried to put his hand up my top.”

“Oh, Jenny, you’re such a prude! You’ve got to give them a little something for paying for the movie and, hopefully, dinner. I don’t mean you have to go all the way or anything. You’ve just got to keep them interested.”

“Lisa, you’re such a slut!” Both girls laughed.

“Let’s go to Jamba Juice! Patti and Kimberly are going. It’ll be fun and besides, it’s early.”

“Okay, that sounds good, I’ll follow you. Where’d you park?”

“I got to school late, so I’m way down the street. Let’s just meet there.”

“Okay, I’ll see you in twenty!” Jenny said.

Jenny walked to the parking lot and opened the trunk of her little 528i BMW that her dad gave her for her 17th birthday. Jenny put her books in the trunk.

When she looked up, standing by the door was Keith Perkins.

“Hi, Jenny.”

“Hi, Keith, how are you?”

“Oh, I’m okay. You sure we can’t go out tonight? There’s a great new movie playing in Westwood. Maybe we can have dinner before the movie, you know, someplace special.”

“I’m sorry, Keith, I promised my family I’d stay home tonight. Maybe next week.”

Keith looked down and said, almost in a whisper, “I kinda pushed things the last time we went out, didn’t I?”

“Kinda? You put your hand up my top during the movie.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just that the other guys always talk.”

“Keith, I’m not your girlfriend. We’re just friends.”

Keith looked at her for a little while, and said, “I was kinda hoping that we could take it to the next stage. Just maybe, I would really like to be your boyfriend.”

Jenny blushed and then said, “Next weekend I’ll go to a movie with you, as long as you promise to be good.”

“I promise. Can I call you tomorrow or Sunday?”

“Sure.”

Jenny got into her car and drove off. The whole time driving to Jamba she thought about Keith. *He’s real cute, and I think he’s still a virgin like me. Guess I should give him another chance, as long as he behaves.*

Jenny got to the strip mall. She drove around the parking lot for a maddening amount of time and couldn’t find a parking space. She was about to give up when finally someone pulled

out. She walked across the parking lot and saw Patti and Kimberly sitting outside sipping their juices and giggling.

“Hey, guys, Lisa said you’d come. How was school?”

“School sucks as usual! That Mrs. Pickeros gave me detention again. Mrs. Puckerass is such a bitch!” said Kimberly.

Kimberly was also seventeen with long black hair, kinda skinny, but very busty. She was on the varsity cheerleading team and very popular with the boys.

“What did you do?” asked Patti.

Patti was a cute blonde. Her father was Michael French. He was a major movie director. She wore the trendiest clothes, and drove a Porsche Carrera.

“She caught me passing a note to Bobby Fields.”

“That’s it?”

“Well, not exactly. It was a pretty nasty note. I asked him how big his dick was.”

“You did not! Oh, my god! Did he tell you?” asked Patti.

“After class, when I was walking to the door, he turned around and put his hands this far apart.” The girls started giggling again.

“He’s dreaming, I mean really? Could you even imagine one that big inside you?” Kimberly said. There was an embarrassed pause. No one actually knew the answer.

Jenny broke the awkward silence. “What’s everybody doing tonight?”

“I told you. I’m going out with Jake Hamilton tonight.”

“Jake Hamilton! He’s such a stud! I heard he’s getting a USC football scholarship.” Patti said.

“Are you going to let him get nasty with you?” asked Jenny.

“Maybe. I’d really like to have him be my boyfriend, but since this is our first date maybe I’ll just let him play with my titties, and tell him I’m still a virgin.”

“Yeah, right, that’s probably why he asked you out cuz he heard how easy you are.”

“You guys are unbelievable,” exclaimed Jenny.

“Oh, come on, Jenny, you need to loosen up! It’s fun as long as you use protection. You can make boys do nice things when they think they’re going to get laid,” Patti said.

“Like what?” asked Jenny, her curiosity rising.

“Well?” Patti said.

Kimberly leaned over and whispered into Jenny’s ear.

“That’s gross!” Jenny said.

“Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it, Jen!”

“I know I’m a total prude, but I was raised to wait for a husband before I have sex.”

“Oh, God, that’s so old-fashioned,” Kimberly said.

“Come on, Jen, let’s go get a couple of Jamba Juices.” The girls got up, went inside and ordered their fruit drinks. While waiting, Lisa looked at Jenny and said, “Don’t worry about what they say. They’re total sluts.”

“But you told me you’ve done it before?”

“Yeah, twice, and both times the guys couldn’t get me off. It was just wham-bam-thank-you-ma’am! I think Patti may have a good point. Maybe next time I will make them do things first!”

“Yuck, that’s so gross!”

Both girls started laughing. “That just sounds so embarrassing, to have some guy looking at my private area, well, you know...”

“I know, but it might be fun and kinda exciting,” Lisa said.

Jenny and Lisa got their drinks, and went back outside and sat down again with Kimberly and Patti.

“Jen, you are so beautiful. Any guy in school would want to do you. What’s the farthest you’ve gone with a boy?” asked Patti.

Jenny blushed and said, “Second base.”

“Oh my God, you’ve never seen a guy’s dick?” asked Kimberly.

“No, not really. Well, once about a year ago, I walked out back and a few of my parents’ friends were in the pool, and they didn’t see me. A guy got out of the pool, and he was naked and his penis looked hard.”

“Girl, we need to get you laid!” said Patti. All the girls giggled.

“I need to get going. I promised my mom I’d help with dinner.”

“We’ll talk about this later, Jen, you really need to let loose.”

Jenny got up and took her drink and walked away.

“Hey, Jen, you do have a great butt! Give it up already!” yelled Kimberly. All the girls giggled.

Jenny turned and smiled. “I’ll see you guys on Monday at school. Hopefully, none of you will be pregnant by then.”

“Bye, Jen,” Lisa said. Then the girls started to whisper and giggle all over again.

Once in her Beemer, she thought that maybe she was a bit too prudish. Perhaps she ought to relax a little, and maybe let Keith go a little farther. Just maybe.

She stopped at the corner drugstore, bought some cosmetics and paid for them with her daddy’s American Express card. It was now 4:30. Jenny checked her cell phone and there were no new calls. She thought that was strange. Her mother always checked in with her after school let out to remind her to drive carefully.

Jenny drove up Fairfax to Palm and turned up her street. When she got to her house, she pressed the remote button on her mirror, and the front gates opened. She drove up the driveway and parked on the shoulder. She went into the house and threw her keys on the table by the front door.

Jenny lived in a mansion. Her father was Khalil Basara. His father was a close confidant of the Shah of Iran who moved to the United States at the collapse of his government. He was

a very short man who was extremely overweight. The top of his head was bald, but he still had some hair on the sides and back.

His father left Iran with close to twenty-five million dollars in cash, and had additional assets in the US which he had acquired over several years.

Jenny went into the kitchen and found her mother at the table reading a magazine.

Hi, Mom.”

“Hi, Jawa, how was school?”

“Good. I got an A on the history test.”

“Oh, how nice. Go tell your father. He’s in his office. He always likes to hear how well you are doing in school.”

Jenny went down several hallways and opened the double doors to her father’s office. Oak bookcases lined the walls. Several valuable statues stood around the room. Her father was sitting behind an exquisite cherry wood desk.

“Hi, Daddy.”

“There’s my little girl! How was school today?”

“I got an A on my history test!”

“Good for you, my darling girl. I think we should be thinking about you going to Harvard or maybe Princeton. After all, it’s just next year. And you are such a smart and beautiful girl. Maybe you’ll meet some handsome man there, huh?”

“Oh, Daddy, are you already trying to marry me off?”

“Any father would love to see his little girl marry a smart Harvard graduate. Tell your mother not to cook dinner tonight. Were going out to a nice restaurant to celebrate.”

“Thank you Daddy, I love you.” Jenny walked around the desk, wrapping her arms around him and kissed him on the forehead. “I’ll go tell Mom.”

After telling her mother, Jenny went upstairs to her bedroom. Her room was big by anybody’s standards, with her own bathroom. The estate had eight bedrooms and ten baths. Jenny took a quick shower and put on a nice dress with perfectly matching shoes.

Her cell phone rang. It was Keith from school.

“Hi, Jenny.”

“Hi, Keith.”

“Jenny, I just wanted to ask you if you would please consider going to dinner with me tomorrow night after the football game. It should all be over by 8:00. I’ll take a quick shower. We could meet by the locker room, okay?”

Just then, Jenny heard something break downstairs.

“Okay, but you’ve got to be good.”

“I swear I won’t do anything you don’t want me to.”

Jenny felt a little disappointed after her conversation with her friends.

“Well, we’ll see. Are you starting in the game?”

“Yeah, middle linebacker. Are you going to be there?”

“Guess I am now.”

“Great, I’m going to play harder just for you!”

She heard a loud yell downstairs.

“Keith, I’ve got to go. Something is weird here. I’ll see you tomorrow night after the game. Bye, Keith.”

“Bye, Jenny.” She hung up and turned to go downstairs. When she opened her bedroom door, she jumped back. There stood a large man with a beard and a grin on his face. In his hand was a large knife.

Chapter 36

It was now 5:00 in the evening. The men who had taken over Zarar’s life let him take a shower and change clothes.

When he came back into the living room, he noticed that the alarm system by the front door had been dismantled. He looked at the phone that sat next to his couch. The cord had been cut and placed on the table.

“Have a seat, Zarar. Let’s talk,” said the man whom he met in the parking structure at his office a few days ago.

“Allow me to introduce myself. I am Kalob, and these men are martyrs for Islam. Just like you.”

One of the men then went to Kalob, and whispered in his ear. He nodded and said, “Go, and hurry. I want you back in an hour.” The man picked up Zarar’s keys from the table and left with another man.

Two men still sat at the game table with the Uzis. The other four men were in other parts of the house. Occasionally, Zarar could hear noises upstairs of things being broken. Ubah was in the kitchen, making a large pot of ghormeh sabzi, a kind of Persian stew.

“That smells great, Ubah,” said Kalob. Then he heard another crash from upstairs. “Not to worry, Zarar. They’re searching for anything that could be of use to us. Soon you will have no use for such material things.”

From the kitchen, Ubah said, “Zarar’s wife had almost all the ingredients. I wish there was fresh spinach, but there are leeks. That’ll work.”

Zarar couldn’t imagine anyone else cooking in the kitchen but his wife. It was only two months ago that the entire kitchen was remodeled with top-notch appliances and granite counter tops. He felt his wife deserved the best kitchen money could buy.

Kalob nodded his head and thought for a minute, then looked at Zarar.

“Zaighum was one of our best instructors, and he said great things about you.”

"That was a long time ago," replied Zarar. Both men sat in silence.

Zarar looked around the living room. All the drapes were shut. Every few minutes, one of the men with an Uzi would go to a window and look out to the street for a minute, then return to his station by the boxes.

Zarar stared at the boxes with the Hebrew writing. "Ahh, you've noticed our special boxes. They were stolen from the Israelis. I am told they are capable of great destruction. We will again teach these American pigs a lesson, one they have not learned since our martyrs flew the planes into the buildings. That was a great day for Islam. But now they have grown lazy."

Zarar didn't say anything. Then he asked, "Why was I chosen? I'm sure there are many others who would jump at the opportunity to please Allah."

Kalob thought about this. "There are not as many as you would think. The police have informants in our mosques. There are only a handful of the faithful who have been properly trained. But you have a family which you don't want harmed. That gives me control over you. And mark my words, if you fail us they will die horrible deaths." Kalob paused for Zarar to grasp the full reality of what he said.

He then continued, "At first you were only a backup. But, alas, when the men transporting those boxes had some unexpected mishaps, we ended up short one martyr."

"How do I know my family will be safe even if I do as you say?"

Kalob smiled and said, "You don't. You just have to take my word. Soon Al-Ba'ith and Ahriman will return with your automobile. Then Ubah, Al-Ba'ith and Imaad and Ahriman and I will move to another location with one of the boxes. I don't like keeping them together."

"What do you want me to do?" Zarar asked.

"It's very simple. Tomorrow afternoon, you and Abdul, Akbar, Hamal and Fadi will go to the Los Angeles Airport. You will go to Terminal 3. The box will be in the suitcase we found in your hall closet. You will simply open the suitcase, praise Allah and then pull the cord on top. You will do this inside the doors of the terminal."

"But security is high at the airport. What if the police stop me?"

"The others will be close by, and all of them will be armed. They will kill anyone who attempts to interfere. If you try to warn anyone, they will kill you, and detonate the box themselves. Imaad will be at Terminal 7, and he, Al-Ba'ith, Ahriman and Ubah will do the same. You will both pull the cords at exactly 4:00. From what I understand, with these boxes exploding at opposite sides of the airport, the destruction of the airport should be complete, praise Allah."

A few minutes later, Ubah came out of the kitchen with two steaming dishes. She handed the guards each a bowl, then went back into the kitchen. She returned with two more bowls and set them in front of Kalob and Zarar.

They ate quietly. Two men came downstairs with two suitcases, and set them on the floor.

“Ubah, would you be so kind as to fix a couple bowls of this wonderful stew for Fadi and Ahriman,” Kalob asked. Zarar had forgotten about these men. He’d first seen them when his hood had been removed. He assumed that these guys kept watch from upstairs windows. Both had guns in their waistbands. They took the stew from Ubah and went back upstairs.

Fifteen minutes later, Zarar heard the sound of cars pulling into the driveway. One of the guards got up and walked to the window. He looked out for a few seconds, closed the drapes and nodded to Kalob.

“Ubah, would you pack some food for Ahriman and Al-Ba’ith? They will be hungry but they can eat on the way. We have another task to complete elsewhere. I want to leave immediately.”

Kalob got up and opened the suitcases, then placed a box from the table in each one. There was a light knock on the door and Ubah opened it for the two men.

“Let us go now. I want to separate these devices as soon as possible. Ubah has packed some excellent food for you.”

He picked up a suitcase and said, “Zarar, this is your chance to honor Allah. We have checked on you over the years. You have violated many laws of the Koran. Do not forget about your family. They are being watched this very minute by some very nasty men. Bit-tawfiq, ma’a as-salama, (good luck and good-bye).”

Kalob left with the suitcase, as did Ubah, Imaad, Ahriman and Al-Ba’ith. Zarar heard four car doors shut. He heard his Mercedes pull out of the driveway.

Zarar looked back at Abdul, who was still holding the Uzi. He was staring at Zarar with a look of pure hatred. Abdul had a long beard and a big nose. His hair was cut short. He stood well over six feet. He was wearing a white t-shirt and blue jeans and tennis shoes.

Zarar got nervous with Abdul staring at him while holding an automatic weapon.

Chapter 37

John and Jill drove past the house and turned on to the next street and parked out of sight. They were soon joined by Agents Kimber and Ross.

