

# **Day Of Vindication**

**James Rupe**

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**MidLand**

[www.dayofvindication.com](http://www.dayofvindication.com)

ISBN: 978-0-615-28930-4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

VERY SPECIAL THANKS TO:

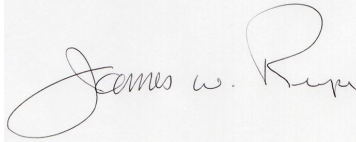
Harl Hanson, Karen Burgard and Keil Troisi

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A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "James W. Ryan". The signature is written in dark ink on a light-colored background.

## INTRODUCTION

Abraham was a man who believed God rewarded faith so in a time past he and God had a heart-to-heart talk that resulted in a major land acquisition. Because of Abraham's great faith, God agreed to grant him the son he so desired in order to carry on his lineage. The baby would be born to Abraham's wife, Sarah. God then fattened the agreement by adding a parcel of real estate that stretched from Egypt to the Euphrates River on the east and from Syria to the Persian Gulf on the south. For his part, Abraham agreed to maintain the faith and pass it down to his heirs. Not long after this heavenly decree, Abraham tripped over his faith and slept with Hagar, an Egyptian girl who served Sarah. Because of her indiscretion, Hagar was chastised by Sarah and left the house to consider her options. While she sat by a spring pondering her condition, the angel of the Lord came to her with a promise. "I will multiply thy seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude. Behold, thou art with child and shalt bear a son, and shalt call his name Ishmael, and he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him." With this guarantee in keeping, Hagar returned to the household of Abraham and birthed her baby.

Thirteen years later, Abraham renewed his covenant with God and bore a son with Sarah, naming him Isaac, making Abraham the unenviable father of both Arab and Jew. These are God's final words on the matter: "As for Ishmael, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. But my covenant will I establish with Isaac."

On that ill-fated day in September 2001, this age-old sibling conflict spilled across the wide Atlantic, brutally sending three thousand souls into eternity and radically changing the lives of Americans everywhere. The United States immediately countered by sending the most sophisticated army ever assembled into the Middle East to democratize the region on the naive belief that democracy was the solution to a four-thousand-year-old inheritance squabble.

## PROLOGUE

### **The Capital, January 20th**

Standing at the podium in the hallowed chambers of the House of Representatives, the President of the United States was about to finish his State of the Union Address, summing up his administration's accomplishments in the last year.

"And finally, I think it befitting to thank the citizens of this great nation for their courage, determination, and patience in the fight against terror. You have endured wars, sorrow, and disasters of every kind while combating the enemies of peace and democratic rule. I am here this evening to proclaim that your endurance was not in vain. The enemies of liberty are on the run. Over the last year, the drumbeat of hate has been silenced. The Al Qaeda terrorist network has been reduced to a handful of rag-tag cave dwellers. Its army of Mujahadeen fighters have been routed in a joint effort on the part of the US military and regional armies who have stayed the course.

Our friends in Israel, both the Israelis and the Palestinians, have made courageous concessions in the search for peace. I am happy to report tonight that those concessions are working to stabilize that country.

Both sides are at the negotiating table, working out diplomatic relationships that will lead to a lasting peace...Democracy is working. Militant Palestine has agreed to put down their rifles and join in the talks. They have also conceded Israel's right to exist.

Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan are all effective, functioning, free societies with democratic administrations, and have good working relations with the United States and her neighbors. Iran has agreed to comply with the United Nations mandate to allow inspections for the purpose of monitoring their nuclear ambitions. This cooperation by the Tehran government will lead to peaceful coexistence in the Middle East, and in so doing permit Iran to process nuclear energy for nonviolent purposes. For the first time in recent history, I can state with absolute confidence that the world is a safer place and its residents are at peace with one another. The efforts put forth by this great nation, the United States of America, to ensure global democracy will not go unnoticed by people around the world. As long as democracy remains the government of choice, peace will prevail. It is the supreme responsibility of all freedom-loving people throughout this great society to guarantee our neighbors that same inalienable right. I leave you with these compelling words from Abraham Lincoln: 'Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves; and, under a just God, cannot long retain it. Thank you, and may God bless America.'

## **PART ONE**

### **Houston Texas, Monday, July 3rd**

Tucker Holt was one very happy trooper. He had the dream job he always wanted in the city he always loved. And if that wasn't enough to make a man feel good, last night his wife rewarded his love with the best news of all - there was a little Holt on the way. The two had been trying for more than two years to have a baby, and now after numerous medical procedures, a good deal of patience, and much love, Sara Beth Holt was pregnant. Nothing could ruin this day for Tucker Holt, nothing at all. It was a beautiful morning in Houston, Texas. It would be hot of course, but then it was always hot in Houston in July.

Trooper Holt had satisfied his childhood ambition when he joined the Texas Highway Patrol three years ago after graduating from South Texas College of Law. Tucker's daddy had pushed him for a law degree, but young Holt had other ideas. A degree in criminal justice with a job in law enforcement would suit him just fine. Shortly thereafter he married his college sweetheart, Sara Beth Maynard, and has never looked back. Tucker was not a complicated man. His short-term plan was to finish the day's shift, take the 4th off, and spend it with his wife and parents at the family's compound in Baytown on Galveston Bay. The routine had been the same for as long as he could remember. First they'd sit down to his mom's famous pot roast served with carrots, potatoes, and the thick brown gravy that originated at the crusty bottom of the roasting pan. After dinner, they would go down to the water's edge, have homemade ice cream (peach and vanilla) and then watch the fireworks - giving the delighted couple an opportunity to tell his mother and father about the new addition and, frankly, to let someone else chase the bad guys for a day.

Trooper Holt's patrol-issued Explorer was headed south on state highway 45. His destination was the toll office in Aldine on the Sam Houston toll-way, just south of George Bush Intercontinental Airport. He was there to check on a toll violation. As he pulled into the toll office parking spot reserved for state officials, he looked at the clock on the dash - 7:03 A.M. The patrol vehicle was parked facing south. As Holt swung the door open and stepped out onto the pavement, he paused a moment to focus better on a scratch on the hood he had never before noticed. His attention was suddenly diverted to his feet. There was a slight vibration on the concrete surface.

"What the..." he said, moving his lips with no clear sound. The tremor was fleeting. Tucker reached down, grabbed the campaign hat from the passenger side of the truck, put it on, and headed for the toll office. He made his way toward the small building, still wondering what the shaking was all about. Suddenly, the office door flew open and an office employee dressed in a drab blue and white uniform emerged. He was frantically pointing south in the direction of downtown Houston. Tucker looked back

over his shoulder to see what the clerk was pointing to. It took a second to make out the gray-blue cloud barely visible on the horizon.

Can't be the marine layer, he thought, it was too distinctive. Anyway, the marine layer seldom reaches that far north. He turned all the way around now to face the south, his eyes fixed on a small puff that appeared to be smoke rising off the surface and growing larger.

"I wonder what that is?" He asked himself, this time in an audible voice.

"What do you think is going on down there?" Asked the tollbooth clerk, now standing beside him.

"Don't know, looks like an explosion or fire of some kind."

"Airplane down, maybe," added the clerk.

Both men stood motionless, eyes fixed on the cloud just above the Texas horizon. "Holy moly, that thing is getting bigger!" The clerk blurted, jarring Holt out of his transfixed gaze. He nodded in agreement.

"It is at that," he said.

"I don't know what's going on down there, but I do know it's not my problem. I'm here to check on a toll violation."

Both men continued to watch for a few minutes longer, then turned and headed back to the toll office.

\* \* \*

### **George Bush Intercontinental Airport, Houston**

At 7:05 A.M., a small charter jet from Denver was just beginning its final approach to George Bush Intercontinental Airport. The flight path would take it across the northern edge of downtown Houston.

"Houston control, this is Jet-Ride Hawker 808 requesting permission to land...over."

The radio squawked and then responded, "Houston control...Jet-Ride you're clear on runway one two. Your heading is north by northeast... Do you copy?"

"Roger, Houston."

Tim Ross had made this landing many times. It was routine for the seasoned pilot who was Captain and principle owner of Jet-Ride Charters out of Denver, Colorado. His co-pilot this morning was his son, Tim Jr.

The Hawker banked left on a heading north by northeast. Its passengers were four investment officers from a local securities firm returning from a business trip to Denver. As the plane banked on its approach, the pilots had a clear view of the ground below.

"Wow, what is that?" Yelled an excited Tim Jr.

"Beats me. Looks like some kind of fire or something."

"I don't think so; that's way out of fire range."

An inquiry came from directly behind the two pilots as the plane began to level off. "Hey, did you see that?"

"Please be seated and buckle up. We're on our final approach."

"Yeah, but did you see that?"

"Yes, I saw what looked like a fire."

"Fire my foot."

"Be seated please."

"Houston, this is Jet-Ride Hawker 808."

"Houston control...go ahead Jet-Ride."

"We have a visual on what appears to be a big fire. There's a lot of smoke, you know, that kind of thing. It looks like it could be right in the downtown area."

"Copy that, Jet-Ride...all of our aircraft are accounted for, but I'll pass that information on to my supervisor."

"Roger, Houston...over."

The control tower was busy but orderly at George Bush Intercontinental. The controller for Hawker 808 summoned his floor supervisor for further instruction on how to handle the Jet-Ride alarm.

"What's up?"

"Hey boss, I've got a guy on approach. Says he's spotted a big fire downtown, thinks it could be an aircraft."

"What does the board look like?" The supervisor asked. The two men studied the monitors in front of the controller for a moment.

"Everything looks up and running over in Houston."

"Ok, but I'll go ahead and pass it on to Washington Center."

A call was placed to the air traffic control headquarters of the Federal Aviation Administration and the operations manager of the southwestern sector, Washington Center. It was determined that all aircraft in the Texas sector were accounted for and on schedule. Back at Houston Control, air traffic began to confirm Jet-Ride's sighting.

"Houston control, this is American 587 Houston to Miami...over."

"Houston control...go ahead American."

"We had the same visual as Jet-Ride on takeoff, but I gotta tell ya, it's much too big for a single plane crash. It covers blocks, lots of real estate."

"Copy that American...over."

"Hello Houston control, Delta 9-5...over."

"Houston control, Delta 9-5...go ahead."

"Houston I'm confirming the American 587 sighting...over." "Roger, Delta, copy that...over."

The mood around the controller's station handling the Hawker 800 flight intensified with the confirmation of Delta and American. The floor supervisor placed a 911 call. The line was dead. A second call was placed to the Harris County Sheriff's department. The switchboards were jammed. All lines were busy. It was no longer a question in the control tower - an incidence of notable concern had struck Houston, Texas. Origin unknown. The supervisor placed a third call, this time back to FAA Headquarters, Washington Center. It was determined that this was a ground problem and not an air traffic problem. However, Washington Center agreed to notify the Defense Intelligence Agency and the FBI in accordance with the new protocols established by the office of the National Intelligence Director. All major disturbances nationwide are now considered potential terrorist activities since the events of 9/11. Upon receiving the call from the FAA, the FBI immediately contacted the Governor's office in Austin, Texas who in turn contacted the Texas Department of Public Safety and the Highway Patrol.

\* \* \*

## **Houston Police, Substation 44**

At 7:10 A.M., the Houston Office of Emergency Communications (OEC) went silent. The OEC replaced the old dispatch office at the Houston Police Department, purging all fire, police, and Harris County Sheriff's department 9-1-1 calls and sending them to a central location. The neutralization of the OEC automatically diverts all 9-1-1 calls to auxiliary substations which impaired and localized the communication system; jamming lines and creating an emergency communications breakdown. Suburban substation 44 was no exception. Computer generated switching consoles were at capacity in the small dispatch office. Two civilian dispatchers worked frantically to handle the incoming 9-1-1 calls as well as the police patrol transmission.

"9-1-1."

"Police?"

"Yes, state the nature of your call please?"

"There's one heck of a fire downtown. I mean smoke you wouldn't believe. I mean, you couldn't. I mean, I just can't believe this."

The dispatcher tried to calm the man. "Calm down please, take your time, and tell me what you're observing."

"My God...my God...oh, my God!"

"Sir, please calm down. I can't help you if you don't calm down. Sir, where are you now?"

"I'm standing in Galena Park, about Clinton and Fidelity." The caller's voice was steadier now.

"What are you seeing?"

"I'm looking west toward downtown. I can't believe what I'm seeing. It's a gigantic fireball of some kind. I can feel the heat, and the..." His voice began to falter and fade.

"Sir, how far are you from the explosion?"

"I don't know... my God, six or seven miles, maybe. I've got to go. I've got to get home."

"Sir, sir..." The dispatcher tried desperately to get a reply. "Sir, are you still there?" No reply. She immediately dispatched an all-points. "I have a code three with undetermined location, downtown area. That's a code three, Houston Central."

Police radio transmissions lit up the small dispatch office. The dispatcher placed a call to the central command center. There was no response. A second call was made to fire station one. The lines were dead. She placed a third call to fire station fifty-three where she connected with the station's duty officer. Fifty-three was located two miles southwest of Galena Park.

"Fire station fifty-three."

"This is HPD suburban 44. We have an alarm, an explosion in the downtown area. We are having trouble reaching anyone in that area. Can you respond?"

"We have a truck en route."

"Ok, are you in touch with central command?" the dispatcher asked.

"That's negative. Central does not respond. We have radio transmission. It's hectic, but no dispatch."

"Alright, can you inform us as information becomes available?"

"Will do. What's going on Harris County?" asked the duty officer.

"I don't know," responded the troubled dispatcher.

\* \* \*

## **Texas State Police, Austin**

Major Michael Furtado, a veteran of the Texas state police for twenty-seven years, stood before a large slate board fastened to the wall of the generic conference room. A computer image of greater Houston's road and highway system was cast against the white surface of the board. His face was dour as he moved about his business with deliberate cause. Major Furtado's company was a small group of subordinates seated facing the projected computer grid. The room was windowless with an adequate bank of fluorescents imbedded in the ceiling. There were two banquet tables, one where the officers were seated, the other between the Major and his team. Coffee was the beverage of choice.

"We are shutting down all right of entry to within a ten mile radius of central Houston. No one gets in until we find out what is going on; the exception being emergency, of course."

The Major was interrupted by one of his senior officers.

"What kind of manpower do we have in the area right now?"

"Not enough. We're putting people in as fast as we can, but we're looking at hours before we are adequately in place."

The questions began to come now in rapid-fire succession from the panel of officers seated in front of the duty board.

"Do we have a command center established yet?" "Not yet, but I think our south Houston station is best suited for this."

Mike Furtado looked straight at Eric Hoefield, the youngest officer seated at the table. He was a four-year veteran achiever and a graduate of Texas Technical University. Now, he was the acting logistics officer for the Texas state police. "Eric, that's your job. I'd like for you to head down there as soon as possible and establish an operation command center."

The young officer nodded in agreement. Another question was fired at Furtado. "Don't we need to get Airborne up right away?"

This time it was from the commander of the aviation division, Bill Sherman. "No question. We need people over the site as soon as possible. That's your discretion, Bill."

"Do we have any idea what has happened?" Eric asked, taking a sip of hot coffee. "All I know at the moment is that there was a big explosion and the city is in gridlock. We're getting some splintered reports from units around the area, but nothing substantiated." Hoefield stayed with the question but phrased it differently.

"What is the preliminary assessment then?"

"Grim," said Furtado, turning toward the board.

Pointing his laser pencil at the map, and the center of the city of Houston, the Major began to make small circles over and over again.

"There is no communication in or out of this sector at all, so the overwhelming concern I have is the massive exodus I anticipate from Houston central. We are going to need to get as many units as we can as soon as we can into this area and try to get this thing under control."