“Do you think it’s the same van?” Jill asked.

“I don’t believe in coincidences.”

John looked down the street where they were parked. Even though it was past 7:00, he saw people walking their dogs or just enjoying the warm air. In California the evenings hadn’t started to cool down.

John took off his jacket and tie. He removed the holster, putting them in the front seat of the Bureau car.

“How about a romantic little stroll, my dear?”

“Beg your pardon?”

“I’d like to get a better look at the house and van. If we pass by hand in hand, I think we’ll attract less attention from whoever is inside. And leave your purse.”

“I don’t like the idea of doing this with no guns,” said Jill.

John pulled up his pant leg and showed her his ankle holster. “Okay, we’re just out for a walk. Don’t look too closely at the house when we pass. Observe it out of the corner of your eye. When you do look, check out the windows. I’d bet a hundred bucks they’re watching the street. And it wouldn’t hurt to laugh when we pass. Then I can act like I’m looking at you with the house behind you.”

“Okay,” said Jill.

“Should we call for backup, sir?” asked Agent Kimber.

“Not yet. We’ll walk past twice. We’ll come back on the other side of the street just like we’re headed home. We’ll figure this out when we get back.

“Shall we, honey?”

“Yes, dear,” Jill replied very sweetly and very sarcastically.

John took her hand and started walking to the corner.

Jill asked, “Why are you holding my hand now? They can’t see us yet.”

“Practice makes perfect. Besides, I like the way you feel.”

“I bet you say that to all the lesbians you meet.”

“Are you still batting for that team?”

“Yes, for the moment. Not sure about changing teams yet, but I’m thinking about it. Right now I’m more concerned about finding this Imaad guy before he levels a portion of Los Angeles.”

They walked around the corner and up the street. When they reached 1944, Jill laughed out loud, and did a great job of it. John stopped and looked her in the eyes, then quickly surveyed the house behind her. They continued their walk, chatting casually.

“Did you see anything?”

“Maybe. I thought I saw someone in the upstairs window.”

John laughed and sneaked another quick glance at the house. A few minutes later, they were out of sight.

“Let’s go up this street. I want to see what’s behind the house.”

They turned right, then another right, and went up the street. They stopped in front of a tidy little blue cottage.

“Wait here. I’m going to have a look at the backyard.”

“John, that’s trespassing!”

“So, call the cops! No one will see me. Remember I’ve been covert for a long time.”

“Okee-doke, Mr. Macho man.”

John walked toward the side gate. After about ten feet from the sidewalk, he disappeared into some tall hedges. Jill looked as hard as she could, but didn't see him anymore. She expected to see him scale the block wall. Nothing.

After about 15 minutes, he emerged from the hedges at the same spot where he had disappeared.

"What did you see? Anything?"

"Yeah, someone disconnected the house alarm at the back door."

"How could you possibly have seen that from the backyard at this hour?"

"Who said I stayed in the backyard?"

"Where were you?"

"I went over the backyard fence to get a better look. The back door alarm was definitely tampered with."

"And?"

"All the drapes were shut tight, but the back door has a small window with no curtains. It was nothing but an empty room, but someone disabled the alarm. They knew what they were doing."

"How do you know so much about alarm systems? How do you know it was tampered with?"

"Jill, please. I would have done it the same way."

"Sorry, just not used to working with someone who knows more about breaking the law than most criminals."

"Maybe that's why I got the job."

They walked back to Laurel Canyon and turned left. "I want to get a better look at the house," said John.

"Yeah, but are we going to be on the other side of the street?"

"When I squeeze your hand, I want you to put your arms around me and kiss me for twenty seconds, with your back to the house."

"Did you already forget what team I'm on?"

"This is on a professional level. I want to get a better look," John said.

"Okay, let's just do it, Romeo." Jill secretly anticipated a nice kiss with John, but she didn't want him to know.

They walked up the street, chatting inaudibly about what they saw at the house.

Occasionally, one or the other would laugh right in front of the house. They walked a little farther. John squeezed her hand.

Jill took a deep breath, and said loudly, "Oh, honey." She put her arms around his neck and kissed him, as he wrapped his large arms around her slim waist. Her breath was warm and smelled wonderful and her lips were soft and seductive. They kissed deeply a long time, much longer than twenty seconds. When they finally stopped, they looked into each other's eyes.

"Was that as good for you as it was for me?" John asked.

"I don't know, it might have been better if you had breasts," Jill said, with a smirk on her face. They started walking again.

"Knock it off! Admit that you liked it!" declared John.

"It was okay until you used your tongue."

"I had to make it look good."

"Come on, they couldn't see in our mouths!"

"Okay, so maybe I got a little carried away."

"I thought your gun was on your ankle. I didn't know you had another under your belt."

"I don't."

"I knew that," Jill said.

She was thinking about how much she enjoyed that kiss. She would never let John know. She still wasn't sure if she could trust a man again. But here was this Commander in the Navy SEALs, tough, macho, and really handsome. Walking back to their cars, she realized she was extremely aroused.

When they got back, John said, "Get Tova Mazel here ASAP, along with the two additional agents. Get a couple of other experienced men as well."

"Do they have to be men to be good agents?" sneered Jill. Ross got on his phone and made the call.

Then they heard a shot come from the house.

Chapter 38

The 405 Freeway was bumper-to-bumper over the Sepulveda Pass, which was normal. It was moving at the slow pace of 5 to 10 miles per hour.

"This traffic really sucks," complained Tony "The Tank" Santini to no one in particular. In the car with Tony was Willy Castanza sitting shotgun. Randy Moretti was in the back seat reading a newspaper.

"We'll be at Sunset in a few minutes. Then we'll be out of this mess," said Willy. Tony nodded.

"Did they find any bugs in your apartment?" asked Randy from the back seat without looking up from the newspaper.

"Surprisingly, no. Clean as a whistle. But Ray found a tracking device in the rear bumper."

"Hey, Randy, how did things go with that stripper you went out with last Saturday?" asked Willy as he turned in his seat to look at Randy. Randy Moretti was a made man. Only Tony and Randy were made men on their crew.

Randy was 6'2", well-built with long black hair down to his shoulders. He wore a purple button-down shirt and blue jeans.

Randy was second in command behind Tony. Whenever Tony was out of town or in jail, Randy ran the operations. He didn't talk much, but when he did, people listened. Mainly, because Randy was a professional hit man.

No one knew how many he'd killed, not even Randy himself. Sometimes Randy would just vanish for a few days, and just as suddenly as he left he would show back up. He never offered any explanation, nor did he have to. Everyone on the crew knew that some poor schmuck was dead. After these brief disappearances, he would always hand Tony an envelope stuffed with one-hundred-dollar bills. This was Tony's and Tony's bosses' cut. No questions were ever asked. Every member of the team had to donate something to the higher-ups, or someone like Randy would pay you a visit.

"She was okay," Randy said.

"She still working at that strip joint out by the airport?"

"Yeah, so?"

"I dunno. I just thought maybe when you're done with her I'd like a shot at her. What's her name, Candy, isn't it?"

Randy now looked up from his paper at Willy. "Just you be sure to wait until I'm done with her. I'm giving her a lot of dough to be exclusive. She's not doing the back room anymore. I had a nice chat with the owner of the club and he promised me that she's out of circulation."

"Hey, man, I'm not going to hit on your lady. You know better than that. I just thought maybe you were done with her, that's all."

"That club owner bastard, what's his name Keith Meyer, owes us a couple of big ones. Next time you're in the club, why don't you give him a little reminder of the debt?" Tony said.

"Done," replied Randy.

They exited the freeway at Sunset Blvd, and traveled east for a few miles past some of the most expensive real estate in the world. Sunset is a winding road for several miles with mansions on both sides. After a few miles, it becomes more commercial, with specialty shops and restaurants.

A block before Highland, Tony turned off into an alley and parked behind The Bella Gents restaurant and bar. This was Tony's place. Good Italian food and it featured live bands on the weekends. They went in the back entrance. Willy headed straight to the bathroom. Tony and Randy went into the bar and sat at a booth off to one side. It was only 2:00, so the bar was pretty empty. There was a guy and a girl seated at the bar whispering to each other.

Tony had a classy place. The bar was granite with nicely upholstered stools. The liquor was lined up behind the bar with special lighting that made each bottle glow. The bartender's name was Matt. When he saw Tony and Randy walk in, he poured them both their regular

drinks. Tony always ordered Wild Turkey on the rocks, while Randy had a shot of Patron tequila.

Matt called over a cute waitress and pointed to Tony and Randy. She picked up the drinks and walked over to their table.

“Hi, Tony, Randy. How are you boys doing?”

“Good, thanks for asking, Michelle. Willy’s in the head. He’ll have a Heineken with a frosted glass.”

“You got it, Tony.”

She went to the bar and told Matt that Willy would be joining them. Matt popped the cap on a Heineken and took a cold glass from the refrigerator. Michelle brought the glass and beer to Tony’s table. After she left, Tony looked at Randy.

“So, what’s in the works?” asked Tony.

“The truck in Vegas was a hit. I’d guess that was fifty Gs in profit,” Randy said.

“Good. The boss will be happy.”

“What else?”

“I’m talking to a boxer who is hurting big-time. He’s fighting Ramos next month. I’m pretty sure he’ll take a dive for the right amount of cash.”

“Nice, we always like those. Let me know as soon as possible. Maybe we can up the odds in Vegas.”

“Rumor has it you’re hot with the Feds.” Tony looked at Randy for several seconds, trying to detect any changes in his face.

If any hit had been ordered on Tony it would, without a doubt, be Randy. Tony was always nervous around Randy.

“No big deal. They’re just blowing farts under water.”

Randy sat back and became very quiet and just watched the couple at the bar. Willy walked in and took a seat next to Tony.

Tony slowly sipped his Wild Turkey. No one said much of anything for about half an hour.

Then the front door opened. Three men walked in and took seats at the bar and ordered drinks. They were all dressed like businessmen, in expensive suits and ties. The guy in the middle was much older than his friends, and as he turned toward Tony’s table, he made the slightest nod of his head.

Tony then looked at Randy, and nodded to him. Tony got up, and walked to his small office, which was located between the bar and the restaurant area. The older man at the bar downed his drink in one gulp. He said something to his friends and walked in the direction of the bathroom, but instead turned into Tony’s office.

Tony was waiting for him just inside the room and he shut and locked the door behind them.

“Rico, nice to see you.” Tony shook his hand and gave him a courtesy hug. “Good to see you too, Tony, how’s the wife and kids? They must be getting big by now, huh?”

“Yeah, growing like fucking beanstalks. How’s everything going with you?”

“Can’t complain.”

Tony walked around to his desk and opened a drawer, taking out an envelope filled with hundred-dollar bills. “Here are ten big ones. We took care of a couple of street vendors who weren’t being quite honest. Next week, I should have double this for you.”

“Thanks, Tony, you’re a good guy. I wanted to ask a favor from you.”

“Sure, anything you want,” said Tony as he sat in his desk chair.

“A guy is flying in from Israel tomorrow. I’d like you to meet him and help him with his briefcase. He’s flying on American Airlines. His plane lands at 12:15 at the Bradley Terminal.”

Tony sat there looking at his boss, waiting for further instructions.

The older man sat on Tony’s desk, and said, “It seems that some bosses in Vegas think that he’s carrying some heavy diamonds, and he asked us to deal with the situation. I told them I’d put my best man on it.”

Tony nodded and looked at the door, deep in thought. “Is he flying alone?”

“That’s what they tell me. Here’s a photo of the guy, so you can recognize him. Just tell him you’re there to pick him up. And Tony, make it clean, not like what happened at the Marina. Okay?”

Tony took the photo and studied it for a while and slid it into the top drawer.

“It’s as good as done.”

“Good. I knew that I can count on you.”

“Speaking of the Marina ordeal, that got real ugly,” Rico said.

Tony didn’t say anything, he just nodded. He suddenly felt nervous.

“What are the Feds charging you with?”

Tony sighed, “Grand-theft boat. They’ll never make it stick.”

Rico thought about his answer for a full minute.

“Any chance of the snitch’s body popping up?”

“Naw, he’s two miles offshore with heavy weights attached, unless Flipper is a cop, we’re good.”

Now Rico nodded.

“Just remember we can’t afford any heat, especially dead bodies washing up on a beach.”

Tony knew exactly what Rico was saying. If the body is found, then Tony would be at the bottom of the ocean.

Rico continued, “Good, I’m glad we understand each other.”

Tony got up now feeling very uneasy. They again hugged, acknowledging the end of the meeting.

With their business completed, the older man unlocked the door and walked out with the envelope inside his jacket pocket. He returned to the bar and spoke to his two friends briefly. Randy watched them closely. One of the men reached into his pocket and took out two twenties and threw them on the counter. All three men walked out of the bar.

Tony came back to the table and took his seat with Willy and Randy.

“Everything good?” asked Randy.

“Randy, sometime today, call Dale in Oxnard and be sure he did a good job of the disposal from the Marina.”

Randy looked at Tony with a questioning look. *Tony’s nervous, the big guy must have put some heat on him. I may have his job sooner than I expected!* thought Randy.

“I’ll call him today.” Tony was now watching Randy for any hints of conspiring with the Don.

”We got a little job tomorrow. I told the Don we would handle it.”

Randy stared at Tony for a while. “Randy, why don’t you meet me here at, let’s say, 11:30. And come heavy.” That was Tony’s way of saying ‘bring a gun’.

Chapter 39

Inside the house, Zarar laid down on the couch with his eyes closed, thinking about his family. He’d never see them again. Tomorrow he was destined to die as a martyr for Islam. He wasn’t afraid to die. He was afraid for his wife and sons. He had been prepared to die years ago.

At one point, he opened his eyes, and again saw Abdul staring at him with a hateful look. Akbar was on the other couch with his eyes closed. Hamal was in the kitchen eating the leftover stew.

“Why do you look at me like that?” Abdul just continued to stare at him.

“What? Are you better than me? What is it? Tomorrow we will die together. That should mean something!”

“You have become an infidel. I was the one who watched you for so many years. Each time I followed you, I wanted to kill you. You drank the infidel’s alcohol. You made money to enrich yourself. You quit going to the mosque. Once, I searched this house and found dirty magazines under your son’s bed. Your wife has gold and diamond jewelry, and wears the clothing of whores!”

“Yes, tomorrow we will die together, but I shall sit by God. You will be sent back as a maggot. I hate dying with you, but Kalob has ordered that I must. I only hope you try to escape tonight, so I can kill you.”

Zarar just stared at him for several minutes and said nothing. Fadi came down the stairs.

"Is everything okay?" asked Abdul.

"Yes, just people walking their filthy dogs, and a couple who are probably fornicating right now. We should just pull the cord right now and take out these American pigs."

"We have our orders," said Abdul.

"I just came down to get some more of Ubah's stew. I'm still hungry," Fadi said. He was a small skinny man with short dark curly hair.

He went into the kitchen and Zarar heard him take out a dish and start the microwave. Suddenly, they heard him yell and a shot rang out. Abdul was up in an instant.

"Stay here and don't move, or I'll kill you!" exploded Abdul.

He ran into the kitchen. On the counter were the remains of a black and white cat.

"It was up on the refrigerator. I didn't see it. It jumped down and scared me and I just shot it. I thought it was a giant rat."

"You fool! Somebody will call the police. Gather everything up, and let's get out of here before we ruin our part of the mission." They quickly grabbed the suitcase and some bags Zarar hadn't noticed before. All five men were in the living room. Abdul was looking out the front window. "I don't see anybody on the street."

Then a voice in Farsi came from the kitchen. "You're under arrest! Drop your weapons NOW!"

Abdul turned and fired into the kitchen. He kept firing until the magazine was empty. He reached into one of the bags and pulled another magazine, but it was too late.

John was in the doorway with his gun out. "Freeze!"

Abdul kept trying to put the magazine in the gun but John didn't hesitate and shot him in the head. Suddenly, the front door was kicked open, and Agent Kimber appeared in the doorway. Fadi, the watchman from upstairs, was now only a few steps from the front door, and shot Agent Kimber twice.

John couldn't see Fadi from where he stood. His first thought was that maybe Jill was hit. He ran through the living room and dove over a couch just as another shot rang out. John could see Fadi's terrified face and fired twice, killing him instantly. He then looked over the couch, and saw Kimber on the floor, blood spurting from his chest.

In the doorway, Jill was in a shooting stance. She shot to John's left. John turned and saw Hamal fall to the floor. He swung around and pointed his gun at Zarar. "If you move, you're dead." John knew they needed to get more information out of these guys. Besides, Zarar was unarmed.

"Get on your knees with your fingers locked behind your head, NOW!" shouted John. Just then, he heard another door shut farther back in the house.

"Jill, cover this one! Someone got out the back way." John ran into the kitchen. As he got to the back door, he saw Akbar go into the bushes. He was headed to the back wall, the same wall John had scaled earlier.

"Freeze!" screamed John.

Akbar turned and fired at John.

He felt a burning sensation in his shoulder and knew he was hit.

John raised his gun and shot, hitting Akbar in the lower back. John ran to him and kicked the gun away. Jill was now in the backyard and tossed John handcuffs.

“Agent down, get an ambulance!” yelled Jill over her shoulder to Ross. Jill ran back into the house. She went to Zarar and threw him on the ground. She reached into her purse, took out another pair of handcuffs and quickly cuffed him.

John went from room to room with his gun drawn. When he came back downstairs, Agent Ross was applying pressure to Kimber’s wounds. “Hang in there, buddy! Be tough,” Ross whispered to his wounded partner. Sirens could now be heard in the distance.

John looked around the room. He said to Zarar, “Where are the others?”

“They left about an hour ago with one of those boxes.”

John and Jill looked at each other. They were both thinking the same thing.

“Did they leave a metal box here?” asked Jill.

Zarar looked at the suitcase by the door. John walked over to it and looked all around it. “I’m going to open it.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea? What if they rigged the device to go off when it’s opened?”

“We have to know if it’s inside.”

John opened the front two latches of the suitcase. He slowly opened it an inch or so. He laid down on the carpet and looked inside. “Doesn’t seem to be booby-trapped.” He slowly opened it, and inside was a duplicate of the cube he had destroyed in the desert.

Out front, a black SUV pulled onto the lawn. Three agents jumped out, followed by Tova Mazel. In the distance, the sirens of an ambulance were getting closer.

“Secure the perimeter of the house. We have an agent down by the front door. Dr Mazel, we have one of your devices. There is a suspect in the backyard. He’s wounded and cuffed. Dr Mazel, your device is also by the front door,” Jill yelled to the arriving agents.

Tova ran into the house with her tool bag. Another agent went through the gate to the backyard.

It was then that Jill saw the blood on John’s white shirt.

“You’ve been hit!”

“Just a flesh wound, I’ll be fine.”

Within twenty minutes, there were a dozen LAPD squad cars. The ambulance had already sped away with Agent Kimber. One of the paramedics wanted John to go to the hospital, but he refused.

John and Jill watched Tova take the device to the front lawn. She turned it over. On the bottom were two holes and what looked like a round plate. She took out a tool that was

made especially for opening the devices. She put it in the holes and turned hard. The plate turned and she lifted it off.

"Can you disarm this thing?" asked John.

She ignored his question, and took out a very small odd-shaped screwdriver and unscrewed four tiny screws. She reached in and slowly pulled out a long tube about six inches long, and put it down. She then took out another odd-looking tool and reached in where the glass tube had been, and did something with the tool. A loud click was heard.

"It's done. It can't detonate without the microfilament. And I disabled the detonation key."

John went back into the house when he realized that his hands were sweating. There were two agents in the living room.

"The place is clean. We looked everywhere."

John walked over to Zarar, who was sitting handcuffed on a couch. "Do you want to talk to me?" said John.

"You have just murdered my family. I have nothing to say."

"Your wife and children and her sister are in protective custody with the Chicago branch of the FBI. They're safe."

"Then let me talk to them. If what you say is true, I will help you anyway I can."

Jill called Coleman at the Wilshire division. "Patch me through to Chicago." Ten minutes later, Jill walked over to Zarar and put the phone to his ear.

"Zarar, is that you?"

"Zawiya, you're safe! Oh, thank God! And the kids?"

"Everybody's fine. These policemen arrested two men who were watching the house. Zarar, they had guns and knives. Tell me, what's happening? I'm scared. The children are scared. Was someone trying to kill us?"

"I'll explain everything later. I love you. And please tell the boys I love them."

Jill took the phone away. John sat next to Zarar.

"Okay, where's the other box?"

"I don't know. They didn't tell me where they were going."

"Who are they?"

"I only know their first names."

"Okay, let's start with that," John said.

"The leader is a man called Kalob. The one who guarded the bombs was Imaad. Another was called Al-Ba'ith, and there was a woman named Ubah, and another they called Hamal. You must be very careful of the one called Imaad. He horrified me. The look in his eyes were pure evil."

John wrote down the names while Jill opened a manila envelope. She pulled out a couple of 8 x10 photos from the bank's security cameras. She handed them to John who showed them to Zarar.

"That's Imaad, and the one with the beard is Abdul. He's over there, you just killed him."

"Do you know what they planned on doing with these devices? And what were they driving?"

"They left in my Mercedes."

"What kind of Mercedes and what color?" asked Jill.

"Black, it's a S550 sedan."

"Do you know the license plate number?"

"No, I don't know, I'm sorry."

Zarar looked away. Then he said, "LAX."

"What about LAX?" John asked.

"I was told to detonate the bomb at Terminal 3, while Imaad would detonate the other at Terminal 7 at exactly 4:00 p.m. tomorrow."

Tova was standing at the doorway. "If both devices were detonated at the same time, that would cause complete destruction of the entire airport," Tova said.

"How much damage could just one cause?" asked John.

"Plenty, probably half the airport," answered Tova.

John looked back at Zarar and asked, "Before we came in, we heard a shot. Can you explain that?"

"I think they killed our daughter's cat. The one they called Fadi was in the kitchen getting something to eat. He's the one you killed after you jumped over the couch. When the cat is scared, she hides on the refrigerator. When she jumped down, I think it scared Fadi, and he shot it. Because of the noise of the gunshot, Abdul said we had to go. Then you showed up. How did you get here so fast?"

"You can thank your wife for that."

They heard shouting in the front yard. John and Jill both sprinted to the front porch. In the front yard, Assistant Director Jules was arguing with Tova Mazel.

"Can I help you, Jules?" asked John tensely.

Jules turned and looked at John. "I'm here to take possession of the device."

"On whose authority?"

"All the way from the top."

John thought for a few seconds and said, "Fine. Take it."

"This is the property of the Israeli government!" screamed Tova.

"It was yours until you lost them. Dr Mazel, could you please come inside for a minute?" John asked.

Tova looked at Jules with a look that would freeze water. She picked up her tool bag and went into the house.

"Let me take a wild guess. The part that you removed--will that stop the device from activating, and was it an integral part of the device?"

"For the time being, maybe. But your scientists will figure out the inner workings, and they will simply develop a new device. I'm telling you this device cannot be controlled with today's technology."

“Well, there’s nothing we can do about that. I do know there is one more of these boxes out there that we have to find. The next one we’ll somehow have to find a way to destroy before Jules gets his hands on it.”

“In his defense,” Jill said, “he was following orders from the top. I know Jules is arrogant and sometime a complete asshole. But he does do his job. If he said it came from the top, then it did. I’ve never known him to lie about anything.”

Jill went back into the house and again sat next to Zarar and asked him, “How was this group going to keep in touch with the other group?”

Zarar thought about this and answered, “Kalob had a cell phone. He kept checking it as though he was waiting for a call. I didn’t see any other phones.”

“Let’s do a search of the bodies and the house. There must be another cell phone. I also want the white van taken down to its very frame,” said Jill. “I want complete descriptions of everyone who left here. Zarar said, “As long as my family is safe, I will do whatever you want.”

John nodded. “If this guy Kalob figures out we took out these guys, he’ll probably have a contingency plan. What year is your Mercedes that this Kalob fellow took?”

“It’s a 2011, why?”

John looked at Jill and she smiled. “I’ll get right on it,” said Jill. She was already on her cell calling Coleman.

“Coleman here,” said the voice on the phone.

“Get online to DMV, and get all the info on Zarar Raskin’s Mercedes. Find out if we can hook into his GPS to locate the car. I want LAX on full alert. Get out the photo of Imaad to all the police there. I also want at least eight agents at Terminals 3 and 7, and at least four more roaming all the other terminals. Starting now! If Imaad is spotted, we have to kill onsite. He’ll have the last box or whatever it is. Put out a warning to everyone that he will have a backup shooter protecting him, possibly a couple of them. They had a detonation time of 4:00 p.m., but now that we have one of these things, he could strike sooner or somewhere else entirely. Let’s move it, gentlemen. There are a lot of lives at stake.”

“Oh, Mayfield, Director Jules is headed to your position. He left here with a big smile on face, which is never good.”

“The asshole has already been here.”

Chapter 40

“Let’s get to the airport, and set our men into position,” Jill said.

“Yeah, I just don’t like putting all our money on those two terminals. Now that they’re down to one device they could blow any terminal. And get the same result,” John said.

"We only have so much manpower, John. I'll call a friend who's chief of internal security at the airport. He'll get TSA on board."

As Jill dialed, John noticed that her skirt had pulled up over her leg. John looked at her soft, smooth skin. Jill looked over at John and noticed him looking.

"Are you checking out my leg, Director Graves?"

John looked up at her and reached out his hand and squeezed hers firmly but with passion. "Guilty as charged."

Someone answered Jill's call. "Los Angeles airport security, TSA."

"This is Federal Bureau of Investigation Special Agent Mayfield. Is Drew Hines available?"

"Please hold. I'll check, Ma'am."

Jill was put on hold for about thirty seconds.

"Jill Mayfield? Is that you?"

"Hi, Drew, it's been a long time. How are you and your family?"

"Oh, everything is as usual. Tina is pregnant again. David's still in the Marines back in Afghanistan."

"How about you, Jill?"

"Oh, everything is fine. Just trying to save the world, same old stuff."

"Just like your father, a real trooper."

"Drew, so tell me, how are you really doing? I mean how are you dealing with Carol's death?"

He was silent for a moment and then said, "God, I miss her. I miss her every time I walk into the house. I'm thinking about selling the place and get some condo in the Marina."

"Have you mentioned this to Tina or David?"

"Well, I talked to David last week when he called. He said that I should do whatever works the best for me."

Carol was Jill's second mother. Drew Hines was her father's partner in the Bureau for over fifteen years. Jill's earliest memories were of her mom and Carol cooking dinner every Saturday night while her dad and Drew watched sports on TV.

When her father was killed in El Salvador, Drew took it just as hard as anybody in the family. He stayed on the job for five more years, then retired and landed the job as head of security at LAX.

"Losing Carol last year brought back a lot of memories of me and your dad. He was a good man. Maybe the best I've ever known. When he was killed, part of me died, too. If it wasn't for Carol, I would have quit the Bureau that week and said screw the pension."

"Oh, Drew, I'm so sorry about Carol. I miss her so much! You know she was like a second mother to me."

"Listen Jill, I know you didn't call to talk about old times. What's up?"

"I'm not sure if Wilshire has called yet, but we have a credible threat against LAX."

Drew Hines was quiet for a moment. When he spoke again, he was intensely professional. "Are you sure about this?"

"Yes, there's a very dirty bomb out there. Our source says LAX is a possible, even likely target."

"Why hasn't Jules called this in? I've noticed some tension with the TSA people. This might explain a few things. Jill, I know that the FBI doesn't like civilian security to know too much, but I've got good people on the ground here."

"I'll have Coleman send you over some pics of the guy we're after, or I'll just bring them myself. We're meeting a team of agents in Terminal 7 at around 9:00. And Drew, these are really bad people. This is a shoot-first-ask-questions-later scenario."

"Got it, what's the profile?"

As Jill filled in the head of LAX security, John couldn't help but think that Jill had a real passion for her job. After hanging up, she looked at John and said, "That was my dad's partner. I've known him all my life. His wife died last year from breast cancer. It was really horrible. Carol was a great person. Every Christmas she went to Skid Row in downtown to hand out blankets to the homeless. She had a warm heart for any wounded animal. When I was twelve, she showed up one day with a sparrow. Its wing was broken and we made a sling with toothpicks and scotch-tape and when it was better we both took it to the backyard and opened the shoebox and let it go. At first the bird just sat there and looked back and forth between us. Then it looked up at the trees, then back at us. I think it really didn't want to leave. Finally Carol jumped at it and yelled 'GO,GO' and the little bird flew away. I asked her why we couldn't keep it as a pet, and she said, 'God made that bird to be free. Keeping it caged would only destroy what God intended.'"

When John looked back at Jill, he could see tears in her eyes.

Chapter 41

Jill hung up the phone with Drew Hines. They were still at Zarar's house. Her phone immediately rang. She talked for a few minutes then turned to John and said, "Well, yes, he does have a GPS in the Mercedes, but we can't track him unless they turn it on."

John gave this a thought and said, "The airport is covered well enough for now. I don't think they'll move this quickly. They can't even be sure that Abdul or the devices have been breached. I think we're safe 'till morning. I haven't slept much in the last few days. Why don't you give me a ride back to the hotel, and we'll meet up at 6:00 a.m. and go from there?" He added, "Oh, and Jill, let's keep the black-and-whites out of sight in case they come back. I want the place to look normal. Just be sure to have a few good agents inside. I doubt they will, but you never can tell."