\* \* \*

### **Pentagon, Washington D.C.**

The DIA is the military arm of the National Intelligence Defense bureau and is responsible for homeland defense, which includes gathering intelligence against any terrorist attack or alleged terrorist activity that may lead to an attack. The Intel is then assessed by an oversight committee of the bureau of NID that determines where to go next with the information. At 7:16 A.M. central time, the DIA received a phone call from the FAA Washington Center, warning of the possibility of an air space infringement over the south central United States. The DIA quickly evaluated the information. A decision was then made to contact NORAD, according to protocol. The North American Aerospace Defense Command was created in the 1950s to protect the North American continent from the Soviet nuclear threat. It has since established a nationwide net in collaboration with Canada to protect the continent from the impending threat of air space encroachment by planes or missiles and has become the front line defense of any national security breach from outside the continental United States.

From NORAD headquarters in Colorado Springs, the command was passed on to CONR Continental Aerospace Command Region, Tyndall AFB in Panama City, Florida, and an arm of NORAD. CONR is responsible for two thirds of the nation's air space, including Texas. CONR was promptly able to determine that no illegal airspace intrusion had occurred. A high level decision was made, however, to scramble two jets from Cannon Air Force Base in Clovis, New Mexico for a look.

\* \* \*

### **Cannon A.F.B., Clovis New Mexico**

The pictures were inconclusive, but the devastation was evident. The heat at the core of the blast was estimated to be at thermo-nuclear levels according to the onboard sensors used by the scramble jets in the fly-over operation. The two fighter pilots stood at ease as the Operations Group Commander, Colonel Jeffrey Harmon, bent over the desk of Colonel John Porter, the Base Commander of the 27th Fighter Wing. The two Commanders were studying the stills using a nondescript magnifying glass. Neither was adept at reading flight photos, but the destruction was unmistakable. Colonel Porter straightened himself to face the waiting pilots.

"Was there anything else you observed that might be of help in determining what has happened?" the colonel asked.

The ranking F-16 pilot stepped smartly to attention.

"Yes sir," he paused a moment to consider his words. "Although the dust created difficult visual comprehension, it looked bleak, sir, very bleak."

The Colonel looked down at the photos and then dolefully back at his Operations Commander, but said nothing. Colonel Harmon dismissed his pilots with a salute. "Good job, fellas."

As the two pilots left the office, Colonel Porter was not far behind. Outside Porter's office was a smaller reception area where Commander Porter's administrative assistant occupied the workspace. Also in the room was a civilian, a local politician, waiting his turn to speak to the Colonel about a community issue. The Clovis councilman was standing now, eyes fixed on the two pilots in full flight gear who were exiting the waiting room. The Colonel walked straight to him, hand extended. The two men had a short and cordial exchange as the colonel walked him to the door, begging his forgiveness, and canceling the scheduled meeting for this morning.

"What's up, Colonel?" he asked as they reached the entrance.

None of your business, the Colonel thought, but smiled and explained that something had come up, and asked him if he wouldn't mind rearranging a meeting after the holiday.

As the man left, Colonel Porter turned back to his aid. "Call General Hamilton, please."

A call was placed to General Robert Hamilton at CONR headquarters Panama City. Colonel Porter was smiling but the Lieutenant saw through the smile and recognized the gravity of the moment. She had been with him long enough to know when it was business as usual and when the matter was urgent. Colonel Porter returned to his office where he found Jeff Harmon still meticulously studying the photos.

"I can't make much out of these pictures, Colonel, but it doesn't take a specialist to see the devastation."

"What do you think it is Jeff?"

"I'm afraid to say what I think it is, but it seems to me there's only one thing that could do this kind of damage."

"Are you thinking nuclear?"

"I don't know... I'm just not good at reading these things. But it's pretty obvious no conventional explosion did this. It's certainly not natural gas, crashed aircraft, or anything of that sort. This dust cloud is at least six miles in diameter. There is some visual evidence on the perimeter of the cloud, but no detail I can make out...the heat at the core is very alarming."

"What time did our people arrive over Houston?"

"We're estimating this event took place at approximately 07:02 we scrambled about twenty minutes later at 07:22, twenty minutes to destination...We were on target at 07:42...forty-two minutes after the explosion. The intercom interrupted the conversation."

"General Hamilton is standing by on line one, sir."

"Hello General, Colonel Porter."

"Hello John, what do you have?"

"We have the results of the fly-by, sir. Your people should be receiving them about now."

"Ok, good. What's your preliminary evaluation, John?" "At first glance the data is very disturbing. Have there been any air space infringements, General?"

"Not to my knowledge, but I understand we are still assessing satellite systems."

"Why...are you thinking a delivery of some kind?"

"Yes, sir. It had to get there somehow. I think we need to get a drone in as soon as possible and see what's happened on the ground."

"I agree, possibly Lackland, they may have a Scan Eagle available. If not, I will bring one in from St Louis. Should be up and running by the afternoon."

\* \* \*

## Television

"We interrupt this program to bring you special report. Here now is Stuart Jenkins." The long-time anchor and the face of network news came into view on the small screen.

"About forty-five minutes ago, it appears that an explosion of some magnitude occurred in or around the greater Houston, Texas area. At this time, details are sketchy. What we do know is that somewhere around seven twenty this morning, Central Standard Time, an explosion of consequential effect could be seen from as far away as Galveston, forty miles to the south of Houston. I understand we have a crew on their way from our affiliate in Austin and should be arriving in Houston momentarily. Meanwhile, Fred Morales is standing by on the phone from Galveston... First tell us who you are, Fred, and then please tell us what you can about this explosion."

"My title is Public Affairs Officer for the Galveston police department, and as you suggested, the details are few at this time. I can tell you that at about seven-fifty this morning, distress calls began to come in from the Houston area asking for medical assistance, water... essentially, all the things one might need to deal with a seriously urgent situation."

"Fred, sorry to interrupt, have you spoken to anyone from Houston yourself?"

"Yes, we have received numerous calls from police officers and emergency personnel located in that area, as well as citizens who haven't been able to contact their own police departments. The Houston officers are not able to give us much information because they can't get back to their precincts, nor can they communicate effectively with their commanders. The city of Galveston has begun a massive mobilization to help in any way that might be requested or needed, and we are making every effort to coordinate with county agencies including the sheriff's department. We will know more as the morning progresses. Right



now, that is about all I can tell you." "So it's safe to say at this time that you have no idea what has happened in Houston?"

"That's right, Stuart. We know something significant took place this morning, but as of this minute we don't know what it was." "Fred, will you be accessible to us as information becomes available?"

"Yes of course, definitely."

"Thank you, Fred...Fred Morales from Galveston." Jenkins' head tilted slightly, indicating that he was picking up something in his earpiece. "Let's go now to our White House correspondent Lewis Kemper, who is standing by on the west lawn. Lewis, it appears we have something serious going on in Texas this morning. What are you hearing?"

Lewis Kemper was the veteran journalist in the White House corps, and normally could be relied upon to gather the particulars before anyone else. "Well, Stuart, no word from the White House yet, but we have an unconfirmed report that the Air Force scrambled two F-16s earlier this morning from Cannon A.F.B in New Mexico. Our sources are telling us that the order to scramble came from NORAD. That is significant because it means that the possibility of an airspace violation has occurred. If that proves to be the case, it opens the whole can of proverbial worms. Hostile aircraft, missiles, even meteorites."

"And the likelihood?"

"I couldn't say. We do know that the President has been advised of the matter and is meeting with his top advisers as we speak."

"Lewis, has there been any indication of the scale...the damage...anything like that? Any information from Home Security that you could pass along?"

"I'm afraid not. We are pretty much at the same place you are. It does appear that something grave has happened in Texas."

"Will you come back to us as soon as you learn anything?"

"Yes of course, Stuart, I expect the President to make some kind of statement at any time now."

"Thank you, Lewis Kemper at the White House." Jenkins' head tilts again.

"Martha Rinek at the Pentagon. What's going on down there at the Pentagon, Martha?"

"Hello Stuart, not much more, but I can lend some credibility to Lew Kemper's report. Just about five minutes ago we were given an official memo verifying that jets were scrambled out of Cannon this morning but no cause was given. I can also tell you that the military has gone on high alert as of the same memo."

"Will you be staying down there for a while?" Jenkins asked Rinek.

"I'll be here until we get some concrete answers, Stuart."

"Thank you, Martha. Martha Rinek at the Pentagon."

A very concerned Stuart Jenkins directed his undivided attention to the viewing audience. "This is what we know at this time; a disaster of significant proportion has befallen Houston, Texas and we are using every resource available to keep you up to date."

\* \* \*

## **The President Of The United States**

A small group of advisers had stationed themselves around the heavy oak desk where the president of the United States was seated. The desk was a gift to the White House from Queen Victoria and fashioned from the timbers of the historic British discovery vessel the H.M.S. Resolute. It was befitting - the President's countenance was resolute this morning. The sunlight found its way through the large oval window at the his back and fell on the west corner of the desk. Seated from his left to his right was Rupert Langford, the National Security Advisor, Adam Mendez, the new National Intelligence Director, and next to him was F.B.I. Director Dale Barker. Finally, to his far right, was the President's personal friend and confidant, the White House Chief of Staff Theodore Clark. The President waited for Ted Clark to move his chair out of the glare of the sun and then spoke.

"What do we know, Ted?"

Clark cleared his throat, and then began without looking up from his notes. "At approximately seven-thirty a.m. this morning, Texas time, Houston experienced an explosion of such intensity that all communication from downtown was cut off." His voice wavered slightly. "There is dust and debris above the city that can be seen for miles."

The president braced a pencil eraser against the desktop and ran his fingers down the side of the pencil. "Have we authenticated this information...do we have facts?"

Clark continued, "The air force scrambled two F-16 jets from Cannon. They're trying to put together a profile right now." The president focused his attention on Adam Mendez.

"How did the Air Force get involved so soon?"

"The jets were scrambled on NORAD's directive, sir. It's procedure."

"Is that all we know then?"

The National Intelligence Director was uneasy. He uncrossed his right leg and then crossed the left before he answered the question. "That's all we know, right now anyway."

The President pushed against the leather backing of his swivel chair in a relaxed posture. He slowly clasped his hands behind his head, attention trained on Mendez.

"Are we going to put the nation at high alert, Adam?"

"We are assessing whether or not this is a national security problem. We simply don't have enough information to make that call this early."

The President shifted his weight back toward the desk in Rupert Langford's direction.

"I suggest we go high alert right now and worry about whether it's appropriate later. Do you agree, Rupert?"

"Yes, Mr. President. I think it's imperative."

The President nodded at his ranking police officer. "Dale?"

"I agree."

The president then pushed himself away from the desk and slowly walked around to the front, making his way through his seated company, resting his weight against the front of the hefty fixture. "My gut feeling is that this is a very serious situation and I want to be informed by the minute. Ted, we will use your office as a temporary operations room until we can get a handle on what's happened. It's expected of me to make some kind of statement as soon as possible."

\* \* \*

## Local Coverage

"We understand we have a local news crew with some pictures on the scene. We are waiting for the feed right now. Meanwhile, let's go to KVUE in Austin, and Diane Taylor."

Jenkins face reflected his concern. "Good morning, Stuart."

"Well, not so well in Houston apparently." Jenkins misspoke, not knowing to what extent the city had suffered.

"What can you tell us about it?" he asked.

"The information we have is that at sometime between 7:00 and 7:30 a.m. this morning there was a horrendous explosion in the center of downtown Houston. The source of the explosion is still a mystery. We understand buildings have collapsed and the streets leaving the city are clogged with snarled traffic. No one is getting in or out."

Jenkins pressed the local reporter. "Can you speculate at all what might have caused such an explosion?"

"There are conflicting reports. The possibilities are some kind of gas leak, a plane crash is another cause floating around, but certainly nothing that can be confirmed."

"What about loss of life?" Jenkins asked.

"There appear to be fatalities, but to what extent is pure speculation."

"Of course. Thank you, Diane. Diane Taylor, KVUE News, Austin, Texas."

Information and directions were flooding into Jenkins' ear in rapid-fire succession.

"We are going to go to George Bush Intercontinental Airport now, and Russell Upshaw."

A panorama of the Texas landscape flooded the screen. In the distance, a blue-gray smoke plume reached skyward.

"What are we looking at here?" Jenkins asked.

An unfamiliar voice answered, "We are looking south in the direction of downtown Houston and what you are seeing is the dust cloud that was created by whatever happened."

The camera zoomed in, cutting the distance in half. The picture filled with a mixture of dust and smoke.

"Goodness!" exclaimed a startled Jenkins.

"Yeah, it's unbelievable. This is a clear day, by the way!" said the voice.

"You are located at the George Bush Airport, and that's Houston's airport?"

"That's right, Stuart."

"How far is that from the downtown area?"

"I'm roughly fifteen miles from where I would estimate the explosion took place."

"Mr. Upshaw, who are you sir, and how are we receiving these pictures?"

"I'm an independent satellite facility operator. We had our truck at the airport to do a regional story for a local station with regard to the increasing hub demand out of the Houston airport."

"Incredible!" said an astonished Jenkins, whose attention was fixed on the revealing video.

"I'm sorry. I didn't get that last part sir," he said at last, after realizing he wasn't paying attention to the reporter.

"We are doing a regional story for a Houston station," repeated the engineer.

"There was something else sir," Jenkins insisted.

"Oh, I apologize, Stuart, I'm not a trained reporter, and I'm a little nervous. The people from the station haven't shown up yet."

"That's all right, just relax and explain to us as best you can what we are seeing."

"We are looking south over what used to be Houston. The debris cloud seems to be getting larger by the minute, as you can see. I just can't imagine what could have caused such a thing."

"Mr. Upshaw, how about the people around you there at the airport, are they aware something has happened, and how are they reacting to it?"

"The airport is rather quiet this morning, but those that are here seem to be confused, apprehensive maybe."

The camera began to pan the airport terminal. People were unusually stationary, standing silently at the large observation windows that housed the terminal. All were staring dumbfounded toward Houston with looks of despair and disbelief.

"As best I can tell, the airport has canceled or delayed all flights for the time being."

\* \* \*

### **Aldine Toll Station, North Houston**

Trooper Holt finished his work at the toll station by 7:45 a.m. and headed back to his waiting Explorer. At 7:50 a.m., Holt notified the troop dispatcher that he had finished his assignment at the tollbooth and was back in service. He then inquired about the obvious debris cloud now looming on the horizon. The dispatcher informed him that there had been numerous calls but that she had no concrete information about the cloud of smoke. She went on to tell him that she believed a mobilization of some kind was underway. Holt decided to head in that direction for a closer look.

He used his personal cell phone to call his wife to verify their plans for the 4th. Sara Beth was in a childlike mood this morning. She was so happy about the baby and she knew that the senior Holts would be almost as thrilled as she was. She was not about to let anything spoil such a wonderful day. Prospects for the Holt family could not be brighter as far as Sara Beth was concerned. The two lovebirds spent a few minutes in small talk and then discussed their plans for the following day. Tucker bid her a loving goodbye, smacking his lips with the sound of a kiss. Sara Beth did the same and then asked with naïve innocence, "What's going on downtown?" She always refused to acknowledge that her husband was involved in dangerous work, but deep in her heart she knew better.

"I don't know. I'm heading that way now to take a look. I'll see you later today. I love you darlin'. Bye-bye."

Holt turned his patrol cruiser south heading down the Hardy Toll Road toward the 610 belt that encircles the Houston business district. He noted the traffic headed north was heavy; stop and go. It should be just the opposite on a working day. The closer he got to the smoky cloud, the more menacing it became. His senses heightened as he moved south. He was aware now that there was something very, very wrong. He placed a call to the dispatcher. She told him they still didn't know what had taken place, but all available personnel were asked to proceed with caution into the Houston sector.

Holt's concern for his family suddenly became foremost in his thoughts as he watched the cloud spread itself across the Texas range with no end in sight. Slowing his Explorer to a standstill, he observed its

relentless expansion. Holt felt a slight quiver across his shoulders while observing the dazed looks on the frightened faces of the people slowly emerging from the dust. He estimated the dust would reach him in two or three minutes and considered turning around, but the reality was that trooper Tucker Holt was a proud public servant who had sworn to assist and protect the citizens of Texas. With this gallant thought in mind, Holt moved his Explorer headlong into oblivion - unaware that he would die from the cloud's effects before the day was done.