An agent searching the house yelled out, "Got something here! Looks like a cell phone under the couch."

"Bag it," said Jill. "Check its history, like right now."

The agent deftly scooted the phone into a plastic bag using a pen and handed it to Jill. She managed to open it inside the bag. "It's been turned off," said Jill.

"They probably had set times to communicate," said John.

From the outside of the bag, Jill pressed the power button. A message came on the screen that read, "You have 30 minutes of talk time remaining."

"Can you check the history?" asked John.

Jill fiddled with the phone for a moment, and said, "Got it. He's received three calls in the last two days."

"How about outgoing?" John asked.

"Let me check." Jill pushed the button. "One outgoing call from this morning. Same number as the incoming calls."

"What were the times of the incoming calls?"

"Mmm, let's see, one was at 4:30 tonight and one at 5:30."

"So, they're checking in with each other every hour on the half-hour mark." John looked at his watch. "That means they probably missed the 6:30 call. Does the phone show missed calls?"

Jill hit another key. "As a matter of fact, it does. There was a missed call at exactly 6:30, and it's from the same number."

"Shit," said John. "That means they know something's wrong."

Jill handed the phone back to the agent. "Get this to the lab for analysis and see if we can get a fix on the other phone's location."

"Wait," said John. "It's 1915 hours, I mean 7:15, sorry, habit. Let's see if he calls back at 7:30."

Jill thought for a moment, took out her own phone, and called Coleman at Wilshire. "We found a pre-paid cell phone and there is only one number that called it. It seems our friends are checking in on the half-hour mark. Put a trace on 757-465-2332. They should be calling back in about ten minutes."

"Got it, trace will begin in about four minutes. With luck, the phone is on and we can get a location in a few minutes."

"Good. Let me know," Jill said as she shut off her phone. "So what do we do if the phone rings?"

"I'll have friendly chat with them in Farsi. Hopefully, they won't notice my accent. I'll say as little as possible."

"I don't like it, Director. But we should just let it ring so they won't know for sure what's wrong."

"You may have a good point there," replied John.

The room was dead silent. Everyone stared at the phone on the table. At 7:30 the phone remained silent. They waited another ten minutes, and Jill said, "They're not calling. Get the phone to the lab."

Then her phone rang. "Mayfield."

"Coleman here, we got nothing. The phone must be turned off. We'll continue to monitor the number around the clock. If they turn it on for at least three minutes, we can get a fix."

"Any info on who these dead bad guys are yet?"

"Not yet, we're still running their faces through the database."

"Keep me informed." She hung up.

Chapter 42

When they arrived at the airport, it was dark but no less busy. The airport bustled with activity. John and Jill went to Terminal 7, where they were to meet the night shift of agents. When they approached them, John noticed one man, probably over sixty and wearing a smart grey suit. Jill walked up to the older man and hugged him affectionately. John felt a pang of jealousy.

"Director Graves, I want you to meet Drew Hines, retired FBI and one of the best ever!"

"Oh, stop it, Jill. You're embarrassing me."

"You were the best, Drew. Still are in my book."

"I can only hope so!" Drew replied.

Jill opened her briefcase and took out a dozen photos of Imaad and gave them to Drew. "This is the guy we're sure is involved. Get these out to your people, and remember this guy is heavily armed and extremely dangerous. We believe he's got his own shooters as well. Their plan was to hit Terminals 3 and 7. But we did uncover one of the bombs they were going to use. The strike was set for four o'clock tomorrow."

Drew Hines studied the photos.

"Do the remaining bad guys know you found one?" Drew asked.

"We don't know for sure. But I would have to say it's probable," responded Jill. "Director Jules was an idiot to keep you out of the loop."

"But, Jill, I can have twenty off-duty cops here in an hour, and I will. I just wish the Bureau would be more open-minded."

"Well, Drew, TSA is a federal agency. You are a civilian back-door security company."

"You know what the Bureau thinks about its personnel taking on civilian security jobs. I'm just an old fart that shouldn't do anything but pull weeds out of my garden."

"Yeah, right," said Jill.

Drew looked over to John. "Is this your partner?"

"Only temporary. Drew Hines, please meet Assistant Director Graves."

Drew extended his hand and John shook it.

"You look to be in better condition than any of the Assistant Directors I've ever met."

"Let's just say I've been in a different world until a few days ago."

"Jill, I'd love to talk but we've to get to work," Drew said.

"After this is over, can we get together for dinner?" inquired Jill.

"Of course, honey, how's your mom?" asked Drew

"Wish I knew. I haven't seen or talked to her in over a year now," Jill said as she looked at the ground.

Drew said, "I need to brief my security agents. Please, take care of yourself, Jill. From what you've told me, this could get really nasty really fast."

John walked over to Drew and offered his hand. "Nice meeting you, Mr. Hines." When Drew shook his hand, he again felt John's forceful strong grip. "Jill, stay close to this man. Something tells me he's a bit more than your average Bureau man."

"Yeah, he's a lot more capable than you'd think."

Drew, still shaking John's hand, said, "I have no doubt, no doubt whatsoever."

"Our agents will be at Terminals 3 and 7. I think it might be a good idea to have your people watch the other terminals," said John to Drew. Drew nodded in agreement. With that, Drew again hugged Jill, then turned and walked away studying the photos Jill had given him.

"I thought TSA and the LAPD did airport security," John wondered.

"They do, but the airport has their own security detail to patrol behind the scenes. The tarmac and baggage areas and some plainclothes work in the terminals. Most of them also work as Air Marshals when they're not working here or at LAPD."

John and Jill briefed the agents. When they were satisfied that everything was under control, John asked, "How about some dinner? There's not much we can do here with agents watching both terminals, and four more agents roaming all the other terminals. Your old buddy is beefing up his security. I don't think they'll hit tonight until they're sure that we've got the other device."

"Are you always hungry, John?"

"You know, growing boy and all." Jill rolled her eyes.

"I just feel like we should be here." Jill said.

"They planned on hitting tomorrow. We can't stay up all night, then be at our best when we need to be. Besides, I'm hungry."

Okay, what do you have in mind?"

"How about that place by the 405 offramp we drove by?"

"The Bandit Steakhouse? I've never been there. Sure, why not?"

This time, John drove. For a couple of minutes, they drove in silence through the clogged airport traffic.

"When do you think they'll make their move?" asked Jill.

"Don't know. I'm still thinking that they might have moved the target, but I'm pretty sure it's not the Federal Building."

"I hope you're right. I have a lot of friends there."

John looked at Jill and said, "I sure hope I'm right, too."

After they parked at the restaurant, John opened the door for Jill. The restaurant was very dark with sawdust on the floor. To the left was a room filled with pool tables and flat screen TVs. At the podium in front of them was a young hostess who couldn't have been over seventeen.

They walked up to her. John raised two fingers.

"Dinner for two. Right this way." She took two menus from under the counter. She led them to their table. John scanned the other tables in the dining room. When they were seated, the hostess asked, "What can I get you to drink?"

"Scotch-on-the rocks and a glass of water," John said.

"A glass of your house Chardonnay, thank you," Jill said.

"Okay, I'll be right back with your drinks. Tonight your server will be Charles." The hostess turned and walked away. John watched the hostess, who had a perfect seventeen-year-old body.

"See something you like, John?"

"Just looking. She's young enough to be my daughter."

Jill shook her head, opened the menu, and muttered, "Humph. Men."

"I think I might eat light. Maybe the deli burger," Jill said.

"Well, since it's a steakhouse, I'm going to have the prime rib."

When their drinks arrived, they leaned back in the booth and just stared at each other.

"We should talk about what happened in Glendale earlier," Jill ventured.

"Okay, I think it's wonderful. I haven't felt this way about anybody in a long time."

"This is just moving too fast. I don't even know if you'll stay in LA after this case is over. You'll go back to the SEALs and I'll never see you again."

John reached over and took Jill's hand in his. Her hand was a third of the size of John's.

"I've thought about the same thing. A lot, actually." John stopped to gather his thoughts. "Jill, the Navy is all I've known for most of my life. I never dreamed that I'd be working for the FBI, as an Assistant Director, no less. But I'm glad everything happened the way it did."

"How so?"

"Well, if I hadn't been discharged and sent to Los Angeles, I would have never met you. I can't promise that I won't go back to the SEALs, but right now, I'm leaning more toward

staying in California. I have my Navy pension, and I'm sure there are jobs in security firms, or maybe bodyguard work for all these rich and famous movie stars."

"Why not stay with the Bureau? Besides, I don't think I want you hanging around some twenty-something starlet judging by the way you checked out the hostess a few minutes ago."

John just smiled at Jill. She smiled back and felt her heart pounding. *Is it possible that I'm falling in love with this man?* thought Jill. John reached over with both hands and took Jill's hands in his. When their food arrived, they pulled their hands apart but their eyes remained locked.

During dinner, John looked up and saw a lone bartender sweeping the floor. He was about to get up and order another drink, when he saw a man walk in the front door wearing a cowboy hat and sunglasses.

John made his way to the bar while watching the man approach. He heard him say something to the bartender, and opened his coat, exposing a gun in his waistband. The

bartender just nodded, his face turning white with fear in his eyes. He walked over to the cash register with a frightened look.

John walked right up to the man with the gun and said, "Roy? Roy Feldman? I haven't seen you in ages! Let me buy you a drink!"

The man looked at John, a little shocked at being approached. "Sorry, buddy, I'm not Roy and I've never seen you before. Now beat it!"

"Oh, sorry, you look like someone I used to know. Let me just get some of these napkins, and I'll leave you alone." As John reached across the man toward the pile of bar napkins with his right hand, his left hand reached inside the guy's coat. With surprising speed, he grabbed the gun.

"Hey! What the fuck?" yelled the man. John tossed the gun to the floor a few feet away. He grabbed the man by the hair, and slammed his face onto the bar.

He lifted up his head, and saw the guy was still conscious. John said, "Night, night," and again slammed his face onto the bar. This time, he let go of the guy, and watched him fall to the floor like a sack of potatoes. When John turned around, Jill was standing behind him with her gun drawn in a shooting stance. "Honey, would you like some dessert?" John said with a small smile.

Chapter 43

It was 11:30 p.m., in Beverly Hills, the streets were quiet.

North Palm Drive was lined with mansions. Most had tall security gates and surveillance systems. Rodeo Drive was just down the street. Stores there sold Hermes scarves for a thousand dollars each.

The palm trees and street lights went back as far as the 1920's. Many TV and movie stars lived on North Palm, as did many rich Iranians.

The Beverly Hills police department patrolled the streets regularly. Tonight was no different.

Things were not so quiet at 2254 North Palm Drive. The driveway was over one hundred yards long. It led to a huge house styled after "Tara" in "Gone with the Wind."

The grounds were landscaped with every shrub and rose bush perfectly trimmed. The one-acre backyard had been equipped with the most extensive lighting and sound systems. At eight o'clock in the evening everything was dark and quiet.

In the gazebo by the enormous pool, sat a man smoking a cigarette. Every now and then, he flicked the ashes onto the table in front of him. After a few minutes, he crushed his cigarette out on the teak tabletop and lit another one.

After a fourth cigarette, he got up and went back to the house. He walked into the kitchen and looked around the expensively appointed room.

Imaad shook his head in disgust. He walked into the dining room and looked at the huge chandelier over an oak table which could seat at least 12 people. He ran his fingers from end to end. He smelled the furniture polish on his fingers then wiped his hand on his pants as though it had been poisoned.

Then Imaad went into the formal living room, and looked at a man in a large overstuffed couch. The man's hands, feet and mouth had been duct-taped. On the couch next to him was his wife, tied up the same way.

Next to her was a girl about 17 years old, secured in the same way as her parents.

Kalob was sitting in a chair across from the man. Al-Ba'ith sat at a table with an Uzi on the table next to him.

"Are you wondering why we picked you, Khalil? Why we came to your beautiful home and tied up your beautiful family? Your father was a loyalist to the Shah and you have given up all Islamic values. Several months ago, a man went to your office asking for donations for the Islamic League for Survival. Do you remember that, Khalil?"

Khalil nodded.

"Good. The Islamic League for Survival is an organization to fund our missions here in the United States. You not only turned him down, but insulted him by demanding he leave your office and never come back. That is when we decided to look deeper into your past."

"Look at your wife! She wears makeup like a common whore and your daughter wears hardly any clothes! I can even see most of her breast! You should be ashamed, Khalil. Your father stole billions of dollars from my country, and you spend the money on everything that has filth attached to it."

Al-Ba'ith beckoned to Imaad to come over. Imaad really wanted to kill the captives right here, right now. He didn't like having non-believers anywhere near him.

He and Al-Ba'ith whispered to each other. Then Al-Ba'ith handed over the Uzi. Imaad took his place, guarding the suitcase with the box device. Al-Ba'ith walked over to the couch, and removed the tape from the teenager's ankles, took her taped hands and lifted her up.

"Come, on, now, Jenny, isn't that what your father calls you? I think it is time for you to become a woman."

Her mother started screaming from under the tape, shaking her head, tears running down her face. She fell off the couch onto the floor crying and screaming.

Khalil sat with his eyes closed, tears running down his face. Al-Ba'ith pulled the teenager up the stairs and dragged her to the master bedroom. He shut the door.

"Looks like Al-Ba'ith wants to sample a virgin before he arrives in paradise. But, then again, the way she's dressed, she's probably been taken a few times already. American women are such whores."

A half hour later, Al-Ba'ith came down the stairs. He went to the game table and took the gun from Imaad. Imaad watched as Ahriman, who was watching the street from the upstairs bedroom window, look into the bedroom. He then looked down at Imaad, smiled, and went into the room and closed the door.

"You go next. She's tied to the bed. I had to leave the tape over her mouth. She made too much noise. Pity, I had plans for her mouth as well. Something tells me Ahriman will break in another part of her young body." Al-Ba'ith laughed like he just heard a very funny joke.

"No, I do not rape women. I'll wait for the virgins that I earn tomorrow." Imaad then patted the box in front of him.

A few minutes later, Ubah came in the front door carrying a bag of Persian food. She looked around the room and asked, "Where is the young girl?"

Al-ba'ith laughed, and said, "She's not a little girl anymore. I just made her a woman."

"Is she dead?" asked Ubah.

"No, she's upstairs tied to the bed. Why, would you like some of her, Ubah?"

"You are a pig, Al-ba'ith," said Ubah. She walked into the kitchen visibly upset with tears in her eyes.

Al-ba'ith just laughed. He then looked at Jenny's mother, and said, "Your daughter enjoyed it very much. I believe tonight I will fuck her again before I cut her throat. Maybe she will calm down enough so that I can take the tape off her mouth, and teach her even more how to pleasure a man."

Ubah heard this from the kitchen and walked to the door. She looked at Al-ba'ith with such a cold stare that he quit smiling and squirmed in his chair.

"Ubah, why don't you prepare dinner, I'm very hungry," said Kalob.

Ubah turned and walked back into the kitchen. Kalob looked at Al-ba'ith. "Be careful of her, Al-ba'ith. She looks like an innocent Lily, but she can become a tiger. I've seen what she is capable of. There is a good reason she was chosen for this mission. It was not only to cook."

Al-Ba'ith just shrugged, as if his warning meant nothing.

Soon Ahriman came back from the bedroom buckling his belt. Ubah watched him go to another bedroom facing the street. A look of pure hatred crossed her face. "Why don't you just kill that poor girl?"

Ten minutes later, Ubah returned with several plates of food she'd bought at the Shamhiri Grill, and she took another plate of food up to Ahriman. As she was returning, she stopped at the master bedroom door and looked in for a moment. She went in for a few minutes, then came back out and shut the door. The three men ate in silence.

Kalob said, "Ubah, eat something, tomorrow is a big day."

"No, I've lost my appetite." Together the men ate.

When they finished, Ubah collected the dishes and took them to the kitchen. A few minutes later, Al-Ba'ith got a strange look on his face. He got up, dropping the Uzi and ran to the bathroom. Kalob sat quietly for a moment and then went into the kitchen.

"Ubah, what was in Al-Ba'ith's food that sent him running to the bathroom?"

"Just a bottle of laxative I found in the bathroom."

"The whole bottle?" Kalob asked.

"No, I just put less than half of it into his food. I don't think he'll be bothering that girl anymore tonight. But he'll be fine by tomorrow. He'll die with a clean stomach and an even cleaner asshole."

"We need to cooperate with each other until our task is complete. I want you to get along with Al-Ba'ith as much as you possibly can," Kalob said.

"Did you do the same thing to Ahriman's food?"

"I did. He got even more, because he did something horrible to her!"

"Why are you so concerned about this family who's about to die?" Kalob asked.

Ubah turned to him and said, "I have been where that girl is now. I'm going upstairs, and clean up that poor girl and bring her back down to be with her parents. If Al-Ba'ith or Ahriman go near her or her mother, I'll kill them, Kalob. You know what I am capable of. If I wasn't gang-raped as a young girl I might have had a normal life."

"Understood, I will warn them," said Kalob.

"But we have bigger problems. Abdul is not picking up his cell phone."

"What could have happened?" asked Ubah.

"I don't know. Maybe the battery is dead. Or maybe he is dead. Either way, we will complete our mission tomorrow. May God be with us."

"Do we have to kill this family? They have already suffered a enough," asked Ubah.

"Yes, Ubah, we have no choice. It was ordered from a higher source than me. Tomorrow they will die, even the girl. I was told it is written."

At that moment, they both heard the upstairs toilet flush. Kalob just smiled and shook his head and said, "I am glad that I am too old to have the need of a young girl." He then looked at his own empty bowl in the sink with concern.

"I thought about putting a little in yours for not stopping those fucking pigs from raping her. But then I remembered that you must keep them happy and not create a situation."

"I am sorry that I did nothing to stop them, but I'm sure not as sorry as they are."

Ubah went upstairs to the master bedroom and closed the door. After ten minutes, she came out with young Jenny under her arm.

Ahriman came out of a bedroom, and walked up to Ubah and said, "You bitch! What did you put in my food? I'm going to beat you like the whore you are!"

Before Ahriman could make a fist, out of nowhere Ubah had a knife and put it to his throat.

"Whore! You dare call me a whore, you fucking rapist!"

"Stop!" yelled Kalob from the bottom of the stairs.

"Ahriman, get back to watching the street, and stay away from the girl and her mother. Ubah is very serious and very deadly. I need to keep you alive." Ahriman turned and walked back to the bedroom from which he was keeping watch.

Kalob turned to Al-Ba'ith and said, "The same goes for you! Just concentrate on what we're here to do. No more bullshit, understand?"

"I understand," said Al-Ba'ith, as he headed back to the bathroom.

Imaad sat in a chair the entire time watching the situation unfold. He lit another cigarette. He watched Ubah come down the stairs with the girl, who was now dressed in her mother's clothes. Ubah set her on the couch by her parents and said, in English, "No one else will touch you. I promise."

Ubah went back into the kitchen to get untainted food for Jenny.

Imaad stood up, put his cigarette out on the plush carpet and walked over to the couch. He pulled out his .45 and shot Jenny in the head. Ubah ran to the kitchen door and looked at the dead girl on the couch by her parents. She looked at Imaad.

He said, "Now there will be no temptation."

Chapter 44

A half hour later, they were back in the car driving toward the 405 Freeway.

"So, Assistant Director Graves, have you ever been married, or are you a bachelor for life?"

John looked at Jill for a long moment. "Yeah, been there done that. Didn't last long, guess I'm the one who screwed up. At least, that's what she says."

"Any kids?"

"Could we just change the subject, Mayfield?"

"Got it," Jill said. They were silent as the car crept down the jammed 405 Freeway.

John couldn't stop himself from looking over at Jill. *She really is beautiful*, he thought.

"No, that's okay, I just can't get rid of this feeling that we missed something."

"I can't imagine what," Jill cautiously said.

"Oh, it's probably just me. I've spent so many years planning and executing missions to the point where I'm prepared for any scenario. This mission is like a new tactic for me. We're basically running blind."

Jill replied, "In this business, sometimes we run around like a chicken with its head cut off. All we can do is try and outsmart the assholes. A lot of the time, it's just plain luck."

"We could sure use some luck right now," John said.

"Let me ask you. If you were the bad guy with this device, what would you do right now?"

John gave this some thought. "Me? I'd lay low, somewhere no one would look. I'd also try to stay somewhat close to my target."

"Hmm, close to the target. Maybe we should send some agents to the hotels close to LAX, flash the photos we have, and check the parking garages for Zazar's Mercedes." Jill got on her phone. Ten minutes later, five agents were enroute to the hotels surrounding LAX.

"Jill, can I ask you a personal question?"

"Sure, don't know if I'll answer it, but shoot."

"I assume you're in a relationship?"

"Well, off and on, why?"

"Just wondering, you're a very attractive woman."

"Director Graves, are you hitting on me again?"

"Let's just say that I find myself drawn to you, and maybe we could have a real date when this is all over."

"Let's get this case out of the way then we'll see."

"Good enough."

A few minutes later, they arrived at the Doubletree Hotel.

"Why don't you come in and join me for a drink? I know I could sure use one," John said.

Jill looked at John for several seconds, as if to interpret his intentions.

"Well, I could sure use one, too. What the hell," Jill said.

They valet-parked the car. Jill told the valet that they would only stay for a little while. They went into the lounge bar and sat in a booth. John ordered vodka-on-the-rocks, Jill a glass of Merlot. They both looked around the lounge hoping to spot Imaad, the man in the photos.

At the same moment they realized they were both searching the evening crowd.

"Great minds think alike," Jill said smiling.

"Yeah, well they wouldn't be in here anyway. Most Muslims don't drink. They would stay in their room and order room service.

"Was your divorce bad?" asked John. Jill looked at him strangely. "Where did that come from? I told you I've sworn off men. Does that sound like a nice divorce?"

"Okay, so you had a bad time of it. How bad?" asked John.

“What do you think? He was a family-law attorney and knew all the angles and all the judges. I got the shaft, and he got the gold.”

“What about you John? Any kids?”

John momentarily broke their gaze and motioned over to the waiter for refills.

“Yeah, I have a nine-year-old daughter, Nikki.”

“That’s a cute name, how often do you see her?”

“I haven’t seen her in seven years. My wife got full custody and didn’t want me in Nikki’s life. She remarried, and wants her new husband to be her only father. After that, the Navy was my family.”

Jill looked closely at him and saw the hurt and sadness in his eyes. Not only did he lose his family, but got pulled out of the service with no warning. She reached over, and put her hand on John’s.

“Will you be going back to the SEALs after this is over?”

John looked down at her hand on his and turned his palm up so now they were really holding hands. Jill could feel the strength in his fingers. “I really don’t know. I’ll just have to wait and see how this plays out. If this nut blows up the airport tomorrow with us in it, then I guess I won’t have to worry about it.”

They stared into each other’s eyes. John could feel Jill caressing his palm with her fingers. “Any chance of a switch-hitter tonight?” asked John.

Jill sat quietly for a few minutes. She drank the rest of her wine. She looked into John’s eyes and said, “I don’t know. Are you a good pitcher?”

A half-hour later, they walked into John’s room. Once inside, John shut the door, took Jill’s hand, spun her around, held her by the waist and kissed her for a good thirty seconds. Jill wrapped her arms around John’s neck and kissed him back, squeezing him tightly.

She let her right hand slide down his body, and touched his groin. “Nice bat,” Jill said.

Chapter 45

After the shock of seeing Jenny murdered, Ubah looked at Imaad. She was about to say something. But when she looked into his eyes, she saw pure evil.

Imaad was twelve feet from her, so she’d had no a chance with her knife. She went back into the kitchen and sat at the breakfast table and cried.

Kalob was the first to speak. “Enough of this! We are here on an important mission! Abdul, take these people into the dining room and duct-tape them to chairs.”

Kalob thought about what to do next. *I only hope the neighbors didn’t hear that shot.*

“Watch the street! Someone nearby might have heard the shot and called the police!”

A half hour later, no one showed up and Kalob started to relax. “We need to get some sleep. Al-Ba’ith, you will take the first watch until one o’clock. Imaad, you have the watch from one to four. I will take over then.”

They took both parents into the dining room and duct-taped them to the chairs. After this, Kalob said, “I will take the couch. Imaad, you can sleep in one of the upstairs bedrooms. Ubah?”

She came out of the kitchen staring at Imaad with pure hatred.

“Ubah, you sleep in the master bedroom and lock the door. It seems you have upset Ahriman and Imaad. You know they are very dangerous men.”

“I’m also a very dangerous woman,” Ubah said.

“Yes, yes, I know. But tonight is the eve of a very special event. I want everyone to get along. Tomorrow we will all be in heaven.”

Kalob’s heart was heavy. He really wanted no part of this mission. But he had no choice. For twenty years he had lived in the United States and had come to actually like most Americans. He had worked for the same company for fourteen years and had many good friends there. He went to the Christmas parties and every other company social gathering. That was until a week ago when he was approached by the two Iranian men who told him that they would torture him if he didn’t cooperate.

Kalob was sent to the United States as a spy. He graduated from the top university in Iran. They planned for him to enter politics. But Americans weren’t yet ready for a Middle Eastern diplomat.

It was now 9:00.

Kalob stretched out on the couch. “Ahriman, you take the first watch and don’t forget to wake Imaad at one o’clock. Imaad, you’ll wake me at four and I’ll take the last watch.”

“Why isn’t Ubah standing watch?” Ahriman asked.

“Because I said so. No questions. Just do as I say.”

Suddenly the gate buzzer rang. Everyone froze. Kalob ran to the stairs and called up to Al-Ba’ith. Instead of an answer, he heard the toilet flush. He turned and looked at Ubah and took a deep breath, as though to say, *See what your little prank did.* Again the buzzer sounded. “Al-Ba’ith, someone is at the gate. Can you see who’s out there?”

He then saw Al-Ba’ith run from the bathroom to the bedroom with the best view of the street.

He then came to the top of the stairs and said, “It’s some guy with a big expensive car.”

Kalob thought fast.

We have to let him in. If no one answers, he might get suspicious and call the police.

Kalob walked to the couch and pulled the tape from Emir’s mouth.

“How do you open the gate from the house?” Kalob asked.

“The telephone, dial 911.”

“Do you think were stupid? We’ll start cutting up your wife if you don’t tell me!”

“Dial 404, and the gates will open.”

“For your wife’s sake, I hope you are telling the truth.”

Imaad smiled at the prospect of cutting the wife into little pieces in front of her husband. This did not go unnoticed by Kalob. He went to the phone and dialed 404. Al-Ba’ith yelled from upstairs that the gates were opening. Kalob hung up and said, “Move these two into another room. Ubah, I want you to answer the door and invite him in.” He looked down at Jenny’s body.

“Cover her with a blanket, and put her behind the couch. Imaad, stay behind those curtains. I’ll talk to him and find out if anyone knows he’s here.

When you see me nod, kill him.” Imaad smiled and said, “Gladly.”

A minute later there was a knock at the door. Ubah answered the door.

“Hello, can I help you?”

“Yes, I’m Alex Cross, I live up the street. Is Emir home? I need to talk to him.”

Kalob walked into the room with a smile on his face. “Alex Cross the famous movie actor?”

“Well, yes. Where’s Emir?”

“He’s meeting my boss in his office. Please have a seat. They’ll be done soon.”

“Well, thank you,” said Alex. He sat in an over-stuffed chair by the window.

“So, Mr Cross, how do you know Emir? How do we have the pleasure of such a big celebrity?”

“Emir and I have been friends for several years. He was actually instrumental in my success. I just dropped my wife and daughter off at the airport. They’re going stay in our Maui home for a week. I’m sure you heard about the whole kidnapping thing.”

Kalob nodded to Imaad. Slowly, Imaad moved behind Alex. Alex then noticed the blanket on the floor. He also noticed some blood on the couch. Looking closer, he saw a bare foot sticking out of the blanket.

“Hey, what going on...” He never finished his sentence.

“Take his and the girl’s bodies and put them somewhere out of sight,” Kalob commanded.

Kalob looked out the window to see Alex Cross’s Rolls Royce.

“Perfect. Authorities usually don’t pull over the rich. Get his keys. We’ll use this car tomorrow.”

Kalob’s phone rang. He looked at the number but didn’t recognize it. He answered and just listened for a full minute. He thanked the caller and put the phone back into his pocket. He just stood there and stared at the cars.

“Is something wrong?” asked Imaad.

“Yes, that was Chicago. Zarar’s wife and her sister were taken into protective custody. They also arrested two of our people who were watching them.”

“What does that mean?” questioned Ubah.

“I’m not sure, but possibly Zarar escaped and warned the police. Which also means they will be looking for his car. They must also know about our plans to blow LAX.”

Kalob looked at the Mercedes and said, “Al-Ba’ith, you and Ahriman, take the Mercedes and the girl’s BMW and park Zarar’s Mercedes somewhere close to the Federal Building on Wilshire. We need to make them believe that that’s the target. We will change terminals as well. And hurry back.”

He watched the men leave in both cars. Satisfied that he made the right decisions, he said, “There is nothing else we can do tonight. Tomorrow we’ll strike much earlier than planned.” Imaad nodded and went back into the house.