\* \* \*

### **Continuous Coverage**

"We are now being told that there were low-flying fighter jets in the area just prior to the explosion. We'll try to confirm this as more information becomes available. Right now I want to go back to Galveston and Fred Hamilton... Hello, Fred. Are you there?"

"Yes Stuart."

"What are you hearing?"

"The Harris County Sheriff's Department has been reporting that people leaving the Houston area are describing intense heat with dust and some destruction. There is still no explanation about what has happened. We can confirm that there are injuries. Most seem to be burn related."

"Is there any word on how far into the city authorities are able to venture?" Jenkins asked.

"No, as best I can tell they are severely hampered by traffic tie-ups and we are having trouble picking up the radio transmissions from the area. There seems to be some kind of atmospheric condition hindering the communications network from up there."

"I'm curious, are you able to see the dust cloud from where you are, Fred?"

"Actually my view is a bit limited by my location, Stuart. Looking north, what you see is a kind of blue-gray hue that just seems to be hanging on the horizon. I'm told that the farther north you travel, the more distinguishable the cloud becomes."

"And how far are you again from Houston?"

"I'm about fifty miles from the center of downtown Houston."

"One more thing before we let you go... have you heard anything about military aircraft in the area at or about the time of the explosion?"

"Yes, there was some talk of jets, but no confirmed reports as of this moment."

"Are there any military bases in that area?"

"Lackland is about two hundred miles from here, but I believe this is a no-fly zone; off limits to the military."

"Thank you, Fred. Once again Fred Hamilton, an official with the Galveston police department."

"Thanks, Stuart."

"Let's go now to Diane Taylor in Austin. Diane, I understand you have some pictures for us."

"That's right, Stuart. This video is coming from our Eye in the Sky chopper. The onboard reporter is Brad Gane. Brad, can you hear me?"

"Yes, I can hear you, Stuart."

"Ok, tell us what we're looking at."

The KVUE news copter began transmitting live video to a nation spellbound and glued to the TV.

"This is the debris cloud just in front of us. It is next to impossible to distinguish anything within the perimeter of this dust and smoke. We are purposely staying away from the cloud right now because of low visibility, and because, frankly, we don't know what it may be composed of."

The picture from the chopper's perspective revealed little to the television audience. A foggy effect was the best explanation.

"Yes, of course. Can you show us what's happening on the ground outside of the debris cloud?" Jenkins pushed.

"Yes...We're looking due-east in this view of westbound traffic on Interstate 10. It's at a standstill as you can see. We've been circling this location for about ten minutes now with very little outbound movement. One other note of interest, Stuart, I haven't seen one emergency vehicle."

"What do you make of that?"

"You mean no emergency vehicles?"

"Yes, right. What do you make of that?"

"It looks like a serious deficiency in city emergency evacuation planning. No emergency coordinating going on at all that I can detect." The camera shot moves to a residential area.

"What are we seeing here? It looks like people are moving around some?"

"This is the Hillshire area about seven miles from downtown Houston, and yes, people seem to be milling about with little direction. It is obvious they are suffering from severe shock. They appear to be languishing helplessly with no conception of what has just happened or what course of action to take next."

"Brad, there doesn't seem to be any structural damage in this area, can you confirm that?"

"None that we can see. No noticeable damage anyway. We're going to make our way back south a little and try to approach from the southwest. The wind is blowing from that direction. We think we might be able to get a little closer to the center of the city from there."

"While we are waiting for KVUE, our team in Austin, to send back more pictures from their helicopter, I want to take just a few minutes and go back to our Pentagon correspondent Martha Rinek... Martha, nice to have you aboard on this one."

"Thank you, Stuart."

"I understand there's an official explanation for the jets now."

"That's right. The Pentagon has just issued a short statement acknowledging the aircraft were jets scrambled out of Cannon Air force Base, Clovis, New Mexico. The statement says it was for 'observation purposes' and that it is 'protocol'."

"So they're our jets then."

"That's what they're saying, Stuart."

"Any news on what they saw?"

"No, there's nothing in the statement with respect to the fly over, other than they're ours."

"Many thanks... Martha Rinek at the Pentagon... Stay close Martha, if you will. I want to go back now to the KVUE's Eye in the Sky chopper and Brad Gane... Brad, can you hear me?"

"Yes, I can hear you. What we have done is make a southwest approach to see if there is more ground exposure on this side of the city. We are headed in a northeast direction just east of highway 59. Directly below us is the 610 loop. It's congested, moving very slowly as you can see. The wind is coming out of the southwest at five to ten miles per hour, but I don't think it's going to let us get a lot closer. This cloud just seems to be lingering. It's heavier than normal air and is playing havoc with our instruments."

"Yes... well we certainly don't want you to put yourself and your colleagues in harm's way...Do you have some sense of the composition of this cloud by now?"

"I've never witnessed a live nuclear explosion, but if I had to guess I would say that is what we have here, Stuart."

"Well, you said what we were all thinking, Brad...Be very careful my friend."

"Right...We can give you some idea of what is going on below us. We're at about twenty five hundred feet and we are coming up on the campus of Rice University. There's not a lot of physical damage, some debris strewn about, but structurally things are still in one piece."

"Are those bodies we're seeing?"

"I'm afraid so. There are people down, and there are people attending to those who are down, but no government response or emergency personnel anywhere to be seen."

"I'm taken by the fact that there aren't very many people there, students I guess...What do you make of that, Brad?"

"Well, I think there are a couple of explanations. One, it's early so most of the kids could still be inside, and two it's summer school and tomorrow is a national holiday."

"Oh yes...of course."

"We're going to try and make our way east around the southern edge of the cloud."

"I'm curious, Brad; do you see any other aircraft, or any kind of ground mobilization, any kind of emergency response going on at all?"

"Yes, we're seeing some air traffic of various kinds now, police, there's another news copter in the area, but little if any crisis mobilization on the ground. I've seen a red light occasionally... actually Stuart, you're seeing pretty much what we are seeing. We are going to tuck right in behind this cloud of smoke and dust which seems to be drifting northeast now...we'll follow it for a while at a safe distance. I think we are coming up on what I believe is the University of Houston...Oh my...the landscape is beginning to change dramatically now, as you can see. We are seeing more structural damage. There are people waving desperately at us now...Oh my God...people are running around hysterically, but there's no help, many are

down. Traffic is stalled in every direction. Some are vomiting. What we are viewing is so surreal it looks a lot like a crisis management simulation, but it's the real thing and there is no managing going on."

Jenkins, gripped by the scene unfolding before him on the video, broke in with a genuine but helpless request.

"Brad, is there anything you can do to help those poor people?"

"Nothing short of landing, and I don't think that's a good idea."

"Can you make contact with some emergency people and help bring them into that location?" Jenkins insisted.

"We can try, Stuart, but if this is what I think it is no one in their right mind is coming into this area for a while."

\* \* \*

### **Emergency Command Center, South Houston**

Officer Eric Hoefield, along with aviation Commander Bill Sherman, arrived at the South Houston State Police substation by helicopter at approximately 8:10 a.m., to establish a crisis command center. Captain Sherman had authorized three of his available aircraft for this operation; two Bell 407 helicopters identically equipped with gyro-stabilized video cameras, a thermal image sensor, microwave down-link facility, a searchlight tracker, and a comprehensive radio system with various other items of role equipment including air-toground heat sensing capabilities. The third aircraft was a fixed-wing Cessna 182.

Hoefield and his crew at station 2 South Houston used a small conference room as the war room for Exodus, the code name given to the operation. Meanwhile, Sherman and his other two pilots began their inspection. Bill Sherman skillfully took his Bell 407 from the South Houston substation parking lot and made his way north toward a very conspicuous debris cloud.

"This is Bell 44 Exodus with a Radio check... over."

The other two state police aircraft responded in businesslike manner.

"Exodus, 43, copy...over."

"Cessna Blue-Boy, four oh...copy."

The pilot of the Cessna 182, code name Blue-Boy, was Robert Wiley. He had been with the Texas State Police for six years and served with the 101st Airborne as a recon pilot in Desert Storm. Wiley's colleague in the second Bell 407 was also a seasoned veteran of twelve years with the Texas Highway Patrol.

The plan of action called for the Cessna to cover the north and east quadrants of the Houston Metro plexus. Bell 43 would cover the west quadrant and Sherman would approach from the south. The objective was to establish exit routes, locate easy-entry roads to be used by emergency traffic, examine the infrastructure for damage, and to better assess the cause and needs. The cloud looming in front of Sherman was a bluish gray color and had climbed to an altitude of 30,000 feet. He estimated the radius of the cloud to be six to eight miles at ground level, but the wind was out of the southwest at five to seven mph, which meant the back side could extend much further north.

"Forty-four...Bob, don't enter the cloud at this time until we can determine what the composition is. It looks very hot...over."

"Forty four, Blue-Boy...copy."

"What's your location, Blue-Boy?"

The Cessna was flying at an altitude of 6000 feet heading northeast, just southwest of George Bush Intercontinental. "One mile west of Tomball parkway," answered Wiley.

"What's the traffic look like over there?" Sherman asked.

"There is no movement inbound, none at all. Many cars off the road. Looks like they're trying to get turned around any way they can."

"What about outbound?"

Sherman asked.

"Very slow," Wiley continued while dropping his Cessna down to about 4000 feet.

"They're being hampered by people from inbound trying to turn around. It's a mess. No coordination of any kind."

Bob Wiley was a fearless sort, or maybe reckless, Sherman wasn't sure which. After finishing his tour in Iraq, he returned home to Bradenton, Florida and joined an Air Force Reserve unit. He married Susan, had

a baby, and spent the next three years looking for a job flying airplanes. There wasn't much available on the west coast of Florida. He tried flying lessons out of a small airport near his hometown, but it didn't work out. He didn't have the patience. Crop dusting was only part time and meant he would have to travel some. Susan would have no part of that idea. It would require her to stay at home and care for the baby on her own. There were other dismal efforts, all leading to the same end. As it is after every war, there is an excess of military pilots all competing for a few jobs. Life didn't treat Bob Wiley very well back then and he became continually less enchanted with Bradenton; and with Susan's perpetual whining. They talked about moving, but Susan wouldn't leave her mother. After all, she would say, the baby couldn't grow up without a grandmother.

There was one thing about life in Bradenton that Wiley did like. His reserve unit worked as storm chasers for the national hurricane center in Miami. Stationed at Mac Dill AFB out of Tampa, he was part of the aircraft operations center's hurricane hunter's wing, more properly acknowledged as the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). He admired the courage and professionalism of the men and women in the highly trained unit, but more than that he craved the adventure. It wasn't unusual to fly the WP-3D Orion in to 70 mph turbulence in search of storm information. Wiley would marvel at the fury of nature and wish within himself that everyone he knew could experience the same feeling. It was second only to the war experience where life and death got all mixed up; where power was king and if you were a pilot you controlled the power. Wiley liked flying into ominous looking clouds. He liked the unknown. It gave him the rush he needed. It filled the void he has craved since Desert Storm. He liked being in control of his own destiny and he liked being a maverick. He wanted the life back he had before the war. He wanted his wife and baby back. He wanted to go back to Mac Dill. He was sick of traffic control. Suddenly with a mind of its own, the Cessna banked into the ferocity of the storm cloud with tenacious grit.

The radio transmission was garbled. "Blue boy, you're breaking up," Sherman warned. "Do you copy? Do you copy, Blue Boy? Over. Bob, you're breaking up...come back. Blue boy, do you copy? Over." The silence was deafening in Sherman's ear. He called the second helicopter, "Exodus 43, do you read? ... over."

"Copy that Captain, but I've lost contact with Wiley." The two officers tried to reach the wayward pilot but to no avail.

Wiley was heading due south now. He had switched to instruments. It was pitch black within the depths of the debris-laden abyss. No sunlight was able to penetrate the dust. The dogged warrior would not be deterred. He will conquer yet another tempest and return triumphantly. Without warning, the instrument panel lights began to flicker. Wiley smacked the panel face with the palm of his hand. The altimeter malfunctioned, showing zero altitude. The intrepid aviator struggled for control of the aircraft. The artificial horizon went next, and then the lights went out completely. Wiley was now totally disoriented.

"Bell 44 this is Blue Boy, do you read? Over... Bill, this is Blue Boy, come back... Bill come back ... 43 do you read? ... 43 come back?"

No response. He felt his skin go flush. His heart was beating so hard he could hear it.

"Mayday...Mayday." He screamed into the dead radio. The fearless pilot, believing he has gone into a steep climb, frantically forced the stick of his winged chariot forward in an effort to prevent a stall. Instead, the disabled combatant flew his Cessna 182 straight into the Eastex Freeway, killing himself and sixteen stranded motorists.

\* \* \*

## The White House

The office of Ted Clark was small, but adjacent to the President's office. All intelligence being gathered regarding Houston would be guided temporarily through Clark in an effort to allow the President to carry on as normally as possible until relevant information could be assessed. At 9:42 a.m., a call came in from the Pentagon. It was General Millard Crenshaw, the nation's highest ranking Air Force officer. General Crenshaw asked to speak to the President but was transferred to Ted Clark's office. Millard Crenshaw was a personal friend of the President's and was perturbed that he would not take his call. He recognized the need to protect the President, however, and agreed to pass on the findings of the still-preliminary military investigation to Ted Clark. Clark switched his phone to intercom speaker for the benefit of those who have

gathered in his small office and then braced himself for what he anticipated to be the worst possible news. "Go ahead, General."

"Hello, Ted... We have just received the preliminary results of the Scan Eagle fly and it's not good. It looks like we've been hit by a nuclear weapon of some kind... Let me repeat, this is preliminary, but I think there's enough evidence here to warrant all presidential safety precautions and protocols."

The office of Ted Clark was silent as the President's men tried to digest what they had just heard. Eye contact was made, but nothing was said.

"Ted, do you understand?" the intercom speaker brayed.

"Yes, General. Yes, I understand. Will you be keeping us updated as information becomes available?"

"Yes, yes, of course, of course, now I suggest you get the President out of there."

"Thank you, General."

A second line began to ring on Clark's phone system just as he finished with General Crenshaw. A female voice boomed across the intercom. "Line two is Dale Barker, Mr. Clark."

Ted pushed the internal connect key that rang his secretary. "Get me Joe Doran, please." He then pushed the key to connect his waiting call. "Dale... we just got some bad news from the Pentagon. They think it's a nuclear explosion."

"I heard," came a strained voice over the intercom.

Clark reached down, turned off the speaker, and lifted the receiver to his ear. "I'm asking the Secret Service to start evacuation as soon as possible."

"Right, ok... well... we have not been able to contact our people in Houston. I'm afraid they're gone."

"I'm sorry, Dale," came the delayed response.

"Yes, well, Austin is up and running but they have little to report at this time."

"Thanks for calling, Dale, will you keep us posted?" "I'll let you know if anything comes across. Will you be leaving Washington with the president?"

"I don't know. I've got Doran waiting now. I think we all ought to get out of here but I'm sure there will be a briefing as soon as the Secret Service begins to move."

The two bid goodbye as Clark pressed another flashing key. On the other end was Joe Doran, the headman at the Secret Service. "Joe, I just had a call from General Crenshaw. They say it's a nuke."

"I'll start procedure," Doran replied.

\* \* \*

## **Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland**

In the time it took the Sikorsky Sea King helicopter, better known as Marine One, to transport the President and his selected staff from the south lawn of the White House to Andrews Air Force Base for departure on Air Force One, Ted Clark briefed the country's leader on the information he had assimilated. "At 7:00 a.m. central time, a nuclear explosion, the origin of which has not been determined, rocked the city of Houston Texas. The Air Force was able to make an initial decision based on data provided by a Scan Eagle drone out of Lackland in concert with fly-bys using two F-16 fighters from Clovis, New Mexico. CONR has concluded that no national airspace has been violated, leading Adam Mendez to believe that the device used was delivered by non-conventional methods and that the potential for more explosions existed. All federal and state agencies relating to national disasters are coordinating at this moment to determine the origin of the explosion and to assist the city of Houston. The country has been placed on high alert in anticipation of more explosions, while the Secret Service, in cooperation with the city's police department, has begun the evacuation of the Washington DC area." It was approximately one hour and thirty minutes subsequent to receiving General Crenshaw's preliminary evaluation that the President's helicopter landed beside the giant Boeing 747. The mammoth aircraft fell well short of its passenger capacity. Only a few special colleagues, including the first lady, joined the President on this surreptitious flight. The President quickly boarded Air Force One, holding his wife with one hand and the "football" in the other. Football is the cipher for a classified briefcase containing the codes for global nuclear deployment.

\* \* \*

**Confirmed**



"SPECIAL REPORT... A statement from the President of the United States." The continuing live coverage of the Houston disaster was interrupted when Stuart Jenkins appeared in his familiar seat at the network studios in New York.

"We understand the president is going to make a statement momentarily. Lewis Kemper is at the White House. Lewis, what can we expect the president to tell us?"

Kemper had positioned himself in the designated media area on the east lawn with the White House in view just behind him.

"Well Stuart, according to a statement released just minutes ago by the White House Press Secretary Jerry Burkett, the president has been relocated to an undisclosed safe location, but we understand that he will make a short announcement from his new location, confirming that a nuclear device of an unidentified nature was discharged in Houston this morning."

\* \* \*

### **Cheyenne Mountain, Colorado**

A somber President readied himself to address the nation. A young female Air Force officer aided him in his preparation. He was seated at an ordinary office desk in an unfamiliar room facing one camera that would feed a global television network. The American flag stood at attention behind the president and just to his left. The Commander-in-Chief of the most powerful military ever assembled endeavored to portray a confident demeanor but was noticeably shaken. It was 1:33 p.m. when a media person standing beside a television camera held up five-fingers and began the count down.

The voice of Stuart Jenkins was heard as Lew Kemper's image remained on the screen. "And now, the President," Kemper's image faded away, replaced by the shot of the President.

"My fellow Americans," the President began, "at approximately 7:00 a.m. this morning, central time, Houston, Texas was brutally attacked and devastated by an explosion of unprecedented proportions believed to be that of a nuclear origin. Scores of people have been hurt and many more are unaccounted for. We are using all means available to ascertain the damage and determine the source of the explosion. The federal government, along with the great state of Texas, and its neighbors are organizing as I speak to do all we can to assess the needs of this horrible crisis. This will take a nationwide effort. I am asking every American to do his or her part to help meet those needs. Above all, I am asking you to remain calm as we work to sort this out." The President remained placid but focused as he continued his statement. "My fellow Americans, it appears that this great country, whose banner is freedom and who has welcomed all kindred spirits to her shores has once again become the victim of a senseless attack. You may rest assured that I will strike the perpetrator with all the resources this nation possesses if that is necessary. I have asked Rupert Langford, my National Security Advisor, and Adam Mendez, head of NIA, to leave no rock unturned in their pursuit of these criminals. My friends, it is this kind of adversity that has made this country what it is today... The greatest nation the world has ever known. We will remain strong in the face of this latest aggression against our freedom-loving people, and we will remain the defender of these principles for as long as it takes to rid this planet of these madmen."

The President's face faded from the picture and was replaced by a staid looking Jenkins. "Well, there you have it. The President of the United States has just delivered a short message confirming the worst. A nuclear explosion has in fact been detonated in Houston, Texas this morning."

\* \* \*

### **Dade County Florida, July 4th**

The FBI field office was located twelve miles north of Miami Beach in a small ordinary office complex containing a couple of law firms, a dentist, and a two-story professional building. It was pretty much the way the bureau liked it - not too expensive, and not too obvious. Most people who used the area didn't realize that one of its occupants was the Federal Bureau of Investigation. "Basic" was a word the agents liked to use to describe their workplace. Ask them about themselves or other agents, and they would use

words like bright, clever, committed, but never flashy, daring, or interesting. That's the way it was in the Bureau and that's the way they intended to keep it.

Seated in a small interrogation room that doubled as the copy room, Hector Fuentes nervously fidgeted with a pack of Marlboro cigarettes while he waited for the agents who had assured him that they would speak with him shortly. Occasionally, he took a swig from the can of Mountain Dew he had requested. Tossing down the soda, his eyes surveyed the holding space to which he'd been consigned, then his attention turned back to the cigarettes.

Hector Fuentes was a dumpy man in his late 40's. The faded floral-print shirt he wore split open between the buttonholes when he sat, exuding all the charm of a well-fed manatee. His hair was thick, salt-and-pepper, and brushed straight back from his forehead. His eyebrows and mustache were the same texture, only whiter. Fuentes first went to the Miami P.D. with his story, but it didn't take them long to realize this was not their party so they called in the Feds. Peter Leonard, the special agent in charge of the Miami office, sent a couple of agents over to pick up Fuentes. It would be easier to question him at the Bureau office rather than in a dingy room at a third rate Miami precinct building; there would be less interruption if nothing else. Although the local police didn't take him seriously, the FBI couldn't afford not to. Hector Fuentes claimed to be an operative of the Cuban government's Secret Service with information about the Houston disaster. Unlikely, thought Pete Leonard, but he had no choice but to follow up.

The two agents given the responsibility of questioning Fuentes were Raphael "Ralph" Guerra and Cassandra Armendorfer, a petite looker better known as 'Army'. Ralph and Army were part of a bigger picture. They were agents assigned to the counterterrorism and counterintelligence divisions of the FBI, and subsequently consigned to the southeast regional Homeland Security taskforce, which was created by the newly formed National Counterterrorism Center in Washington, reporting directly to the president. The taskforce included various branches of law enforcement along with members of the intelligence gathering community. Ralph and Army worked out of Peter Leonard's Miami field office and that is where any resemblance ended. When describing Armendorfer and Guerra, words like flamboyant, extreme, and compulsive were often used. Ralph and Army were a special breed and nobody questioned their methods; mostly because they got the job done and no one in the bureau wanted to find out how they did it. The two agents had been given this latitude because of the positions they held in the taskforce.

Cassandra Armendorfer was a pre-law graduate from Coastal Carolina University. When Cassandra was a little girl, she watched the 1951 movie *Frogman* starring Richard Widmark. Her father had picked up a copy at Wal-Mart for three bucks while shopping for underwear. They viewed it together the first time and then Army watched it over and over again, even memorizing some of the dialogue. From that day on, she wanted to be a Navy frogman. She liked to tell people her feet weren't big enough to be a frogman so her father decided she should be an attorney instead.

Army had been aggressively recruited by the FBI because of her aptitude in the Semitic languages. She was fluent in Hebrew and Arabic, and adequate in Greek. She had the uncanny capacity to pick up on other Middle Eastern dialects. Guerra would act as principle interviewer on this one. She didn't speak Spanish. She was beautiful and didn't fit the usual profile. Her cropped black hair had just enough curl to turn up naturally in the back above her neck. In fact, she looked more like a dancer in a Broadway show than a federal agent. Everything on her face fit. Her eyes were dark and reflective, her lips full. If she had a fault, it wasn't in her appearance, but in her patience.

The son of a Cuban exile, Raphael Guerra graduated from the University of Miami with a double major; accounting and law enforcement, and immediately applied for a job with the FBI. Raphael was an outstanding high school wrestler, winning the state championship in his weight division two years running. In the summers, he filled his time participating in the Golden Gloves program at a local boy's club gymnasium. He was undefeated in twenty-one bouts. To say that Guerra was an overachiever was an understatement. He came by his aggressive attitude honestly. His father believed in the American way; set goals and then worked hard to achieve them. Ralph and Army were recruited for special assignment with Homeland Security around the same time. Both were sixyear veterans of the bureau and joined the taskforce a year and a half ago at its conception.

Presently, the agents seated themselves across the table from Fuentes. A small camera recorded the interview along with concealed audio recording equipment.

"Buenos Dias, senior Fuente. Habla ingles?" Guerra asked.

"No. No, hablo ingles," Fuentes lied. He spoke English, but reasoned to himself that if the agent didn't know it, he would have an edge. Guerra leaned back in his chair and focused on Fuentes for a moment, then turned to look at Army.

"Claims he doesn't speak English." He turned back and looked Fuentes in the eyes for a moment more.  
"But I think he does."

Fuentes' subservient expression changed to one of assertive caution. "May I smoke, senior?"

"That's better," Guerra said, relaxing a little himself.

"This interview will go a lot smoother if you're straight with us from the start; and no, I would prefer you didn't smoke. Now, is Hector Fuentes your real name?"

"Sí, senior."

Guerra was looking at a copy of the Miami PD interview as he questioned Fuentes. It had been done in Spanish. Guerra was fluent but interpreting the Spanish transcript and questioning Fuentes in English for Army's sake irritated him.

"Hector, it states here that you're a citizen of the U.S. but you work in a Cuban intelligence capacity, is that correct?"

"Sí."

"Are you a spy, Hector?" Guerra asked tauntingly with half a smile.

"No, senior. I am citizenship in both countries.

Guerra looked at Army. "Is that possible?"

"I didn't think so," Army replied. "Not with Cuba. But hey, maybe it's who ya know."

"Diplomat," Fuentes said with a smile.

"Baloney," said Army.

"There are no diplomatic ties with those self-serving socialists that I'm aware of," Guerra said, not trying to hide his scathing opinion of Cuba's political persuasion and in particular the old Fidel Castro regime. Guerra's parents escaped the persecutions of Castro's gulag in the early seventies using a small fishing boat to make the treacherous ninety-mile journey across the high seas to Miami.

He was also tired of Fuentes's gamesmanship.

"Ok, let's cut the crap, Hector. Get to it. What do you have?"

Fuentes straightened himself. He appeared to grow. His expression changed from timid to aggressive. "I am Mexican citizen too." A slight sneer draped his face as he made eye contact with Army. "I know how bomb gets in U.S."

Army and Ralph exchanged glances while Fuentes continued.

"Fishing Boat."

"What kind of fishing boat?" Army asked.

"Charter fishing boat is registered U.S."

"Okay, now we're not talking about a large commercial fishing vessel like a shrimp boat or any thing like that, are we?" asked Guerra.

"Charter boat." Fuentes continued, "One captain, two helper, one day fishing...six hundred dollars."

"What's the name of this boat?" Guerra pressed.

"El Escaparse," Fuentes answered.

"What's it mean?" Army asked.

"The getaway," said Guerra.

"Grande getaway," smiled Fuentes.

"This is not real funny, Hector," Guerra said indignantly.

"Lo siento, mi amigo." Fuentes said conciliatorily.

"Keep it English, please," requested Army.

"No disrespect, senorita. Very sorry for lives who die," Fuentes said with compulsory humility.

Army squeezed Guerra's jacket sleeve. "Ya got a minute?" she said, pulling on his arm. The two agents moved away from the table to the back of the small room. "Is this guy full of it or does he have something?" she whispered to Guerra with a trace of disdain.

"I think he wants something," Guerra said, looking back at Fuentes, who was still playing with his cigarettes.

"I think he's going to play dumb until he decides if he can get what he wants, and I think he may know something," Guerra said, turning back to face Army.

"Ok then, let's stay with it," Army agreed.

They returned to the table. Guerra pulled his chair out and seated himself, slightly cockeyed from Fuentes now. Army positioned herself directly in front of him, placing her hands on the table as she leaned forward, staring. It was unnerving for Fuentes.

"Hector," she said finally. "What is it you want?"

Fuentes lost his accent altogether, which was no surprise to the agents. "Twenty-five million dollars, a new identity, and witness protection."

Army looked warily at Fuentes for a moment longer, then lifted herself from the table.

"And I want a house on the Chesapeake," she said, moving away.

The room grew quiet as the three combatants shared glances. "Alright, assuming that can be done, what do we get for our twenty-five million?" Guerra asked, breaking the silence while straightening out his own chair. He was beginning to think they were talking to a crackpot but he was willing to take it one more step.

"I know how it was done."

"Wait a minute...wait a minute," Army interrupted, placing her hands back on the table. "You're telling us you know how the bomb was made, delivered, and detonated?"

Fuentes sighed. "I was about to say how they got in, and I have names."

"That's a lot of information," Guerra said skeptically as he rechecked the rap sheet supplied by the Miami PD. There were no prior arrests, only an ID sheet Hector filled out himself. Guerra pulled out a yellow steno pad and pencil from his briefcase and laid it in front of Fuentes.

"Ok, write it all down."

Fuentes smiled. This time it wasn't a smirk. "Oh no, I want assurances. This is bigger than you think; much bigger."

"A million people were just murdered, Hector, how could it be any bigger?" Army said, disgusted with his audacity.

"Four million murdered," he said without smiling. Army and Ralph traded looks. "Are you saying there are more bombs?" Guerra asked, looking back at Fuentes.

"Possibly three more that I know of," he said stoically. Army remained in the same position, eyes glued to the Cuban. "You're a filthy louse, ya know that, Fuentes," she said.

"I love it when you talk dirty to me," Fuentes fired back.

Somehow Hector Fuentes had changed from a dumpy little man to a formidable adversary. The two stared at each other, expressionless.

"Why didn't you come forward before this thing was detonated yesterday?" Guerra asked, trying to break up the cerebral gridlock the two were engaged in.

Fuentes slowly turned his head to Guerra. "We didn't know it was going to be of this magnitude and it wasn't supposed to go down until November." He paused. "November twenty third."

"Thanksgiving?"

"The day before Thanksgiving," Fuentes said. "A work day... and I didn't know they were nukes until yesterday."

"You're a lying, no-good..." Army said, pushing herself away from the table.

"I want to smoke a cigarette and use the bathroom," Fuentes replied, pushing himself away from the table, waiting for a response from one of the agents.

"Sure," Guerra said at last. "The bathroom is down the hall to the right. You can step outside to smoke." Fuentes left the room.

"What do you think now?" Army asked Guerra.

"He's not the same guy we started with, I know that," Guerra said, filing the rap sheet in his briefcase.

"I'll bet his name isn't even Fuentes."

"No kidding, Sherlock," Army said, looking through her purse.

"Ok then, let's start all over again with this guy. Let's assume he's got crucial information and let's stand on him pretty hard," Guerra reasoned.

Army pulled a tube of lipstick and a small compact mirror out of her purse and applied a new layer of blackberry to her lips. She put the tube of lipstick back in her purse and with her free hand fluffed her hair until she was satisfied with the way it laid. She put the mirror back in her purse and looked at Guerra. "You mean shake him down big time, don't you?"

Guerra smiled, admiring her pizzazz, among other things.

"I'll check with Leonard about meeting Fuentes' demands," Guerra said with a smile. Army left the copy room ahead of Guerra, grinning as well.

\* \* \*

**Peter Leonard's Office**

After a brief discussion with Peter Leonard, it was agreed that they would make an effort to accommodate Fuentes if the information he had was relevant to the Houston disaster and led to an arrest. Leonard assured Guerra that he would contact Washington right away and get back to him as soon as he had word. They both agreed they should play along with Fuentes as though it was a done deal. The two men exchanged pleasantries and then Guerra left Leonard's office in search of Army, who had found her way back to the lounge area in search of a can of full-strength Coke.

"Ok," Guerra said to her. "It's a go. I'll round up Hector, meet you in the copy room, and get after it." Army agreed and they left the lounge in different directions.

Guerra stopped by the media room to check with the agent in charge. He wanted to make sure the copy room was miked and video-ready. He picked up Fuentes, who was working on another cigarette just outside the lobby door, and they headed for the copy room. Army was there waiting.