Once everything was back in order, Kalob went over to the flat screen, picked up the remote control and turned on the TV. He switched to the news. He got comfortable, putting a cushion under his head. Ubah came out of the kitchen and went to the stairs.

On her way up, Kalob said, “Good night, Ubah. Lock your door.” She stopped briefly, nodded and went into the master bedroom and locked the door.

Kalob was exhausted. He wasn’t used to this kind of stress. He closed his eyes and fell asleep.

An hour later, the men returned with only the BMW. Ten minutes later, Imaad went up the stairs and crawled into Jenny’s bed. He could smell her perfume on the pillow, which made him smile.

Imaad dreamt of being in prison back in Iran. He was alone in his cell on his bed staring at the ceiling. Suddenly, his cell door opened. The guard pushed another prisoner in the cell. When Imaad looked up, it was Omid. He looked down at Imaad and smiled, showing a nearly toothless mouth. When Imaad was a small boy, Omid had grown up in the same neighborhood as Imaad’s family. One hot summer day when Imaad was home alone, he heard a knock on the front door. When Imaad opened the door, Omid stood there smiling just as he did now in Imaad’s dream. He walked into the house and took Imaad by the hand and pulled him into the bedroom. He threw Imaad on the bed, pulled his pants down and raped him. This continued every week for over a year until his father was transferred to another factory in another city and they moved away. Imaad never told a soul about Omid’s little visits.

Now Omid stood there in Imaad’s cell!

“Hello, my little Imaad, want to play?” Instantly, Imaad was transformed from a grown man back to an eleven-year-old boy.

“Imaad, Imaad! Wake up! It’s one o’clock and I’m tired.”

Imaad opened his eyes to see Ahriman standing by the bed.

“It’s your turn.” Imaad swung his legs over the side of the bed and stretched his arms.

“Is everything quiet?” Imaad asked.

“Yeah, except for that whimpering old lady. She just won’t quit her crying.”

Imaad walked out the door as Ahriman took his spot on the bed. Imaad went downstairs to see Jenny’s parents weeping through the tape. He went outside and walked to the big gates at

the bottom of the driveway and watched the street for several minutes. *All quiet*, thought Imaad. He then went back into the house. There was Kalob on the couch, snoring loudly.

The TV was still on. It was playing some old black-and-white gangster movie. Imaad sat in the overstuffed easy chair and watched the movie blankly. At two o'clock he went to the kitchen and looked in the refrigerator, finding some sliced turkey and cheese. On the counter was a loaf of bread and he made a sandwich then returned to the living room. He stopped in the dining room and looked at the two hostages. The mother's shoulders were heaving in grief. Her eyes were red from the non-stop crying. Across the table, Jenny's father just sat and stared at the mother of his dead child.

After getting comfortable again, Imaad took a bite of his sandwich. It tasted dry. He decided he needed some water to wash it down. He put down the sandwich down and crossed through the dining room into the kitchen. He poured himself a glass of water and saw a butcher's block filled with expensive German knives.

He pulled out a knife and tested the sharpness of the blade with his fingers. He picked up his water and went back into the dining room. He set his glass down on the table and in one movement, he grabbed the crying woman by the hair and slit her throat. He looked at her husband whose eyes were wide with terror. Imaad smiled and thought, *We should we have done this hours ago*. He was still thinking about his dream. A madness was building inside of him. He walked around the table, bent over and whispered into Emir's ear. "Don't worry. Soon you'll be with your wife and daughter!" He looked down at the chair to which he was tied. His wrist was taped to the upper part of the leg. He reached down with the knife and cut off three of his fingers and laid them on the table in front of him and let him look at them for a while. Smiling, he then grabbed him by the hair and slit his throat.

Imaad went back into the kitchen put the knife back in its slot, without washing it. But he washed the blood off his hands. He went back to the dining room. He picked up his water and returned to the movie and his sandwich.

At 4:30, when the movie ended, Imaad went to the couch and shook Kalob awake. "Your watch, old man."

Kalob slowly got up. Imaad took his place on the couch.

"Is everything quiet?" asked Kalob.

"It is now."

Kalob wondered what that meant. "Did something happen?"

"No, I just had a bad dream." He rolled over and closed his eyes with a slight smile on his face thinking, *There will be no more bad dreams tonight*.

Kalob peered out the windows for several minutes. Once he was satisfied all was well, he walked into the dining room and saw the dead parents. Then he saw the three severed fingers on the table. He walked back into the living room and looked down at Imaad thinking, *This is one very sick man. Fortunately, after tomorrow I will never have to set eyes on this murderer again*.

At 8:00, Ubah emerged from the master bedroom.

“Good morning, Ubah. Did you sleep well?” Kalob asked.

“No, I didn’t. I kept thinking about that poor girl. Couldn’t we have just killed her straight off? Nobody should be raped so horribly.” Kalob didn’t answer.

“I made coffee. It’s in the kitchen,” Kalob said. He watched her as she walked into the dining room. He wanted to see her reaction.

As Ubah walked through the dining room on the way to the kitchen, she froze when she saw the dead parents and the fingers on the table.

She kept on walking to the kitchen and poured herself a cup of coffee.

Chapter 46

At 4:00 a.m., Jill woke up. It took her a second to remember where she was. She turned her head expecting to see John next to her, but no one was there.

She sat up and looked around the dark room. John was standing at the window. He was naked, looking out at Century Blvd. Jill got out of bed, walking up behind him and wrapping her arms around him. He could feel her breasts press against his back. It had been a long time since he had felt this way.

“Did I snore and wake you?” asked Jill.

John smiled, and replied, “No, I woke up about an hour ago and just laid there watching you sleep for the longest time. You’re really beautiful when you sleep. I just have this nightmare that haunts me.”

“Did you have one tonight?”

“Yeah, but it was different, I always get a severe anxiety attack afterward. Not tonight. I think that’s because of you.”

“Have you seen a doctor?”

“No, I was afraid they’d take my command away.” He paused and said, “Jill, I really care about you.”

“Oh yeah, bet you say that to all the girls,” Jill smirked.

John smiled, and said, “I was gonna say the same thing to you!” She slapped his ass hard.

“Now let’s get this straight. I’ve only been with one woman, and she’s with the Bureau. When you see her, you’ll know why. She’s beautiful and great in bed.”

“Really, tell me more. What’s her favorite position?”

“You’re a pig, you know that?”

John turned around, and Jill saw his big erection. He picked her up and carried her to the bed. He got on top of her and said, “Maybe now you could give me a few pointers,” and

started to move down her body. John put his face between her legs. In less than five minutes, she had a huge, rolling orgasm. He then moved back on top of her, and kissed her deeply as he inserted himself into her.

“You don’t need any pointers!” breathed Jill passionately.

At 6:00, the phone rang with John’s wake-up call. It was their wake-up call to make love again.

“Wow, that was amazing,” Jill exclaimed.

“Yeah, it’s been such a long time for me. Jill, you’re really special. I mean that,” John said as he caressed her body.

“Okay, Deputy Director Graves, we better get back on the job. We’ve got a bomb to find and it looks like we’re running out of time.”

John got into the shower and was washing his hair when he heard the shower-door open and felt Jill’s hands rubbing his muscled chest. He rinsed the shampoo out of his hair and began kissing Jill with their naked bodies wrapped around each other.

“We’ve got to get back to work,” John said.

“I’ve gotta go back to my place to change clothes. It’s not far, just down the road in Venice Beach.”

“Okay, but we’ll have to make it quick. I want to be at LAX before eight and brief the day shift of agents just getting on duty.”

“Well, I’m already showered. It won’t take me but a minute. These clothes smell funky.”

“I like the way they smell, kinda turns me on!”

“You’re disgusting!”

John put on one of his new suits with no tie. “You’re very handsome in your suit. I bet you looked great in your Naval uniform.” Do you have pictures you can show me?”

“Most of my stuff is at Little Creek, Virginia. Let’s just say I didn’t have time to properly pack. I don’t have much, just some mementos and a lot of junk.” They left the room and went to the valet parking. Four minutes later, they were out on the Pacific Coast Highway, headed to Venice Beach.

“What are we going to do? It sure didn’t feel like a one-night stand. I have real feelings for you, Jill. I’m falling for you. I know we’ve only known each other a few days.”

“Well, they say when it’s right, it happens quickly. I knew we’d be together the minute I laid eyes on you. Don’t let that go to your head, Mister Director Graves. We have a bigger problem. It’s against Bureau policy to date another agent.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it. Let’s just say I have friends in very high places. Jules won’t be in charge much longer. I’ll have a chat with the director. That’s if we live through the rest of the day.”

They arrived at Jill’s condo, and Jill went into the bedroom to change clothes. John walked all around her place looking at her photos and reading the titles of the books on her

shelf. Stephen King, Charles Dickens, James Clavell, Jean M. Auel. John was pleased to see how many of these he had also read.

John sat down in a love-seat by the back window with a view of some of the beach and a bit of the ocean. A genuine black and white tuxedo cat came silently into the room and studied John for several minutes. She then jumped onto his lap, and started purring.

Jill came out of the bedroom half-dressed and slipped on her shirt.

"How about a quick breakfast? I'm starved," Jill said.

"I think I just met your roommate. Let's eat at the airport. I really want to get back." Jill turned and saw her cat Shadow parked on John's lap.

"Huh, she doesn't usually like strangers." Then Jill went into the kitchen. John heard her putting dishes away.

"So, you like unicorns and elves?" asked John. Jill came out of the kitchen. He noticed how nice she looked in her blue outfit with matching shoes.

"You look beautiful, Jill."

Jill smiled. She looked at her collection and said, "Ever since I was a little girl I loved these things. I've had some of them for years. Some even belonged to my father." John picked up Shadow and gently put her on the ground. He got up and walked over to Jill and kissed her for two whole minutes.

"Let's go, or I'm going to do something I'll regret, Director Graves!"

"That could be considered insubordination, Mayfield!"

"Really! Then you promise to punish me later?"

"Without a doubt, a good flogging might be in order," answered John sternly.

"Hmm, you're quite the romantic." They went out the door, Jill smiling as John furtively adjusted the erection in his pants.

"It's only seven o'clock. Let's stop and grab a bite. I think we'll have time if we hurry. We might not be able to eat again until late."

Ten minutes later, they were in a cafe on Ocean Ave. John ordered the steak and eggs while Jill got the oatmeal.

"What's our next move?" asked Jill.

"I plan to eat breakfast, then I think we should head over to the airport. I was thinking that you should go back to Wilshire and monitor things from there."

Jill thought about this for a few minutes when the waitress brought their food to the table.

"Are you trying to get rid of me?"

"No, not exactly, I just thought you would be more help from there. Besides, things at the airport could get real ugly. I've seen what these devices can do, it's not pretty."

They continued to eat, both deep in thought.

"You're not getting rid of me that easy. Besides, we only have one car."

Jill's phone rang. She reached into her purse, and looked at the number.

“It’s Wilshire,” Jill said.

“Of course it is. We just got breakfast.”

Chapter 47

Abe Fishman walked down the cracked sidewalk in Tel Aviv. Nobody paid him much attention, except for the man in an alley watching him closely. Abe made his way to a three-story building and went inside where he was greeted by four very large men carrying automatic rifles.

“I’m here to see Sal Zavahi. Please tell him Abe Fishman is here to see him.”

“Please sit in that chair, sir,” said one of the men. Abe did as he was told and noticed a small camera across the hall pointed at him. Another guard picked up the phone and spoke quietly.

“Okay, Sal said you’re good to go in, but first we have to search you.” Abe leaned against a wall and was thoroughly searched. He was then led to an elevator. He went inside with a guard and they went to the third floor. When the door opened, the guard told Abe to walk down the hallway to the steel doors and press the buzzer.

Abe walked down the hallway with the guard watching him intently. He pressed the buzzer and instantly a small hatch in the door opened. A man looked at him for several seconds, then looked at the guard in the elevator who nodded approval. He opened the door. Once Abe was inside, the man shut the door and set several locks.

Abe Fishman was an American. He owned a prestigious jewelry store in Los Angeles and flew to Israel twice a year to buy the best diamonds available. He was a small man five-feet-six-inches. He had semi-long grey hair and a long beard. He was a Hasidic Jew who wore the traditional large brimmed black hat and long black coat. His wife died two years ago and he never recovered from his loss. At 65 years old he could retire, but he needed to work to stay busy. But lately he was feeling tired and old.

He lived in a simple home in the Los Feliz area of Los Angeles.

His trips to Israel were a special treat to Abe. He was able to experience the thrill of being so close to history. He would always visit the wailing wall. Abe would write his prayer on a scrap of paper and force it into a crevice of stone.

Abe looked around the room, which was filled with men working at desks. Most of them wore yarmulkes. A few wore the wide- brimmed hats such as Abe was wearing.

He was led to a room in the back. The man leading him opened the door and nodded. Abe walked into the room. The room was practically empty. In the center of the room was a desk with a man sitting behind it. He looked up at Abe and a large smile crossed his face.

“Abe! How are you?”

“Sal, so good to see you.” Sal got up and walked around the desk and wrapped his arms around Abe.

“Please sit down. Would you like some coffee? Tea?”

“No, I’m fine. Thank you.”

“How long are you here for?” Sal inquired.

“Not long, I’m leaving tomorrow morning. How’s the wife and kids?”

“Good, everyone is well. I’m so sorry about Hillary. I know you loved her very much.” Abe’s smile faded.

“I miss her so much. Life just isn’t the same without her.”

Both men sat silent for several minutes.

“So, I have confirmation of the money you wired,” Sal said.

“Good, and to be honest, this will be my last trip, Sal. I’m selling the shop. I guess you could say I’m going to try and retire.”

“That explains why you sent so much more money than usual.”

“Yeah, seven million dollars is about all I have left after the medical bills were paid. When I get back, I’m going to sell the house. Just too many memories.”

“I understand, old friend. Why don’t you come and live here? I’ll give you a job! It would be like old times.”

Abe sat quietly and said, “You know that’s not such a bad idea, I’ll think about it.”

“Good, you know you are always welcome here.”

“Thank you, Sal.” They got up and went to another office where there was an armed guard at the door.

Once inside, Abe looked at five men with black velvet mats in front of them. On the mats were hundreds of diamonds.

Sal went to the far wall where a large safe stood. He opened it and took out a briefcase and handed it to Abe. Abe took a seat at the table and opened it. Inside were several containers filled with diamonds.

“I handpicked these myself, they are the crème of the crop. And I guarantee they are not blood diamonds. They range from 10 points to three carats,” Sal said.

Abe opened each container and examined a few stones from each one.

“Very nice. Very nice indeed. These are excellent quality. Thank you, Sal.”

I am going to send Duran with you. He’ll be sure you’re safe while you’re here. Did you make arrangements for protection in the US?”