"Have a seat please, I've got some good news for you," Guerra said, pulling a chair out for Fuentes. "My boss is working to secure our agreement this very minute. We should know something definitive by day's end. He said we should consider it a done deal and that we should proceed with that in mind. He said it's just a matter of channels."

"That's a load..." Fuentes pushed the chair back under the table and walked toward the door.

Army, who was standing near the door, quickly moved between the two, blocking his exit. "Sorry, Hector," she said. "You can't come in here. Tell us you have information about the greatest act of violence to ever occur in this county, and then just walk away. That's just not going to happen...amigo."

Fuentes grinned sardonically for a moment, then his face tightened.

"Scary...amiga," he said, trying to step around her.

"Sit down, Hector," Army demanded, moving to cut him off. About that time, Guerra moved toward the two combatants, gently resting his hand on the girthy Cuban's shoulder.

"Sosegar por favor, sientese, sientese...por favor," he said in Spanish, hoping to ease the tension.

Fuentes considered Guerra's request while still staring intensely at Army. "Si," he said, "I will calm down for the moment...sir."

"My name is Raphael Guerra. They call me Ralph, and this is Cassandra Armendorfer," Guerra said, looking at his partner.

"Just call me Army," she said. "We are currently assigned to the Southeast Counterintelligence taskforce recently created by the Justice Department, as a component of Homeland Security." Knowing that Fuentes could walk at any time, Army became more conciliatory. "There are ample resources available to meet your request if you have information that can lead to arrests or stop any further atrocities."

The three had once again seated themselves at the table facing each other. Fuentes' face revealed a certain desperation the agents hadn't seen before. It was evident he wanted to give up the information he had, but he was not a man who made mistakes. He was clearly uncomfortable in the role of stool pigeon, but had a habit of getting his way and being in control of his own fate. Army reached across the table and lightly laid her delicate palm on Fuentes' calloused hand "Hector," she said softly. "We can't allow this to happen again. You must help us stop this madness."

Fuentes slowly pulled his hand out from under Army's, looking at her with disdain. "I'm not a lackey idiot, Miss Armendorfer. I will provide you with information on my terms, so save your Femme Fatale fair for someone else."

"Alright, alright," Guerra said, interrupting an awkward moment. "Here's the long and the short of it, Fuentes, we have given you our word we will meet your request. That's good enough. Should you not begin to cooperate, I will put you away somewhere and throw away the key."

"You can't hold me and we both know it," Fuentes bellowed with confidence, pushing away from the table. Guerra's expression changed from tolerant interrogator to urban street cop.

"I can pull every friggin' hair out of your fat head one at a time if I want to," he said with deadly conviction.

Fuentes paused, not knowing quite how to take Guerra's fury. After analyzing the situation for a moment, he reasoned to himself that it was good cop bad cop, and then laughed out loud scooting back to the table.

"Not bad," he said, "not bad at all."

Fuentes' newfound affability cut some of the tension.

"Here's what I'll do," he continued. "I'll give you a part. You pay me the twenty-five bucks and I'll give you another part. I guarantee you if Bin Laden's head is worth twenty-five million, what I tell you is worth twenty-five million."

"Go ahead," Guerra said, still miffed, and then added, "I wasn't joking, Hector."

"I've worked in the western sector of Castro's private police service for over twenty years," Fuentes said, not intimidated by Guerra's remarks.

"What is this Cuban private police service?" Army asked.

"It's not the Cuban private police. It was Castro's personal army, made up of a small band of trusted comrades dedicated to the cause and protection of the presidente and, of course, the largest smuggling operation in the western hemisphere," he stated proudly.

"We are familiar with Castro's feeble effort to import goods through black market sources. The Drug Enforcement Administration has that part of the world under a blanket," Guerra said, looking through his briefcase for something. He was as smug as Fuentes.

"DEA," Fuentes repeated, annoyed. "The DEA couldn't find Cuba on the map. Listen very closely to what I'm saying to you." His intensity raised a notch. "The Castro organization was the conduit used to move four nuclear devices into this country, obviously unnoticed."

Guerra put his briefcase back on the floor. "Go on," he said, giving Fuentes his full attention.

"The whole thing was orchestrated by the South American socialist alliance to fund their campaigns, using the Cuban militia for muscle, to the tune of ten million dollars, and all financed from the poppy fields of western Afghanistan."

"What does Cuba gain by blowing up the U.S.?" Army asked, moving to the edge of her chair.

"Cubans can't blow their nose without permission. Cubans don't have any idea what is going on... Cubans are lemmings." Fuentes made no effort to disguise the contempt he felt for his homeland. "Cubans are not the bad guys here, just stupid. We had no idea we were smuggling nuclear material into the U.S. We thought we were moving illegals in from the Middle East. Castro made a fortune doing this kind of thing. Very enterprising," he said coldly.

"Come on, Hector. Ten million dollars to move a couple of ragheads into this country? That's pretty hard to accept," said a suspicious Guerra.

"You don't ask questions, Mr. Guerra. You take what they give you."

"Didn't some red flags go up on this one? Surely someone had to question the motives here."

"You don't get rich questioning someone else's motives, sir." "But they knew these were Islamic radicals," Army added. "Yeah, they knew," Fuentes sneeringly agreed.

"How is it you know so much about all of this?" Army asked. "We brought these guys in through Mexico. I was the coordinating officer for the operation. Originally, I thought we were moving illegals around, like I'd been doing for twenty years. About six months ago, this one particular group brought some cargo with them. They were followed by a second group."

"What was the cargo?"

"Cases," Fuentes answered. "Cases they wouldn't allow the crew to handle and we had to bring these people in where there would be absolutely no scanning technology. No scanning of any kind. They came in two teams with two identical cases per drop." Fuentes paused to take a breath. "Two plus two equals four," he said, folding his hands across his ample belly.

"You're saying two teams add up to four bombs?" Army asked impulsively, knowing what he meant.

"You got it, sister," said Hector acidly. "I became friends with one of the more talkative guys. Turns out he was a leader of some kind. I asked questions. He answered some, didn't answer others. I filled in the blanks."

Army was beginning to take Hector Fuentes, or whatever his name was, more seriously now. "How'd you get them in, Hector?"

"Trade secret, lady," he answered, giving Army a blank look. The two agents exchanged looks themselves, and then looked back to Fuentes. They had worked together long enough to know how each other thought. They both believed Fuentes' story was plausible, so far anyway.

"Go ahead," said Guerra.

"We're getting to the second part," the Cuban countered.

"No money, no more story...terminado."

"Not enough, Hector," Army said. "Smuggling aliens in doesn't contribute squat to this investigation. You've got to do better than that."

"How about this, pretty lady... I have the address of the safe house in the city these people were delivered to and I have the name of the person who ran the safe house. And, on top of that, I believe this person is more an opportunist than a radical."

"What's that supposed to mean?" questioned Army.

"That means I think she can be bought," he said, satisfied that was all they were getting.

"She?" said Army.

"That's right...she," affirmed Fuentes, smiling again.

The two agents huddled with Pete Leonard and decided to put Hector Fuentes into protective custody for twenty-four hours or until word from Washington came down.

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## **The President's Men**

Condolences are a matter of international courtesy, although in the back rooms of world opinion they were saying, served them right. The confluence of energy in Ted Clark's office intensified by the minute. Global leaders concerned for the welfare of their state, or in some cases their back pockets, coveted the intentions of the United States even though they despised U.S. tactics. Washington bureaucrats and insiders manipulated the ebb and flow of commerce by controlling world trade with fear and trepidation. The decisions that Washington made in the next forty-eight hours would decide which side of the impending line in the sand they would move to. Businessmen throughout the industrialized world cowered at the prospect of an economic global breakdown. For all practical purposes, buying and selling had come to a standstill.

The television media had made camp on the west lawn, demanding statements and progress reports. Temporary hands-on responsibility for managing the government while the president was being relocated for security reasons was delegated to his five trusted allies; Ted Clark, chief of staff, Rupert Langford, National Security Adviser, Adam Mendez, Intelligence Director, and Dale Barker, the country's top cop. Everyone else, including the Attorney General, was just one degree left of the president's comfort zone. The vice president, who was normally on the same page as the president, joined them today. There were five phone lines to Clark's office, but only one was being used at present. Clark had asked his trusted secretary to divert all incoming calls somewhere else. He'd left their destination up to her. Cell phones were the communiqué of the hour; the five men present would use their personal phones continually throughout the meeting doing business as usual in their own departments. The one exception was Barker, who had taken a hard-line call from the FBI field office in Miami. After a brief discussion with Peter Leonard, Barker asked Clark to go to intercom.

"Gentlemen, I have special agent Peter Leonard from Miami on line. He has an important development he would like to discuss."

The room gradually settled down, phone conversations were put on hold or ended. Leonard would have the full attention of the Washington inner-circle.

"Go ahead, Peter."

"We have a man who claims to have information pertaining to the Houston explosion. He says he knows where the perpetrators staged the event and is willing to lead us there. He claims he brought them in himself but didn't know their objective was to discharge a weapon of such mass destruction. Says he knew they were up to no good but had no idea it was nuclear in nature."

Barker seemed disappointed, the confession of a Miami wharf thug was not a gripping breakthrough as far as he is concerned. It happened during every major crime investigation - there are always multiple confessions. On top of that, every terrorist organization in the world was standing in line to lay claim for the Houston massacre.

"What else?" he asked languidly.

"Here's the kicker," continued Leonard. "Fuentes said he brought in four lead-lined trunks with the Arab foreigners."

Barker was standing now. The others leaned forward at the same time, as though in concert. "You have our attention, Peter, go ahead," Barker said.

Leonard explained to Barker what Fuentes had alleged in detail, including his assertion that three more bombs existed. Leonard also explained to the commission what Fuentes' demands were to finish the deal. After a brief discussion, they agreed to promise Fuentes whatever he wanted for the time being. They gave Leonard and his staff all the latitude they needed to carry the investigation as far as it would go. The White House would provide a legal envoy from the Justice Department. He'd be armed with the power of

attorney, giving Leonard's staff executive authority in the investigation of this country's greatest criminal act.

"Get it done yesterday," Barker demanded, ending the conversation.

\* \* \*

## Revelation

"We understand that momentarily the Arab television network Al-Jazeera will broadcast a statement from a high-ranking Qaidat al-Jihad official. The Qaidat al-Jihad (Islamic army for the liberation of the Holy places) is an offshoot of the now impotent Al Qaeda terrorist organization once headed by Osama bin Laden. It is unclear at this time who that official is, but speculation has that it will be Abdelkarim Zawahiri the head of Qaidat al-Jihad, and the nephew of Ayman AlZawahiri, the longtime mouthpiece for Al Qaeda. While we have a few minutes, let's go back to Lewis Kemper standing by at the White House...Lew."

The reporter was standing in the back of a full media room at the White House. Directly behind him, the press secretary, Jerry Burkett, was leaving the podium after finishing a brief statement regarding the Qaidat al-Jihad announcement.

"Yes, Stuart, as you can see, Jerry Burkett has just addressed a very crowded press room. Essentially he said the White House didn't know who was delivering the message, or the content of the message, only that it was from a Qaidat alJihad representative." "Where is the president?" Jenkins asked.

"Well, we don't know for sure where the president is. We have been assured he is safe and in full control of his office responsibilities. It's assumed that he is either at Cheyenne Mountain Air Force Station or in the White House bunker. Cheyenne Mountain is, of course, the home of NORAD and for all practical purposes is bulletproof."

"Do you know if he intends to address the nation again anytime soon?" Jenkins asked.

"The Secret Service is waiting to see whether the president is in any personal danger before they expose him. But, as you might imagine Stuart, knowing the president, he's biting at the bit to get fully involved. He's not a sideline player."

"What about the vice president, is he in the Washington area, and what's his roll in all of this?"

"Well, there again, no one is saying where the vice president is either. But this is an active vice president and he is most assuredly closely involved. If you remember, the 9/11 attacks put that president in Air Force One and the vice president in the bunker. It's assumed he ended up at Cheyenne Mountain, Colorado, for a short period of time before concluding it was safe enough to return to Washington. We can guess there's a similar scenario playing out here. We're still not sure how safe the capitol is. There is talk that it's on the list."

"There's a list?"

"A very unofficial, unconfirmed list, but very scary. Word has it that many officials are leaving the city or being advised to leave. I did have a brief conversation with Sue Crawford, the Deputy Security Advisor. She expressed the hope that this Qaidat al-Jihad statement will shed some light on what has happened in Houston, and what their future intentions are."

"Can you give us some insight into the Qaidat al-Jihad organization: Who are they, who they represent, and what can we expect from this statement?"

"I think it's safe to say they will speak to the Houston ordeal. Beyond that, we don't know very much about them. I can tell you that until recently they were a little known outfit that floundered in the shadows of Al Qaeda, but when Bin Laden became non-existent, and presumed dead, Qaidat alJihad became heir-apparent to the Al Qaeda throne. Some people in positions to know have told me that the government is more afraid of Qaidat al-Jihad than they ever were of AlQaeda. They say they are far more dangerous and resourceful."

The picture was back to Jenkins. "A disheartening prospect. Ok, Lew, many thanks, take care of yourself...Lewis Kemper reporting from the White House. We are awaiting a statement from the Muslim organization Qaidat al-Jihad to be broadcast at any moment now from Al Jazeera...I want to go to Martha Rinek, our person at the Pentagon. What is going on there, Martha?"

The picture went to a tired Rinek standing in front of the Pentagon. "Hello, Stuart...no one here at the Pentagon is saying much, but I was able to corner a lower ranking official who asked to remain anonymous, this person is privy to the inner sanctum decision making forces at the Pentagon. He claims the



military is prepared to hit the northwest frontier of Pakistan. That would include Peshawar, the capital of the province, and the city of Dir, which is believed to be a Qaidat al-Jihad stronghold...with very, emphasize the very, serious retribution. He tells me that all necessary procedures are in place; they need only the president's go-ahead."

"Are we talking about a nuclear reprisal?"

"That's right, Stuart."

"The U.S. intelligence community has for a long time believed that Osama bin Laden openly conducts his deadly business from this region without the fear of seizure."

"Excuse me Martha, sorry to interrupt, but do they think bin Laden is still functioning? We are getting conflicting reports about his effectiveness."

"I am being told that militant Islam has immortalized bin Laden and that his followers believe he was the resurrected Muhammad for the purpose of establishing a global jihad. It doesn't seem to matter whether he is dead or alive; his memory lives on to fight another day in the hearts of followers. This area I'm referring to, the northwest frontier of Pakistan, military planners say is next to impossible to launch any kind of ground assault because of the rugged mountainous terrain. The region is also armed to the teeth with Mujahadeen fighters loyal to bin Laden and his cause."

"Mujahadeen... meaning a dead man walking."

"I think they prefer 'holy warriors', Stuart."

"Many thanks... Martha Rinek at the Pentagon."

The picture was back to Jenkins. "We are continuing to wait for a very important broadcast from Al Jazeera, which has proven to be the international voice used by Al Qaeda, or in this case the Qaidat al-Jihad organization. Al Jazeera, as you know, has become the most influential news source in the Middle East, and boasts over thirty bureaus throughout the world. They are broadcasting from Doha-Qatar in the Persian Gulf."

Jenkins' head tipped. "Ok...I'm being told that Gwen Sheridan is standing by at the State Department...go ahead, Gwen."

The picture went to Gwen Sheridan, the network's attractive State Department correspondent. "Yes, well, no one is saying anything on the record down here either, but we understand they are pulling all personnel out of the region as fast as they can get them out."

"Alright, Gwen, I want to make sure we're on the same page here...are you talking about Pakistan, the diplomatic core, who and where are we talking about?"

"I'm talking about everyone, and yes the unconfirmed target is northern Pakistan. There are operatives. There are ground forces still operating in the area, aide workers, God knows who might be in there. We have been assured that they will do what they can to contact all Americans, military or otherwise, in an attempt to get them out. We should also say, for the sake of our viewing audience, that if you know of loved ones or acquaintances in this area you should try and notify them at once to get out."

"Good advice, Gwen... So you're saying the State Department is expecting a military strike of significant consequences."

"I'm saying they are very closed mouthed down here, but the general consensus is... significant consequences. I might add, we've been informed by a very high ranking State Department official that Secretary of State Larry Stiller has been in contact with the president of Pakistan advising him of the options the United States is considering; one of which is nuclear retaliation."

"Alright Gwen, stay close, will you... Gwen Sheridan over at the State Department. I want to pause here for just a minute and consider what we have just learned. Even though it's laced with speculation, it seems an inevitable conclusion."

The picture was now back on a very reflective Stuart Jenkins who had been handed a hastily assembled synopsis on the Hiroshima, Nagasaki affairs in an effort to fill time while waiting on the Al Jazeera report.

"It was on August 6th 1945 that the first of two atomic bombs were dropped on populated cities. The first over Hiroshima, and then three days later on her sister city Nagasaki. This was the war that was to end all wars and bring peace and freedom to an Asia who had suffered the indignities of Japanese imperialism. Since that fateful day in August 1945, the world had armed itself with enough nuclear force to decimate the planet. It is enough to say that the United States is the greatest proliferate of this destructive power and now that power has been turned against us. Will this be the beginning of the end of mankind as we know it? Or, will better judgment triumph? Will leaders of state and nuclear powers restrain from unleashing the destruction of the ages? We can only pray that sound minds prevail."

A live picture of an active city plaza presumed to be that of Doha panned across the screen. People scurried about as though nothing had happened, some dressed in western apparel, most wearing the traditional turban and robe, abayas the fashion of choice for the women. Jenkins continued commentary while the camera captured life of the wealthy Arab metro.

"The world is still standing by, waiting for Al Jazeera to broadcast a taped message from a Qaidat al-Jihad representative. We are assuming it has something to do with Houston, but of course there is no way to be sure until they transmit. Al Jazeera has become the accepted voice of Islam since it began broadcasting in the mid-nineties, from the small island state of Qatar in the Arabian Gulf. They prefer Arabian rather than Persian Gulf in that part of the world. Especially since the Middle East, and Arab interests in particular, have become the global focus in recent history. Qatar is an Emirate state ruled by the Al Thani Family. Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa is the Emir... Emir meaning head of state. Even though they proudly declare themselves a democratic political system, the Emir rules with absolute power... They are telling me that Al Jazeera is about ready to go... we will be going to Doha, Qatar at any moment now."

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### **Doha, Qatar, in the Arabian Gulf**

The set was like any modern newsroom; full of activity and iridescent color. The background was transparent purple with large English letters spelling Al Jazeera across the surface. Arabic symbols traversed the facade as though embossed in it. The whole thing had a clever three-dimensional look. Two very western-looking anchors sat at a large desk in front of the purple setting. The man was thin and balding, in his mid- to upper-forties, smartly dressed in a light tan suit. To his left was a black haired beauty in her early thirties wearing a modest but formfitting crimson dress with appropriately selected jewelry. Her facial line was distinctively Middle Eastern, with a hint of makeup. Both had light olive complexions with radiantly dark eyes.

Khalil al-Masri was born in Saudi Arabia, the son of a Saudi oil Sheikh. He was educated in the United States at Dartmouth's College of Journalism. Masri was the station's principle analyst and leading correspondent in western affairs. Hanan Naznawi, a native of Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates, also privileged but trained in the UK, flanked Khalil. Both reporters spoke fluent English. Hanan had a slight British accent. Al Jazeera was linked with as many satellites as their system networking could handle. Most international networks were co-operating in the broadcast to reach as many stations worldwide as technically possible. For those areas devoid of television hookup, satellite radio would pick up the signal and broadcast simultaneously.

The anchors fidgeted and made last minute adjustments as the station floor director started the countdown to broadcast. The red light on the camera in front of the anchor's desk began to flash. Khalil al Masri uneasily addressed a viewing audience estimated to be over one billion people - the largest ever assembled.

"Good day, my friends. It is an honor and a privilege to speak to you from Doha-Qatar in the Arabian Gulf. We at Al Jazeera are humbled by the vast responsibility we have been given in bringing this most important video message to the world, and in particular, the American people. The terrible tragedy befallen the United States yesterday lays heavy on the hearts of the Al Jazeera team... our sympathies." The camera moved to a close-up of Hanan Naznawi, her striking good looks were distracting but her professional manner dispelled any notion of tempting allurements.

"The tape you are about to view was delivered to the Al Jazeera station manager by an unidentified courier at 7:00 pm Qatar time, three hours after the American disaster of July 3rd which took place in the city of Houston, Texas. The courier told him that it contained very important information regarding that event, and more importantly, instructions to the... referring now to the American government... on what to do next. Al Jazeera is acting as messenger only and accepts no responsibility for the content of this tape... having said that, here now is the video."

After a short pause, a fuzzy image emerged. It was that of a shadowy, unidentifiable character whose face was hidden in shadow. He was seated in front of a dirty blue backdrop. Beside him was a small table that held a cup and saucer. Beside the saucer was a red note pad. He didn't refer to his notes once during his harangue. The voice the American public heard was a delayed English interpretation that didn't match the lips of the speaker.

"Praise be to God. Praise be to God. Who revealed the Book, and to the Prophet, Muhammad bin-Abdallah, who said: 'I have been sent with the sword between my hands to ensure that no one but Allah is worshipped. Allah, who put my livelihood under the shadow of my spear and who inflicts humiliation and scorn on those who disobey my orders.' We, the true believers, the arm of Allah have struck a devastating blow to the crusader in his own sanctuary. Praise be to God, who has given us the strength and the means to defeat the infidel. This message is an indictment against the marauding American crusader, and his Jewish stepchild, who occupies the Arab land of Palestine. Get out of our lands.

"This is not a plea; it is a command. For half a century, the Crusader-Zionist alliance has killed millions of Palestinians and their Muslim neighbors. No longer will we allow this genocide to continue. Allah has given Islam the power to annihilate the invader. No longer will we tolerate the plundering of the Arabian Peninsula. No longer will we allow you to use our land to stage attacks on neighboring Muslim people. You are through imposing your will in the Peninsula. Your puppet governments are no longer effective in the region. The sins you have committed are sins against Allah, and his messenger, Praise be to Him, and the Muslim people. Allah has spoken. 'Fight the pagans altogether as they fight you altogether, and fight them until there is no more tumult or oppression, and there prevail justice and faith in Allah.' We call on all Muslims to comply with Allah's orders to kill all Americans where they can be found. Our justification is found in the words of Almighty Allah. 'And why should ye not fight in the cause of Allah and of those who, being weak, are ill-treated and oppressed-women and children, whose cry is Oh Lord, rescue us from this town, whose people are oppressors; and raise for us from thee one who will help.' I am that one. I am Osama bin Muhammad bin Laden."

"A ten-kiloton nuclear bomb was discharged in Houston, Texas on July 3rd, one day prior to the American commemoration of Independence Day. This was not by accident. Your proud and haughty nation has been brought to her knees. You can no longer depend on your government to protect you. You are now at the mercy of Almighty Allah and his servant, praise be to Him. Listen very closely and respond very quickly. This is just the beginning of your sorrow if you try to retaliate against any Muslim brother or any Muslim lands. Islam will be victorious against the aggressor in this struggle, Praise be to Allah, who gives us strength to do his will."

"There are six more nuclear bomb, three alone, remain in the United State, strategically located in major cities throughout the country. These devices are manned and protected by competent brothers for the cause. One or all can be detonated at my command. As you can see from the annihilation of Houston, this is not idle talk. The prayers of the brethren have been answered. I am the one that has been sent. I am Osama bin Muhammad bin Laden. Praise be to Allah and his Messenger. These are the conditions you must accept to save your land from further destruction."

"First, you must stop all aggression against the Muslim peoples. Remove all occupying forces from the lands of Islam. Pay to rebuild the nations that your crusading armies have decimated and cease to plunder its resources, dictate to its rulers, and humiliate its people. The Muslim people have a right to choose their own form of government without interference from the outside. No longer will you impose your will on us. There will be no evidence of American influence in the region. We refuse to accept the decadence of the west. Finally, you will end all support to the invader, and occupier, of Palestine. That would include all financial aid and armament sales. America will cease to guarantee the survival of the petty state of Israel and its expansionism. Instead, you will support the true state, Palestine, with Jerusalem as its rightful capital. We are not asking you to comply with our request. We are giving you seven days, beginning with this message, to begin to pull out all American interests in the region and a statement disavowing all ties with the illegal state of Israel."

"If you refuse or do not act immediately, another device will be discharged in another American city, and then another, until you meet the demand. You, America, and you, Israel, have been judged in the courts of Allah and found guilty. There is no place to run and no place to hide. Your punishment is death and humiliation. Turn from your wicked way; believe in Allah and his virtue. It is the desire of all Muslims to live in peace with its neighbors under the banner of Allah and his everlasting words. The eyes of Allah are throughout; we are closely monitoring your every move. Should you do something foolish, we, the right hand of Allah, will strike a second blow equally as destructive as the first. I am Osama bin Muhammad bin Laden."

The image on the screen went to static and then faded back to Khalil al Masri, and Hanan Naznawi, placid in their countenances. The bin Laden statement was not a surprise. They championed the cause although abhorred the method. Both are devout Muslims with inferiority complexes. The camera slowly moved in on Khalil. He looked pleased. It was hard to hide his favor. After all, the arrogant giant has been

cut down, gutted, and hung out to dry. Al Masri was proud; not because he opposed a society free of religious tyranny but because somehow it helped diminish his own second thoughts about the condition of Islam. It was a proud moment for all Muslims, though not a judicious one. Khalil straightened his notes and then spoke.

"There you have it. Osama bin Laden and his Holy Warriors the Mujahadeen have taken full responsibility for the detonation of a nuclear weapon in the United States on July 3rd, one day before the independence celebration, commonly referred to as the Fourth of July, a very important anniversary for most Americans. This was no mistake, according to Osama it was designed to bring humiliation to, in his words, a haughty nation. The United States declared war on Osama in 1991 when bin Laden's Sudanese construction company was accused of being a front for terrorist activities. A running battle of words and military actions ensued, placing pressure on bin Laden to enlarge his al Qaeda (foundation) that was originally shaped to help defeat the Soviet threat in Afghanistan."

The picture suddenly came back to Stuart Jenkins in the New York studio. "We have apparently lost our satellite signal." The signal was still strong but the network decided the Al Jazeera anchor had gone beyond the acceptable bias in light of the attack against the United States.

Stuart continued. "To sum up what we have just heard, Osama bin Laden issuing America a message, if in fact it was bin Laden, there is some question as to the authenticity of the veiled figure representing the terrorist icon, but there can be no question regarding the content of the tape. The message was clear, whatever the representation, either al Qaeda or Qaidat al-Jihad, delivered to an Al Jazeera executive three hours after the explosion that so completely devastated Houston, has accepted the responsibility for a nuclear strike against the United States. What we did not know before viewing the tape is the heinous threat to blow up three additional U.S. cities if his demands are not met."

Jenkins began to struggle with his passions as he considered the implications of what he had just reported. He was angry at the madman bin Laden but felt the United States government was derelict in their responsibility to protect its citizens. His transiently philosophical mood was obvious to the astute viewer, but he remained composed and continued.

"They include, as we understand it, the extraction of all military and diplomatic personnel from Islamic nations. We were not told what Islamic states, if any, were collaborating with the Qaidat-al Jihad network in these demands. It is not clear whether all American business interests are included as well. He is demanding reparation for unspecified damages, apparently war related. He wasn't specific here either, and it comes as no surprise; he is demanding all support of Israel be withdrawn. Here, he was clear. All financial, military, and diplomatic backing should cease at once; and in place of the 'petty state of Israel', as he called it, a recognition of Palestine as the rightful possessor of the land, with Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine."

\* \* \*

## **World Reaction**

After the revealing confession of the terrorist operative, the networks continued with non-stop coverage of the chilling details surrounding the Houston tragedy and the global ramifications it now offered. News and reactions from around the world flooded the airway with reports and counter-reports, charges, and counter-charges. Russia had vaulted to the top of the suspicious list of western analysts because of their reputation as the largest arms dealer in the region. This documented reput along with providing the Iranians a uranium enrichment program that threatened the balance of world power was fueling additional tension. The Russians had sold Iran billions of dollars worth of tactical weapons including ground-to-air systems in an attempt to protect their interest in the Iranian nuclear reactors from the threat of a preemptive Israeli strike. This unacceptable behavior by the Russians remained of major concern to the United States during this time of uncertainty, not only because of their relations with Tehran but also because of their obsession with the region's wealth.

\* \* \*

## **Moscow, Russia**

A camera slowly honed in on a lone journalist standing in front of an unidentified building displaying the onion domed architecture distinctive to the Russian landscape.

"Moscow has denounced the terrorist action as barbaric and inhumane," stated the unfamiliar third-team American reporter with a gravelly voice.

"It is not clear whether that statement came from the president's office or from the Federation Counsel. What is clear is that the government is being cautious not to play their full hand here in the early going. Tass, the country's official news source, has reported that the military is extremely nervous and placing their personnel on ready alert, but being very careful not to reveal their intentions...Reporting from Moscow." The reporter gave his name, but no one really listened or cared.

The picture was back to the New York studio for some brief announcements, and then on to a segment taped earlier in Gaza. It was a demonstration familiar to most Americans - masked men filled the streets, armed to the teeth firing their AK-47s randomly into the air without regard for life or limb, yelling anti-American slogans while ten-year-olds swarmed about mimicking the veiled cowards. Most local officials recognized the slogans to be representative of regional thinking but admitted the demonstration was scripted and forced by reprehensible terror organizations. The truth rested somewhere in between with a majority of Palestinians wishing the violence would go away. Their desire to live in peace with the Israelis was real but the strong arm of the fanatical Islamic right pulled the political strings and promoted the terror.

\* \* \*

### **Gaza Strip, Palestinian Territory**

The reporter was unseen, but her voice was clear, her accent scarcely audible. "The people here in Gaza are euphoric as you can see. Shouting 'long live bin Laden, praise is to Allah', and 'down with America'. They have been celebrating in the streets for two days now. These Palestinians believe they have had a rebirth, an answered prayer if you will. There is even talk that Bin-Laden is Muhammad incarnate. Palestinian representatives have told us unofficially that militias are now being formed to help in the invasion of Jerusalem as soon as the Americans commit to the demands of Qaidat-al Jihad. There is a robust suspicion that the Jewish State of Israel will soon be referred to as Palestine once again...back to you in New York." She gave her name as well, but nobody remembered it either.

\* \* \*

### **An Hour With God**

The Christian program, An Hour with God, was running on the sister stations of leading networks. The host of the popular program was the Reverend Cedric Rollins. The controversial Rollins claimed no tie to denominationalism, but professed a bible-based theology acceptable to all true believers. Rollins took on the issues of the day without the apologetics of denominational baggage. He was most popular with the Christian conservative right but had followers in the ecumenical left as well. Although all major network stations were carrying the continuing aftermath reporting on the Houston disaster, their sister stations were running regular programming. The format of An Hour with God was a casual talk show with guests from all walks of life. Rollins masqueraded as a quasi-psychologist taking on the psychoses of the day using bible text as his cure-all source. The majority of the time was spent in bantering about world events and how they related to the second coming of Jesus Christ.

Today the featured guest was Ronnie Holiday, the president of the Christian Alliance for a Secure Israel. Holiday's organization was politically active and accrued a relatively large conservative voting block. The tenet of his foundation was summed up in their affirmation based on Biblical text. "I will bless them that bless thee and curse him that curseth thee. This is in reference to a promise God made to Abraham in the twelfth chapter of Genesis that we believe is relevant today," Holiday said, responding to a question from the host about the origin and purpose of his organization.