“No, no one even knows I’m here. Besides, too much security just makes me more conspicuous. Better to just take a taxi from the airport to the shop and put them in the vault.”

Abe left with the briefcase and one of the guards from downstairs.

They made his way to the hotel where he was staying. Several yards behind them walked a solitary man. He would stop occasionally and window shop. When he saw Abe and his bodyguard go into the hotel, he took out his cell phone and placed an international call.

Someone picked up the phone and didn't say anything. "He got the package. He's booked on American Airlines flight 1026. He'll land at LAX at 12:15." The person on the other end just hung up without ever saying a word.

Chapter 48

"Mayfield."

Jill listened carefully. She then said, "They found the Mercedes."

John looked down at his steak-and-eggs and heaved a sigh. "Why do these calls always come in while we're eating? Where did they find it?"

"That's the interesting part. They found it at the West Los Angeles VA facility."

"Was it in a parking lot?" John asked.

"No. The VA has dozens of abandoned buildings left over from WWII. A Federal police officer noticed the Mercedes by the hospital's laundry facility. At first, he didn't think much of it. When it was still there at 8:00 this morning, he ran the plate. We'd better get over there."

Thirty-five minutes later, they were pulling up to several Federal police cars on the corner of Eisenhower Avenue and Bonsall on the north side of Wilshire Blvd.

When they approached the scene, they parked across the street. There were several Federal police officers milling about. Since the LAPD had no jurisdiction on Federal land, the Federal Police were investigating with a dozen FBI agents.

John walked up to the Mercedes. He looked in the windows and examined the license plate. He then slowly did a full circle looking at all the vacant VA Buildings.

Jill reported what the agents had told her.

"All the buildings in the immediate area have been searched. No signs of anyone. They found a homeless guy sleeping in one and that's it. We're expanding the search to other vacant buildings farther away. Wadsworth is the main hospital. Security is beefed up there as well."

A van pulled up and two ATF agents got out. The agents debated various ways to get into the car. John walked back to the car and simply opened the back door.

"Are you crazy? That could have been rigged to explode," yelled one of the ATF agents.

"Let's just say I'm an authority on booby-traps."

"Okay, fine. Let's take out the back seats and get a look inside the trunk," said one of the techs.

John looked back at the car, then at the Federal Building. Then he turned and looked at the sprawling VA Facility.

"Let's go. We're wasting our time here. We've got to get to the airport ASAP."

"But, John, you even said they might change their plans since we found one of the devices," Jill said.

"I did, but this isn't it. These guys have played pretty smart and they're been very careful. Suddenly, you think they got stupid. The plates on the Mercedes are untouched. The car was left out in plain sight. They could have concealed it in a hundred places around here. They made sure to leave it in view of the Federal Building. We need to get to the airport."

"They pulled some of the agents off the LAX detail to come here and help in the search."

"Like I said, their ruse is working well! Let's move!"

They drove down to Wilshire, and once again got on the 405 south toward LAX.

"How many agents are still at LAX?" asked John.

"Four. They are also beefing up security at the Fed Building inside and out. We're lucky to get four agents."

"I really do think you should drop me off and get back to the Federal Building. You would be more useful coordinating things from there."

"No chance. You're stuck with me, mister."

"I really don't want anything to happen to you, Jill. You're the first person to really get inside of me in a long, long time."

Just then, John's cell phone rang. "Graves, here." It was Director Jules.

"Where are you guys going? We need all the available manpower we can get right now! We know they moved their target to hit us here."

John could hear the fear in his voice. Jules was certain that they were the next target.

"Calm down, Jules. I think they're still targeting LAX."

"How can you say that? The Mercedes was found a block from here at a place where they could easily hide out. No, we're the target. I'm sure of it."

"You go right ahead and work your hunch and I'll work mine."

"I could really use Mayfield here. I have to be at the Israeli Embassy at 10:00, and she's a senior member of the task force."

"Israeli Embassy at 10:00, that's covenant."

"What are you trying to say, Graves?"

"Oh nothing, other than rats always abandon a sinking ship. I would recommend you cancel your 10:00 and stay where you are. Otherwise I will have to make a full report on your conduct to the director himself."

Now Jules was yelling into the phone with obvious panic.

"Listen here mister, you have no right to tell me what to do or not to do! A few days ago you were just some fucking overrated Navy piece of shit!"

"All right. You better hope that the target is the Federal Building, because if you're not dead when I get back, you'll wish you were, you asshole!" responded Graves evenly.

Chapter 49

John turned off his phone and looked out the side window. On the west side of the freeway was a large mall with signage for sixteen theaters. John thought, *Why would any theater need sixteen movies playing at once?*

“What did Jules say to get that reaction out of you?”

“Let’s just say if we make it out of this thing alive I intend to stick his head up his ass, then I will make some calls to my new friends, and make sure his next posting is somewhere like Death Valley.”

Jill hadn’t seen him look this serious before.

“Want to talk about it?” asked Jill.

“He just insulted the United States Navy and me, personally. The guy really has no idea who he’s screwing with.”

Jill got off on Sepulveda Blvd. “That asshole is a real piece of work. While the Federal Building is a possible target, he’s taking a hike on some made-up bullshit.”

“What? Jules is leaving the Fed Building! You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“Let’s just get to the airport. We’ll contact our men there and meet one at Terminal 3, and have the other three stay at Terminal 7.”

At the stoplight, Jill dialed one of the agents and gave her the instructions.

While turning in to the airport departure lanes, they saw several LAPD officers pulling over cars, most of which were black Mercedes.

“Looks like LAPD didn’t get the word that we’re no longer looking for a black Mercedes.”

They parked at the curb in front of Terminal 3. While getting out of the car, an LAPD officer walked up to them.

“You can’t park here,” said the officer. John and Jill both showed their Federal IDs.

“I guess we’re here for the same reason. Anything I can do to help, just let me know. I’m the senior officer on duty here today. Name’s Lieutenant Pete Wagner. Your Bureau ID says you’re an Assistant Director. What merits the big brass?”

“Let’s just say this assignment landed in my lap.” Then John asked, “How many men in uniform do you have on the ground here?”

“Four at Terminal 2, and four at Terminal 6, and another six roaming.”

“That’s it? How many plainclothes?”

“Two and two. We had a few more but there was a multiple homicide in Inglewood and they pulled some of my men.”

“Do all your men have the pictures we distributed?”

The LAPD Lieutenant reached into his breast pocket and pulled out the two photos.

“Do you mean these?”

“Good, Lieutenant. In your opinion, if a bomb was set off, where would it do the most damage?”

“Material damage or loss-of-life damage?” asked Wagner.

“Loss-of-life,” Jill said.

“My guess would be the Bradley International Terminal. That terminal is always crowded with the international flights. Besides, that’s where El Al is, the Israeli airline.”

John said, “Move a couple of your men to this terminal. We’ll cover the Bradley Terminal.”

“You got it,” said Wagner. He then took out his handheld radio and started to reroute his men.

John said to Jill, “That Mercedes thing really put the odds in their favor.”

She nodded.

It was a Wednesday morning, and as usual the airport was packed. People ran, dragging their suitcases and rushing for their flights. LAX was constructed in the shape

of a horseshoe with the Bradley International Terminal at the top. John watched all the faces as they passed.

“My guess is this will still be their target. We just need to figure out where detonation will cause the most damage. That’s where we’ll find them. I have to agree with the Lieutenant. As soon as your man gets here, we’ll go to the Bradley Terminal.”

Jill said, “The agent we’re waiting for isn’t exactly a man.”

He then saw a beautiful Hispanic woman walking toward them. Jill smiled. “Agent Perez, this is Assistant Director Graves.” John extended his hand and she shook it with more force than he had expected.

John noticed how intensely Claudia and Jill looked at each other. He then realized that they were more than just working partners, that this was the woman Jill had described. He thought to himself, *This could get awkward.*

“I’ve only been here a few times and that was to just change planes. So give me the complete lay of the land.” Both agents described the airport and all the terminals. As they did, John kept scanning the faces in the crowd. John walked over to the LAPD officer who was in charge.

“Do your men also understand this is a shoot-on-sight scenario?”

“Those are our orders. A first for me in twenty four years with the force.”

“Well, I’m a director with the FBI and I will take full responsibility. Is that understood?”

“Your call, Mr. Graves.”

“I’m taking my team to the Bradley Terminal. I want to be sure you beef up security here at Terminal 3. Keep your guard up, these are very dangerous people. If you see the guy in the photo, he’ll have two, maybe three shooters close by.”

“It’s already done. My men will be here in a few minutes. Something tells me I should have taken my retirement when it was offered.”

"I'd have to agree. Good luck, Lieutenant." John noticed how good it felt to refer to a man's rank. He actually felt a bit like he was back again in the SEALs commanding his team.

They decided to walk to the International Terminal, eye-balling everyone who passed. John felt the tension in the air. He fell back a bit and let the women walk ahead of him as he searched the crowd.

John couldn't help but notice that both women were built like supermodels. As John caught up to them, he heard Jill and Claudia speaking in hushed tones.

When he reached them, he said, "Is everything okay?"

Jill said, "Yeah, everything's fine."

Claudia didn't say anything. She simply walked away toward the Bradley Terminal. John looked at Jill, as if half expecting an explanation. But Jill was watching Claudia.

Jill said, "Let's get to work." She walked away toward the Bradley Terminal. John just stood there and watched her. He then started on his own way again, still looking over each face he passed.

He thought, *Judging by the way they greeted each other, I'd bet Agent Perez was the girl she talked about. I hope this doesn't compromise the mission. Then again, we don't even know if this is still the target or if they had a contingency plan. Jules could be right. The Fed Building could be the target.*

When they arrived at the Bradley Terminal, Claudia was there at the entrance. Without looking at Jill, Claudia said to John, "So what's the plan?"

"There are only these two entrances, so one of us should stay outside, and the other two inside. Let's change positions every half hour, so we won't stick out, agreed?"

"Sounds good to me," Jill said, also without looking at Claudia.

"I'll take the outside first," Claudia said.

"Shall we?" John said to Jill.

"Hold on a sec," said Claudia as she reached into her purse. She pulled out three mini handheld radios and gave one to John and one to Jill. "The agents in Terminal 3 and 7 are on this same frequency. We'll be able to hear them and they can hear us." With that, she turned and walked away toward a van arriving with pilots and flight attendants.

John and Jill went into the terminal.

John turned and faced Jill. "Why don't you take these doors and I'll take those over there? Please be careful and promise me no hero stuff. If you see anyone suspicious, call me," John cautioned her.

"Got it. Good luck," Jill said as she started to walk away.

"Jill?" She stopped and turned back to John.

"Yeah?"

"I'm serious. I don't want anything to happen to you."

Jill looked John in the eyes. More than anything, she wanted to wrap her arms around him.

"Is Claudia that friend of yours we talked about?"

Jill looked deeply into John's eyes. "We can talk about that later." John made his way to the other doors. He positioned himself so he could see everyone coming through the doors without being too obvious. There was a newspaper stand near by. John bought the *L.A. Times*. He returned to his position to pretend to read the paper.

When John looked up, Tova Mazel appeared in the terminal.

"What are you doing here, Tova?"

"Well, if the device shows up here, you'll need me to disarm it, right?"

"I guess you have a point there. Did any agents accompany you?"

"Yeah. But Director Jules ordered them to return to Wilshire to protect the Federal Building."

"I'm shocked. Jules let you leave?"

"I didn't give him much choice. My guess is that the action will be where you are."

"Okay, could you, I mean, would you mind staying out of the way?"

Tova looked around the terminal and said, "I'll hang out at the El Al check-in. I know one of the security people there."

As she walked toward El Al, John thought, *That's awfully convenient knowing someone here. There's more to Tova than she's letting on.*

Everyone from all over the world entered the Bradley Terminal. John heard Chinese, Korean, Hebrew and some languages he didn't recognize. After about twenty minutes, in walked a nervous-looking Middle Eastern man. It wasn't the man in the photos. Then again, it could be one of the shooters Zarar mentioned.

John followed him until he got in line at the Singapore Airlines counter. He watched him check his bags and produce his ticket. He went back to the same place he was before and again pretended to read the paper.

John looked over at the El Al counter and saw Tova talking with a man who was in turn watching him. John thought, *Something tells me that he is no ordinary security guard. Nor do I believe that Tova is strictly a scientist.*

When the half hour was up, he went outside to find Agent Perez. He was just about to take out his radio, when he spotted her. She was talking to two Marines in uniform. She stood at an angle so that she could see everyone who walked behind them. *Good cover*, thought John.

He walked about 10 feet away and pointed at his watch. She nodded and told the young Marines something about her flight and went inside with John behind her.

They found Jill leaning against a counter that wasn't in use. She had a book open and also appeared to be reading. When they got about 30 feet from her, she closed the book and put it in her purse.

"Agent Perez, why don't you take my spot over there? And Mayfield, you go outside and I'll take my position here." Claudia walked away without a word. John looked at Jill and she just walked outside. John thought, *There's some ice between them. Did Agent Perez suspect something? Maybe Jill confided in her earlier.*

They rotated their positions for a couple of hours. John was outside when his radio went off.

“Director Graves, I need to use the powder room. Could you please cover the east entrance for me?” John recognized Claudia’s voice. He went to her position, and nodded through the glass door. She turned and walked off toward the ladies’ room.

He sat on the short wall by the door and again opened his paper. He then noticed a very attractive Middle Eastern woman walk past him into the terminal. It struck him as odd that she was alone without luggage. She was dressed casually in blue jeans and a pink top. John did notice she carried an extra large purse. He started to follow her into the terminal when his radio went off again.

It was Jill. “I think I might have spotted the driver. He came in with a shopping bag. Looks like he’s headed for the men’s room.”

John froze and looked toward where he thought Jill would be, but she wasn’t at the counter. Carefully, John pulled out his .45 and slipped it in the newspaper. He started walking toward the men’s room assuming that Jill was headed the same direction.

He stepped behind a row of pay phones, took out the radio and called Jill. “Where are you, Mayfield?”

“I’m at the kiosk in front of the men’s room.”

“Go back to your post. I suddenly had an urge to take a leak. All agents in Terminals 3 and 7 get to the Bradley Terminal, NOW!”

John walked into the bathroom. There were about fifteen stalls, a long row of urinals and a dozen sinks. A janitor was mopping the floor. There were about six people washing their hands. Several looked like they had just endured some very long flights.

John knew the feeling well. He’d been flown to far-off points of the globe with less than an hour’s notice.

John looked around and didn’t see the suspect. He looked down at the stalls and saw about eight pairs of shoes. He walked over to a urinal and stood there pretending to relieve himself. He stood there a good five minutes. Keeping a discreet eye on the

mirror, he could see all the stalls behind him. Six of the stalls had emptied and still no suspect.

More men had entered during this time. One was Middle Eastern-looking so John kept an eye on him. Only two of the stalls were still occupied.

He walked over to a sink and put the newspaper under his arm and slowly washed his hands. One more stall emptied. That left just one.

John suddenly thought, *What if he detonates here in the bathroom? Unlikely. These walls would protect the people outside.*

John walked out of the bathroom followed by the Middle Eastern man. He watched him get in line at the El Al desk. Then he waited a minute, went back in and started his routine over again.

He mind was racing. *The device won't fit into a shopping bag. He must be the gun man.* He felt his radio vibrate and quickly walked out of the men's room and took it out of his pocket.

"What have you got?"

"It's the one they call Imaad. He just walked in carrying a large suitcase."

John thought for a second. "Agent Perez, where are you?"

"I'm about 30 feet behind you by the ladies' room."

"Good. Watch the bathroom. I'm backing up Jill, I mean Mayfield." He turned and saw Agent Perez walk over to the same kiosk where Jill had been.

John then walked quickly to where Jill should have been. He looked around the crowded terminal and spotted Jill's blue dress about 50 feet away. She must have been following Imaad.

John sped up. About twelve feet away, he saw Imaad. Imaad turned and looked at Jill and saw John approaching fast.

At that very moment, Tony Santini walked up to a man with a long gray beard and a broad-brimmed black hat and a long black coat and white shirt. He was carrying a briefcase and was pulling a small piece of luggage on wheels. They stood no more than 15 feet from Jill.

Santini leaned over and whispered something into the man's ear. Abe Fishman looked up at Santini with disbelief. Santini then opened his suit jacket to reveal his gun. Randy kept his eyes on Santini from the terminal entrance.

"Just do as I say and you'll be fine. If you fuck up, I'll blow your fucking nuts off. Understand?"

Imaad dropped to his knees and disappeared into the crowd. Jill pulled her gun from her purse and yelled, "FBI! Everyone down on the ground!"

Now it was Santini with a look of disbelief when he set his eyes on Jill. *Fuck! I was set up!* thought Tony. He looked at the doors for Randy's help, but he was gone. Tony pulled the gun from his jacket and aimed it at Jill.

She didn't see Santini. John did. He pulled own weapon from inside the newspaper and shot Santini in the shoulder. He shot again and hit him square in the chest.

Santini went down and Abe Fishman turned and ran through the terminal with both his arms clutching his briefcase. Jill looked at Santini and was trying to figure out why he was here with a gun in his hand. She then looked back at John with a confused look on her face.

Suddenly, the Middle Eastern woman whom John had seen earlier came up behind Jill and shoved an eight-inch knife into her back all the way to the hilt. She pulled it out and was about to stab her again.

John saw the knife and the blood spurting from Jill's stomach. He aimed his gun and shot Ubah in the head. His first thought was to get to Jill. She dropped her gun and grabbed her stomach with both hands while collapsing to the floor.

He heard shots from behind him and felt several rounds burn into his back. He collapsed to the ground. He heard two more shots and thought it was all over for him. No more rounds hit him. But he heard the rapid fire of the Uzi again.

He turned to see Claudia with her gun in her hand face down on the floor in a pool of blood. He saw Ahriman bleeding from the chest.

Another shot rang out and Ahriman's head exploded. Behind him stood the same El Al security man who Tova Mazel was talking to earlier. He was holding a small .38. The crowd in the terminal was running and screaming in all directions.

He heard another shot from the other direction. He saw Al-Ba'ith fall to the ground. Standing behind him was Drew Hines with his gun drawn.

John rolled over, searching for Imaad. He saw him on his knees with the opened suitcase. He yelled, "Allahu Akbar!"

John raised his gun and fired twice, hitting Imaad in the chest. The force of the bullets sent Imaad flying back, causing the strap to be pulled that was in Imaad's hand. He looked at John and smiled grimly with his last breath.

The bomb had been detonated. This was John's last memory before everything went black. His last thought was of Jill.

Chapter 50

In Griffith Park, it was a beautiful day in late September. The leaves were turning gold and red as they fell from the trees.

Carefree children played on swings and jungle gyms without a care in the world, true innocence. Many parents stood in the background watching their children play.

Behind the moms walked a man oblivious to this innocence. He was oddly dressed in a heavy overcoat. The temperature was 72 degrees.

He turned and walked farther into the park. He walked slowly and deep in thought. A mountain biker came roaring down the path, headed straight at him. He jumped out of the way. As the cyclist flew past the man, he said, "Sorry!" He watched the cyclist disappear down the hill.

Kalob continued on his meditative stroll. He thought about his long dead parents. He thought about his wife and son, also long dead. They were killed when an artillery shell hit their house during the Iraq and Iranian war.

Kalob looked up at the trees and thought, *What a beautiful day it is.* He approached a vacant bench and sat down. It was only then that he turned his attention to the children playing in the playground at the bottom of the hill. He thought of his own childhood in Iran. Kalob was from a poor family. His four brothers and one sister lived in a concrete block house with

no indoor plumbing. Instead they had an outhouse in the back that they shared with the neighbors.

He thought about the last two weeks. *Life is interesting. I wonder where these children will be in twenty or thirty years. Some will be doctors or attorneys. Some will be in prison and I'm sure a few will be dead.*

He suddenly felt very old. In the last two days, he had neither slept nor eaten. He sighed heavily and looked into the woods. He heard a noise in the bushes. A small deer darted across the path into the hills. He thought, *If only I could escape so easily.* Again he sighed.

Inside he knew he was a dying man without a country.

He fervently wished that he had never left Iran, had never agreed to come to America.

Kalob reached into his coat pocket and felt the gun.

He thought, *I always had good intentions. I never meant to harm anyone. Those damn boxes, they destroyed so many lives.*

The day before, he had gone to his apartment in North Hollywood. In front of his building he had seen several police cars and two black Escalades, which he assumed were the FBI. He wondered how they had found him so quickly. It had been only been two days before that he had sent Ubah, Imaad, Ahriman and Al-Ba'ith to certain death.

Kalob had violated the orders of his superiors. He was destined to die with the others, but he lost his nerve. He had come to question his leaders' motives. Now he would pay the terrible price.

Kalob looked again at the children in the playground. Then he saw two men walking up the dirt path toward him. He knew them well. They had planned the entire mission, without flaws. He also knew they would not be kind to him. Most likely, they would take him into the woods, and torture him for their own pleasure. When they were done with the torture they would start cutting off body parts, and finally remove his head.

He knew he would end up much like his friend in Canada, Omar Kuddafi, had two weeks before. Omar and Kalob had been friends for many years. In fact, it was Omar who had convinced Kalob to cooperate in this insanity. He had paid with his life.

Kalob took a deep breath and looked up at the sky. He saw a hawk floating on the light breeze. He thought, *If only I could just fly away from this like that beautiful bird.*

These were the same men he had met at this same bench every Tuesday and Friday for the past month, and Zubin and Fahad were the ones who had picked Zarar. They had ordered the murder of Emir's family in Beverly Hills, and had ordered the rape of the daughter in front of her parents.

Kalob couldn't stomach watching a teenage girl get raped. Before they broke into Emir's home, he had privately told Al-Ba'ith to take the girl upstairs and do as he pleased.

Kalob looked again down the trail. The men were getting closer. He reached back into his jacket and brought out the gun. Both men stopped 30 feet away when they saw the weapon.

Kalob looked around and heard the birds chirping and felt the light breeze that moved the trees making the colorful leaves fall. He looked up to the sky again and watched a flock of geese fly over in formation.

He said to himself, "It really is a beautiful world, but it's time to go and meet God and to finally reunite with my family." He looked back at the men. They just stood there waiting to see what he would do next. One put his hand in his coat pocket. Kalob smiled at the men. Fahad smiled back, while Zubin remained expressionless.

Kalob reached down to the ground, and plucked a small dandelion. He then spoke to the flower. "We are both so insignificant in this world."

He stood up and inhaled the sweet air of autumn. Again he looked up at the leaves falling all around him, and said very softly, "Allahu Akbar!" Then he put the gun under his chin and pulled the trigger.

Chapter 51

John awakened in a morphine haze. He looked around the room and couldn't make out anything in particular. Then he passed out.

Again, John opened his eyes. He saw a bright light and thought, *This must be either heaven or hell*. He vaguely thought, *It must be heaven. I don't see any flames*. Then his vision started to become clear.

"Mr. Graves, Mr. Graves, can you hear me?"

John nodded weakly. He saw an elderly man with white hair and a short beard looking down at him.

"Mr. Graves. I'm Doctor Gottlieb. You gave us quite a scare. You've been through three operations. In my opinion, the average man would not have survived."

"How long...?" John couldn't finish his sentence. His mouth was drier than he had ever remembered.

"You've been here eight days. You were in a coma until yesterday when you regained consciousness. I must say, you scared the devil out of nurse Carter. She was taking your vitals when you reached up and grabbed her by the wrist and then you passed out again." John looked around the room and now realized he was indeed in a hospital.

"What happen...?"

"No talking now, Mr. Graves. No more questions. You need to rest." The doctor inserted a syringe into the IV connected to John's arm. Again, all went black.

The next day, John awakened slightly. This time he felt a bit more clarity. He didn't open his eyes but heard several voices arguing in the room. He couldn't make out what was being said.

John said, "How do I get something to drink around here?" The room went silent. John opened his eyes and saw the doctor and a man in a suit. As his eyes focused, he recognized him as Coleman. There was also a man in a uniform.

As he focused, he recognized that the man in uniform was Petty Officer First Class Rodriguez, he was sure he was hallucinating.

Rodriguez walked over to the bedside table, poured a small glass of water and sat beside John. He gently lifted John's head and helped him take a little swallow of water.

"That's enough for now. He should be hydrated gradually," said the doctor.

"Rodriguez? Is that really you?"

"Yes, sir, Commander. When we heard what happened, most of the team flew here on an Air Force transport out of Little Creek. The rest of the guys are downstairs. I managed to sneak up here. You know me, Commander. You always said I could get past anyone."

"He did manage to get past the guards, and I'm not really sure how he did it! I just happened to be here when he came into the room," said Coleman.

"I was just about to put him under arrest for being AWOL from the Navy when you woke up. We got a warning this morning that they might come here from Shore Patrol in Little Creek."

John looked at Rodriguez and then at Coleman, then back to Rodriguez. "Is that really you, Juan? But call me John now, I'm no longer your Commander."

Everything started coming back to John--the shootout at LAX--Jill being gutted by the woman, and Claudia Perez being shot down. Most of all he remembered Imaad being thrown backward by the impact of his gunfire. At the time, John didn't realize Imaad was gripping the strap on the box. It was his bullets that caused the bomb to activate.

"How could I be alive? I saw him detonate it, I swear, I saw it!"

Coleman walked over to John's bed, and said, "Well, all we can figure is that they must have been duds. Our scientists think they might have been wired wrong. At least the one that we have was."

"What's Tova Mazel think?" asked John.

"The El Al guy who took out Ahriman seems to have vanished with Tova Mazel and the device. Probably on the first flight back to Israel. We questioned everyone at the El Al desk and they claimed they had no idea who we were talking about, our guess is they were both Mossad."

"But we saw one explode in the desert," John said.

"Yeah, but we tied a shitload of C-4 to it," said Rodriguez.

John reached up and took Rodriguez' hand, and squeezed it weakly as best he could. "Thank you for being here, my friend."

"Nothing could have stopped me or any of the other guys from coming. We'll probably all get court-martialed. They're in the waiting room. When they find out you're awake, nothing will keep them out of here. We all know you would have done the same for us."

"I wouldn't worry too much. I'll put a good word in for everyone with Admiral James."

Coleman said, "Speaking of friends in high places--President Powell has called twice to check on your condition."

"Did that asshole Jules abandon his post at Wilshire?"

"Well, yes, as a matter of fact he did. He's been relieved of his command. You're now talking to the new interim director of the Los Angeles Bureau."

"Good for you, Coleman."

"So, what the hell was Santini doing there? Was he working with the terrorists?" asked John.

"No," answered Coleman. "It was a total coincidence. He was there to heist about seven million in diamonds from a dealer arriving from Israel at the same time everything went down. He must have assumed the trap was set for him."

John wondered why Jill hadn't been appointed interim director, as she was Coleman's superior.

"Oh, God, is Jill dead?" asked John, with tears welling in his eyes.

"What about Jill? Did she..."

"It's about time you asked about me!"

John turned his head to see Jill in a wheelchair by the door. He smiled for the first time.

"How about Agent Perez?"

"Okay, I think that's enough talking for now. This man took four shots with two of the bullets hitting vital organs. He was in a coma for six days," said Dr. Gottlieb.

"Doctor?" said Rodriguez. "I've served under the Commander for years. Believe me. He won't stop till he knows."

Coleman looked down at the floor and said quietly, "I'm so sorry, she didn't make it. That bastard hit her point-blank with 12 rounds. She didn't have a chance. But she did get off a shot that nailed him. She probably saved a lot of lives. That guy hit five other people who just happened to be in the way. One died. It might have been worse if that El Al security guy hadn't been there. He finished off the guy who killed agent Perez.

John looked at Jill. She had her hands over her face and was sobbing.

"I'm so sorry, Jill," John said. Rodriguez looked at John and then at Jill, and realized this was more than just a professional friendship between them. Juan got up and walked over to Jill, and wheeled her over to John's bedside. "Why don't we give these two a few minutes alone?"

"Two minutes, and that's it, he needs rest," said Dr. Gottlieb.

Everyone left the room. John and Jill locked eyes. Jill said, "Remember at the airport you wanted to know what Claudia and I said to each other?"

John just looked at her and said nothing.

“Claudia told me that she hoped I’d be happy. She knew from the way we looked at each other that we’re in love.” A solitary tear rolled down Jill’s cheek.

John was quiet for a moment and said, “I do love you, Jill. I do. How are you feeling? That was a big knife?”

“Well, I’ll never have kids. But I’m alive, thanks to you. Some witnesses said she was getting ready to stab me again when you took her out. You should have killed Imaad instead, before he could detonate. How did you know that thing was a dud?”

“I didn’t.”

They were embracing awkwardly when they heard loud noises and yelling in the hallway.

Suddenly, the door burst open and Chief Dewalter limped into the room. Behind him were Rodriguez and Petty Officer Holgren and Williams.

“Commander! So glad to see you’re still with the living!” said Chief Dewalter, waving at John with his cane.

John raised his head as best as he could, and said, “Hey Chief, how’s the leg? Where’s the rest of the team?”

Dewalter first looked at Jill and then he looked at John. “They’re out there in the hallway. A couple of cops and some Fed guy tried to keep us from coming in. Let’s just say SEAL Team 4 has taken over security,” said the chief with a big grin on his face.

The End.

A novel by
David Lovett

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