"We believe that the United States is God's champion for Israel in her hour of need. We believe Christian America is a major player in the restoration of the lands promised to Abraham, and above all, is instrumental in the fulfillment of His redemptive covenant to the Jewish people."

"Wow... Praise the Lord," shouted a jubilant Cedric Rollins. "We believe," Holiday continued, "that if the United States of America fails in this responsibility then we as a country will incur the wrath of God, be cursed, and Houston will pale in comparison."

"Amen... Amen," confirmed Rollins. "Let me ask you this, Ronnie: What role do you think this dreadful tragedy in Texas plays in the bigger picture?"

"I believe it's a wake up call, Reverend. I believe God is warning us to get out of bed with Islam and to quit pacifying them on every turn. I believe this county was founded on Christian principles and those same principles are a testament to its greatness. I believe pandering to Islam, and its anti-Christ posture, is a slap in the face to God. I think what we are witnessing today is the quintessential good against evil. Christ church against the anti-Christ system and I believe we have to decide once and for all which side we are on."

A more subdued Rollins changed positions in his chair, considering his next question. He didn't expect such a politically incorrect diatribe. He decided he was halfway in, so he might as well go all the way. "And so your organization is advocating...?"

"We are advocating a hard line toward any Arab country that will not recognize the State of Israel as a sovereign nation and any Arab State that sponsors hostilities against her, verbally or otherwise."

Rollins hoped for a station break to collect his thoughts and got one. During the break, the phone banks began to light up. E-mails from around the country poured in, all in overwhelming agreement with Ronnie Holiday's assessment of current affairs. At the end of the day's program, it was agreed that Holiday would act as a co-host on An Hour with God until the national crisis was resolved.

\* \* \*

## **The War Room, Washington D.C.**

The corridor leading to the president's Emergency Operations Center was normally florescent white. Today, the auxiliary lights were being tested in case the city's power was diminished. The bright white had given way to efficient battery-powered lumens that cast their eerie orange hue on the narrow passageway. Built in the late 1950's, the hardened facility was designed to withstand the blast of a nuclear detonation. Today, the PEOC, better known in the White House as The Bunker, was occupied by the vice president, Rupert Langford, Dale Barker, Adam Mendez, and General Dennis Velder, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. A threeway telephone conference had been established with Cheyenne Mountain, home of NORAD, and the underground buttress that now secured the President of the United States. Seated with the President inside the mountain was Colonel Jake Clemens, NORAD's Commanding officer, Ted Clark, Hillary Swan, White House council, and various other military personnel. The third party making up the teleconference was the National Military Command Center NMCC at the Pentagon. In attendance there was Martin Kerr, secretary of defense; Admiral Hugh "Buzz" Atchison, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the NMCC deputy director for operations.

All three locations were closely monitoring world reaction using multiple televisions to follow the news. Some networks had allowed the Al Jazeera news agency to ramble on prognosticating the Arab perspective on the Bin Laden tape while other networks regained control to spew their own perspectives of the event.

The delegations of the three participating parties were staggered beyond grief at the possibility of three more cities being destroyed by these crazed fanatics. The President was told the connection had been achieved.

"How did they get in?" he asked. His deportment was disconcerted, his question droning. He repeated the question, this time with palpable fury, slamming the table with his fist.

"How in God's name did they get in?" The President asked a third time before anyone has a chance to respond, this time directed to the head of intelligence.

"How did they get in, Adam?" The question jarred Mendes out of a mental fixation compelled by his own self-condemnation.

"Looks like the country's ports, Mr. President, although we can't be sure."

"We need some answers now, gentlemen, before anyone else gets blown up," barked the President, speaking directly into the phone as though he was not sure if everyone from the other two locations could hear him.

Mendes continued, "It looks likely that Galveston Bay could have been the port of entry."

"How so?"

"Just not enough manpower or time to conduct the kind of inspection necessary to screen all imports arriving with the kind of tonnage and expedition our ports are experiencing."

"Oh for crying out loud, Adam, how do you miss Plutonium? It has to be easily detected."

"Not really, Mr. President. There are methods of masking small quantities of radioactive materials that can fool the most sensitive scanning technology. On top of that, there are small boats including private pleasure yachts that sneak through the system everyday. The truth is, it is impossible to monitor all shipping and boat traffic on ten thousand miles of coastline."

"Isn't it a little late to drop this in our lap?" barked a frustrated president. Calming down, he continued to try and find out if there was any light left to work with at the end of the tunnel. "Does that mean that we have some sort of pattern here? Are we onto something Dale...with the ports I mean?" The president's question this time was intended for the Director of the FBI.

"Hardly, Mr. President, but the ports have always been a major security concern. We're working on the theory that the largest cities in the country all have harbors, and that body count is the fundamental intent of the terrorist."

"Rupert, do you agree with the idea about the ports and all?"

Rupert Langford was a trusted colleague of the president. Their friendship had been solid since they started their political careers together as junior Congressmen. Both aspired to become President of the United States. Rupert was well-qualified for the job but lacked the television persona to win an election. He held a Doctorate of Law from Harvard and had spent most of his political life in the diplomatic core. His answer was brief. "I do, Mr. President."

"How about it, Martin, how does the military feel about this point of view?"

Martin Kerr was the new kid on the block, confirmed only six months prior to Houston. He was cautious and slow with his response.

"Did you hear me, Martin?"

"Hello...yes, Mr. President, you are coming through very clear...the Defense Department Intelligence Bureau has some limitations internally as you know, in that homeland security falls on someone else's watch, but it has long been a Coast Guard priority to interrupt drug traffic in and out of the intercoastal waterways. Unfortunately, success has been fractional at best. It seems to me if you were going to bring anything illegal in, you would use the waterways."

The president abruptly changed course. "What is our response position, Martin?"

It was the question all parties had anticipated. The idea of a nuclear response to anything prior to July 3rd was unthinkable. Now it seemed warranted. "We are at stand-by, Mr. President. All we need is targets and a go."

"Well, we have a week to resolve this before we decide to burn up all of Asia."

The president's imprudent reply silenced the contingent. Dale Barker broke the hush. "Mr. President, this is Dale."

"Yeah, go ahead Dale."

"We have a man in custody who claims to have information about the location of the remaining bombs. The Miami office is interrogating him as we speak."

"How promising does this look?" the president asked.

"He's an officer in Cuba's state police. His name is Hector Fuentes. His connection with Qaidat al-Jihad is still unclear. Maybe a dead end but the Miami people are drumming him pretty hard. We hope to have some definitive answers by this afternoon. Some of what we have found out through Fuentes is that a large Qaidat al-Jihad cell has operated out of Cuba for sometime now with immunity. Members of this cell have Mexican passports and travel in and out of the United States at will. Fuentes claims it's this group that smuggled the bomb components in through a privately chartered fishing vessel."

"Why is he, this Fuentes, giving up this information?" The question came from Theodore Clark.

"Says he's been passed over one too many times by the Castro regime, said Castro was Diablo himself, claims he loves the United States and wants to stop the madness."

"What's your take on this guy? Is this promising, or is he a kook?" asked Clark.

"We think there's a price on his head in Cuba and he's trying to save his own skin. We should know more about the reliability of his testimony later today."

The president pushed Barker. "Dale, do you think this is a legitimate enough lead to verify the existence of these bombs?"

"My gut tells me Fuentes has valuable information. It is possible, however, that he could be a plant to keep us occupied until time runs out. It looks like time is the premium commodity right now."

"What else do we have?" The question was an open invitation.

Langford weighed in. "Mr. President, I think it's crucial that we begin the Washington Exit Strategy as soon as possible. The city is pretty much empty already. Most have left, but of course no official word as yet."

The Washington Exit Strategy was a plan devised after the 9/11 attacks to vacate the Capitol if the possibility of mass destruction was eminent in the city. The plan called for each branch of government as well as relevant offices to relocate in the federal buildings of designated cities throughout the United States with as limited an amount of interruption as possible. The stratagem allowed for the Federal Government to carry on with a viable governing system even though under siege by a clear threat to the nation's infrastructure.

"What kind of signal are we sending here?" Asked a beleaguered president. "I think we need to reassure the country that we are in full control and working to resolve this thing by any and every means available to us."

Langford agreed, "By all means, and I think that is being arranged, but we need an official go on the Exit Strategy."

"We don't, sir...but we do know that the Capitol is most assuredly at the top of the list."

"Let's go with it then."

"Thank you, Mr. President. We will notify all surrogate cities to gear up and be ready to receive their respective delegations."

There was a pause in the communications between the three teleconferencing parties. Ted Clark eventually spoke. "Gentlemen this is Ted Clark in Colorado. We are making the necessary preparations for the president to address the nation from Cheyenne Mountain as soon as we have clarified all of our options. We will need to secure the right to preempt at any time we think it suitable to keep the American people informed. Hopefully with your help we can make an informative address within the next six to eight hours."

The vice president had been a respected voice in this administration and a leading advocate of the president's foreign policy.

"Ted, this is Rupert Langford. With all due respect, I think we need to address the country with some type of buffer right away. The sooner the better, the media is going to formulate policy through misinformation and speculation if we don't get something out there right away."

"We are working as fast as we can to put an appropriate announcement together. We want to be as accurate as we can, of course."

The president left his chair and walked over to a large electronically driven transparent world map located in the NORAD boardroom. The grid was alive with various colored lines and lights - meaningless to the casual observer but understood by the trained eye to be the monitoring organism of all North American airspace generated by networked global positioning satellite imagery. It was not an atlas that easily projected distinguishable geography but was good enough to serve the president's purposes. He searched for the Asian continent while posing a question to the Pentagon. "What are our capabilities in the region right this minute, gentlemen?"

"Mr. President, Buzz Atchison here. We have enough delivery capability to level Pakistan at a moment's notice should that be your decision, sir."

"Can you be precise, Admiral?" the president asked as he continued to peruse the giant monitor, searching for a recognizable location.

"Yes, sir, I can...we have two subs with nuclear ballistic munitions standing by in the Gulf of Oman, a third is en route. Two aircraft carriers are within eight hours of the Persian Gulf. Warships accompany both carriers with surface-to-surface capability, and we can sneak a couple of B-2s from Diego Garcia in with gravity channeled nuclear armaments. We can do this job messy or with precision, whatever is called for."

The president showed no emotion while the Admiral briefed him on the crushing retaliatory power available and the military's ability to deliver such a lethal blow. Finally, he asked the young, clever looking officer standing beside him for assistance in his search. "Where is Pakistan on this thing?"

The officer was the operations shift manager. The area being used for the teleconference room was a mapping complex of multifarious global positioning systems capability, providing instant access to world geographic imagery. The operations officer left the president's side and moved to a nearby technician seated at a console. The two had a brief conversation and the monitor the president was viewing changed to



a graphic three-dimensional likeness of the earth's landscape. The picture began to move rapidly over sea and land, traversing one continent after another until it came to a sudden rest over a mountainous region. The source of the picture seemed to hover just outside of the viewer's sight. The image was computer generated, resembling a giant gaming board. "What are we looking at here Lieutenant?" the president asked. The Lieutenant motioned the tech to move and then seated himself in the chair the tech left. "This is the northern Afghani-Pakistani border, sir." As he spoke he used the cursor to point out specific locations. "This is the Tora Bora mountain range."

As the picture zoomed in, detailed infrastructure was revealed. Road and rail networks became evident. Towns and cities were exposed. The president was given a bird's eye view of the Northwest Frontier. The Lieutenant briefly identified the location and then moved to the next position.

"This is Peshawar, the Capital of the region."

"Where's Dir?" the president asked, his eyes still glued to the monitor. There was a hint of retribution in his voice. The picture began to roam again, settling on the city of Dir, 135 miles north of Peshawar. Abruptly, the image changed from computer graphics to high altitude radar generated satellite photography. The city was then magnified to an altitude of twenty thousand feet. Roads, buildings, and modes of transportation were all revealed. The Operations Officer moved to within ten thousand feet. It was close enough to fraction parts of the city. At five thousand feet, dogs were plainly identified. Then suddenly there was movement. "Real time," the lieutenant boasted.

"Amazing. Is this where we think he is, Buzz?" the president asked, referring to Osama bin Laden.

Through the video-conferencing network the White House and the Pentagon were sharing the technically generated journey he was taking. "This is where we think he spends some time. We can't be sure he is there right now."

The Admiral's response frustrated the president. "How long to hit Dir?"

"Capability within a few hours. Probability depends on how many people we need to move."

The president pushed for a more definitive answer. "What's that mean, move people?"

The Admiral remained vague. "It's likely there are operatives in the area. It will take some time to find out who's got people in there and then get word to 'em. I'm sure that course of action has been started, but we're talking days, not hours here."

"What did you mean by messy or precise?"

"Messy or precise, sir?" The Admiral repeated.

"You said we can do this with precision or we can do it messy, what do you mean by that?"

"By that I mean we can put a couple of ballistics in there and take out the entire Northwest Frontier Province of Pakistan, along with some folks in Afghanistan, and Tajikistan, who knows what else, and run the risk of setting off every nuclear security response alert in the world, initiating a missile exchange no one would live through. Second option is to drop a nuke or two using the B-2s and have a similar result... the simple indiscriminant killing of millions of likely innocent people. Option three, we have some standoff capability, with the JASSM (Joint Air to Surface Standoff Missiles) with geo-positioning technology."

"Smart bombs?" Inquired the president.

"That's right. Smart bombs with low-yield, earth-penetrating nuclear warheads."

The president reluctantly turned his attention away from the display screen and looked directly into the small camera related to the phone system. "I take it you prefer option three, Admiral."

"I do."

The president intentionally tried to ignite the passions of his delegation. He was hopeful of some feedback. It was his way of inviting ideas. "Not that bin Laden gave a hoot when he murdered a million people."

"I'm not concerned about the well-being of that bastard and his crowd," Buzz Atchison fired back. "That whole region is a nest of cutthroats, misfits and murderers, never mind that it's the belly of Qaidat al-Jihad. However, there is an entire thirdworld culture residing there that remains oblivious to global conditions outside of their own three little acres. Look...We're confident that bin Laden moves from place to place with impunity within a hundred and fifty mile radius of Peshawar. Dir is just one stop along the way. There are caves in those mountains that are off the screen. They're terrorist-friendly and have their own controlled atmospheres. He could be several miles underground right now, in fact most likely is."

"What's your point?" the president asked, agitated. "You're saying we don't have credible targets?"

"I'm saying we could do a horrendous amount of damage, kill about a jillion people, and not get bin Laden. That is, if we choose option one or two, indiscriminant carnage. Option three affords us select target ability with low-yield nuclear munitions using joint air-to-surface standoff missile technology. It's clean,

not as much wholesale fallout exposure. It's surgical. It still kills a jillion people but doesn't tear things up so much, and we can go after him underground with earth-penetrating bombs."

The Admiral ran his hand over his bald head. He was satisfied with his point. "Sends the message without blowing away half of Pakistan," he said.

The president remained standing, arms folded across his chest. He posed the question to Martin Kerr, the Secretary of Defense. "Do you agree with this assessment, Martin?"

"I do, Mr. President. A tactical nuclear strike at this time enrages fewer people...the world knows that we are going to retaliate in some measure and they know our capability. I think a low yield response says that all we want are the people who threaten our security."

"Do we have credible targets, is what I'm asking, Mr. Secretary."

"Yes, we think he is in one of three or four places, within the three hundred mile circle stated previously."

"You're referring to the Peshawar area?"

"That's right, sir."

"Ok, let's put it together. Anybody disagree with this plan of attack?"

No response.

"Does anyone disagree with the idea of a nuclear strike...period?"

Dale Barker spoke up. "Mr. President, I'm hoping this Fuentes character can provide something we can use to stabilize this situation. Can you give us seventy-two hours to pursue it?"

"What would stabilize it?" the president asked.

"The location of the remaining bombs," Barker replied.

"You've got seventy-two hours."

\* \* \*

## **Tel Aviv, Israel, Day Two**

Prime Minister Yaron Sharett had placed his nation on the highest military alert immediately following the Al Jazeera release. He was about to address the Jewish State for the first time since the Houston explosion. The young Sharett won the position of Prime Minister as a rising star of the National Democratic Assembly. He was instrumental in putting together the Palestinian-Israeli alliance that led to the cessation of hostilities which had wrecked the country for a decade. He was young, very good-looking, and very politically left. The NDA liberal platform was popular with the new generation Israeli who has grown up witnessing the ravages of war. This new breed of conciliatory Jew was prepared to recognize the rights of the Arab minority, encouraging autonomy in the cultural and educational arenas, while providing widespread admittance to the political process. There was no love lost between the two parties, but a desperate effort to find some common ground and to stop the killing. Sharett was a signature member of the Jewish reformation charter for a Palestinian state and had hinted that he was open to a discussion that could place the new Palestinian capital in the Arab quarter of Jerusalem. This most recent Israeli position could be a reality, should the government of Palestine guarantee peace. This new provocation had all but destroyed any hope of peace in the troubled state.

"My fellow patriots and citizens of Israel. First, let me extend this nation's deepest sympathy to the people of America and especially the great state of Texas. It is with heavy heart we in Israel recognize and are familiar with the pain and suffering inflicted on our good friends in America. We offer our sympathies."

His expression changed from one of empathy to one of stern determination. "A few hours ago, the international criminal Osama bin Laden announced to the world that he has six more nuclear bombs he will detonate if his demands are not met. This warning must be considered a direct threat to the security of Israel. Therefore, I am asking our military planners to prepare an offensive first strike capability at any time and any place should it be necessary to protect the welfare of our people. We shall reserve the right to use all weapon systems available to defend ourselves. That could mean the deployment of Israel's nuclear armaments. I am asking Israel's new Arab friends in the area to exercise whatever influence you may have to cool off a very incendiary and volatile situation. It is in the best interest of all governments in the region to cooperate in this crucial endeavor."

The fact that Sharett's beloved homeland was possibly teetering on the very edge of extinction nullified the need for political correctness. The tiny state of Israel would do as it had always done...defend herself.

"Therefore, in an effort to safeguard the existence of our nation, we will close our borders to all outsiders. No one will be allowed to come or go until we are sure this county is free of a nuclear bomb threat. All commercial flights will be grounded until further notice. All reserve units are being required to report to their designated staging areas immediately. There will be a curfew in effect throughout the state of Israel. Any group larger than ten people will be disbanded for your own protection, and the safety and well-being of others. Any person found outdoors after dark without proper identification will be considered a risk to the state and be detained. That will include the West Bank and Gaza territories. I am asking the army to deploy troops in all Palestinian sectors as precautionary measures."

The features of Yaron Sharett's face tightened, giving it the appearance of chiseled granite as he stared directly into the camera. He methodically slid the outline of his speech to the side of the podium without looking away from camera. Tightly clenching his fingers in front of him, he continued without the aid of notes. "The blood of many Israelis, young and old, has been shed in the restoration and defense of their homeland, the land that God gave to Abraham four thousand years ago as an everlasting agreement. The Jew is here to stay by directive of almighty God and we will defend her until the last man and woman is left standing."

The resolution in his face intensified. "Now, I give the enemy of Israel a warning of my own: Any hostility of nuclear derivation against the Jewish State of Israel will be met with the same aggression a hundred times over."

\* \* \*

## **The Experts**

The network had assembled a panel of hastily gathered experts to participate in an open discussion on Middle Eastern affairs to attempt to enlighten the public on the cultural differences in the region and answer some questions on the how and why something like this could have happened. The moderator was Tony Rinker, a seasoned correspondent skilled in the art of diplomacy. Along with Rinker's television duties, his weekly commentary appeared in two hundred newspapers throughout the United States.

His guests included Rabbi Albert Gaon, chairman of the Jewish Institute of Religious Studies, New York State. Rabbi Gaon was an authority on Jewish antiquity whose scholarship concerning the ancient city of Engedi had been widely recognized as brilliant. He was a frequent contributor to the highly acclaimed publication *Archaeology at Large*. Also seated on the panel is Dr. Paul Morris, Professor Emeritus at Harvard University. Dr. Morris headed the celebrated 'Society for Change' program, a graduate-level syllabus exploring Middle Eastern culture. Dr Morris was considered an expert on Semitic cultures. Dr Andra Akili, author of *The Modern Muslim* also joined the fray. She was the co-founder of the Center for Islamic Awareness, a Washington-based think tank promoting progressive Islam. Dr. Akili was a frequent guest analyst on the CBS evening news. The youngest of the panel, she would be aggressive and formidable in her responses. The last participant was Michael Snelling, author of *A Better World Before Us*, the best-selling narrative on the late 21st century. Michael brought to the discussion a very liberal bias on the direction the world was heading. He would emphasize the need for recognition of universal harmony.

Tony welcomed his panelists and then set the ground rules for the discussion. It would be a round table format, giving everyone equal time should they care to contribute. Tony would direct each question to a particular guest, the panelist would tackle the question, and then it would be open for discussion. Rinker started the ball rolling with the first query.

"Something new has happened over the last twenty years, a brand of hostilities that target the innocent, the bystander, the politically credulous...women and children. We have labeled it terror, and we know the effects, but what are the causes? Are they religious, political, ethnic? Why are civilized societies so terribly barbaric? Dr. Akili, I'll start with you."

Andra Akili was born in Jordan, raised and educated in the United States, and spent an equal amount of time in both places. "First of all, Tony, I wouldn't say this is anything new. It's only been recently acknowledged by the United States because America has been on the receiving end. These kinds of tactics are a way of life for millions of people, especially those of developing countries, which are frequently governed by tyrannical despots. I think it's fair to say that historically terror has been a path for intimidation since the written word. Unfortunately, Americans are incredibly naive in their knowledge and

understanding of foreign cultures. What is perceived in this country is what the television tells us to perceive and we are woefully satisfied with the findings. Fact is, Tony... there's another world out there, one that Americans are extremely unfamiliar with."

"Are you suggesting then that America has in some way engaged in terror campaigns and now those acts are coming back on us?"

"No, I didn't say that, you did."

"Well, I am trying to understand your statement, 'America has been on the receiving end.' Wouldn't that imply that with this tragic event in Texas, America is reaping the result of her past actions?"

"I am saying that you don't have to hide in the shadows or wear a turban to be a terrorist. You can blow things up in the name of justice but terror is terror regardless of how you label it."

"I see ... Michael do you agree with this appraisal?"

"I concur that terror tactics are nothing new, but I think this behavior is more an act of desperation than hostility. People will revert to terror when their options as they recognize them run out."

"That's just nonsense," said Dr. Paul Morris without being invited. "The terror we are talking about here is government sponsored. It is in fact a global jihad supported by a worldwide Islamic conference and inspired by religious perversion. It's easy to point your finger at the guilty parties. They don't try to hide it. Oh, and by the way, defending oneself from such tyranny is certainly justifiable."

"So you attribute this new wave of violence to outlaw regimes and over the line religious zealotry?" Rinker asked.

"No... I credit the Arab-Israeli conflict, and that's what we are talking about here, isn't it? Let's make no mistake about that, it's the root cause of this clash that has overflowed into the rest of our lives...I attribute this conflict to sibling rivalry."

"Professor Morris... please, you're not going to use the Isaac-Ishmael argument are you? Let's be reasonable. The Biblical account historically speaking is hardly reliable, wouldn't you agree?"

"On the contrary, Mr. Snelling, there is hard evidence by way of antiquity that substantiates Arabs and Jews are descendents of the same ancestry. Every day there are new archaeological findings that seem to validate the probability. However, before I was interrupted I was about to say that an interesting study regarding the genetic breakdown of the Semitic peoples have lead a prominent group of biotechnologists from New York University to suggest that Palestinian and Jewish men carry the same y-chromosome which is passed down from father to son. The y-chromosome is not dual gender. It can only be male transmitted creating a genetic fingerprint connecting these ethnic societies to a single father. If this study proves to be true, then Palestinians and Jews are siblings. For that matter, all Arabs and Jews carry the same biological identity in their DNA sequence. In principle, they all derive from the same father. Abraham the father of Isaac and Ishmael, or Shem a son of Noah from which Abraham is an offspring and from which the word Semitic originated...or astounding enough, all the way back to Adam. If this is true, and I believe it could be, the conflict is a territorial squabble over inheritance." Professor Morris's elucidation opened a whole new can of worms for Tony Rinker's panel. There was nothing more provocative than a religious argument.

"Michael?" Rinker went back to the best-selling author, hoping he'd fire off a rebuttal. He was not disappointed.

"Professor, you're using genetic double-talk to try and persuade this panel, as well as the American people, that somehow through bio-techniques there's scientific evidence that Adam and Eve actually existed, making Adam the father of the human race. Sir, I thought you were above Biblical mythology."

"No, Mr. Snelling, I am not trying to persuade this panel, nor anyone else, anything. Adam simply implies a beginning. He could represent the Adam of the Bible or the evolutionary Adam who descended from the slime pit that you so eagerly embrace. I will grant you that population genetics is still in its infancy and there is yet much to learn, but genetic fingerprinting along with historical evidence make a good argument for a family feud in this case."

"Rabbi Gaon, do you want to wade in on this?" Rinker asked the diminutive Gaon. The Rabbi guffawed nervously as he crossed his legs.

"Professor Morris is right when he suggests that the two ethnicities have had a long-term irreconcilable relationship. The historical evidence is beyond question. But Tony's query why the outbreak of hostilities that has brought the world to the brink of war, and more recently has landed directly on top of Texas, has not been addressed. I would like to answer it this way. Simply put, it was the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948. The restoration of Israel was made possible by the west. I am not concerned about political

correctness when I will tell you the truth. Arabs believe their right is to the land and to the holy places taken from them. They are united in the notion that the west, specifically the United States, is the managing partner in the acquisition of Palestine thus making them a target for militant Islam and the likes of al-Qaeda. The Muslim world still holds Europeans accountable for the crusades of the Middle Ages. Those forays into the land of God, sponsored by the Roman Catholic Church in collaboration with the Cross of England, were designed to take back the Holy Land for the cause of Christ. Thousands of Muslims were slaughtered in the invasions, creating a deep-seated hatred for all white Europeans, who Muslims consider Christians. That mindset is alive and well today, fueled by power hungry Mullahs, who proliferate the hate for personal gain. The incursion by the industrialized west into Asia, and specifically the near east, by the US and her allies for purposes of stabilizing the region after the second world war is an affront to Islam, and considered a twentieth century crusade. This idea is perpetuated by the bullies that govern the Muslim faith."

"Rabbi Gaon, you are showing your bias," Dr. Akili stated. She was a globalist first and Muslim second, an active member of the organization Islam International whose goal it was to differentiate militant Islam from the more conventional peace-loving tradition. "This is not a problem linked to a single geographic region. Terror is worldwide sir; a dilemma that crosses international as well as ethnic lines. Your explanation smacks of elitism and can only spread the flames of contempt."

"Agreed," said Snelling. His book, *A Better World Before Us*, was a vision of the future of the human endeavor. The fundamental theme was a world government without religious interference. In his book, Snelling wrote that the majority of human suffering could be attributed to faith in a mythical God. Therefore, remove the "tentacles" of organized religion and begin to depend on the human resource...diminishing the lines of racism and nationalism, leaving the world in harmonious bliss.

Snelling continued. "It seems to me pointing fingers is counterproductive. There's obviously enough blame to go around. Shouldn't we be working these problems out at the conference table? Let's bring the disgruntled parties together and hammer out the differences with level-headed compromise."

"My Lord, Snelling! What planet are you visiting from? What we have here is the result of millennium of compromise. There are good guys and bad guys involved in this terrorist thing. It's time for the good guys to step forward and thump the bad guys."

"My Lord, yourself, Morris," said Michael Snelling in disgust.

"Alright gentlemen, let's try a different question," said Rinker, trying to regain control. "We do know that the issue at hand is Islamic related, because we have the Qaidat al-Jihad tape claiming responsibility for the Houston disaster and accusing the US of fostering Israel. Keeping that in mind, I think our discussion should focus on the two parties' at the center of conflict: the Israelis and the Palestinians. This dispute seems to have no apparent solution. My question then, is there an immediate answer or even a long-range solution to this volatile situation? Rabbi Gaon."

Gaon was an American born Jew but spent most of his time in Israel. He was a frequent guest lecturer at Hebrew University Jerusalem and a board member of the prestigious Cymbalista Synagogue and Jewish Heritage Center at Tel Aviv University.

"My friends, as far back as one thousand BC, ancient Egyptian records suggest that the 'Prst,' a word meaning sea people, invaded Egypt and settled in Philistia the southwestern coastal plain of Canaan. We know them better as the Philistines, the rival adversary of the early Hebrew and the ancestor of today's Palestinian. The argument is four thousand years old and getting older. There are but only two realistic options to settle this problem. One, create an atmosphere of cooperation between the two states void of outside interference that would eliminate hostility and promote peaceful coexistence...Not going to happen! Or two, relocate the Palestinians to an Arab friendly country where they can live in peace and practice their faith among their own kind." "Isn't that a bit extreme?" Rinker asked, shifting his attention to Andra Akili.

"Of course it is... Rabbi Gaon, you should be ashamed of yourself. It's that kind of remark that widens the chasm. There is always hope and we should cling to what hope we have."

"My dear Dr. Akili, we must see the world as it really is and not through some idyllic looking glass. You cannot legislate love or acceptance. These are characteristics that appeal to the heart. What we must do is apply practical solutions to unworkable circumstances."

"Fine then, why not move Israel to Europe, as has been recommended in some circles by fair minded men? Is that a practical solution to an unworkable circumstance?"

There was a pause in the discussion. Tony looked for help.

"Professor, is it reasonable to expect the Israelis and the Palestinians to work their differences out?"

"Well, let me say this: two people with diverse positions lay claim to the same territory, neither intend to go anywhere, and neither can stand the other. Can they learn to live together side by side given enough time? I doubt it. The hate and resentment are too deep-rooted. It is a gargantuan dilemma stretching beyond human debate. One thing I believe for certain, the growing admiration for radical Islamic direction in the Muslim world is only going to stoke the fire. Islam must police its own if there is any progress to be made. If they're unable to do so, then someone else will have to do it for them." "Professor, we agree on one thing," offered Dr. Akili. "Islam must denounce the violence and gain control of the militant right that is so attractive to a growing number of younger Muslims. Of course, it is ridiculous to presume that forces from the outside can speed the process. The fundamental antipathy you speak of will never be resolved by strong arm tactics."

"Mr. Snelling, your thoughts on the Palestinian-Israeli dispute?"

To call Michael Snelling an expert on Arab-Israeli affairs was absurd. He was only an expert of his own personal philosophy that revolved around a one-world government. What made Snelling an attractive guest in these kinds of discussions was that in the end, according to his viewpoint, all grievances are settled, which appealed to the naive viewer.

"The substitution of religious obligation for common sense secular management is the first obstacle to overcome if we are to improve the human condition. The number of religions in our global society today adds up to the same amount of disparities. The Jews and Palestinians are a good example, as Dr. Morris points out, family and yet divided by religion. Our responsibility as a freethinking society, it seems to me, is to move toward an independent form of self-rule for all peoples abolishing the bias of life-controlling religious faith. The idea that an unseen supreme being is in control of every man's life is the cruelest lie ever perpetrated on mankind. This type of thinking must be changed if we are to preserve humanity. We must teach all people to think for themselves, express ideas, work together in equality for all."

Albert Gaon re-crossed his legs shifting his weight to better see Snelling and then spoke directly to him. "Mr. Snelling, your ideas are utopian and unrealistic at best. It all looks good on paper, but in reality people don't easily forget where they come from. The US is the best example of this ethnic nomenclature. Look at any metropolitan city in this country, you will find black communities, Hispanic, and Oriental neighborhoods. You have Arab sections, Irish, and Jewish districts. Let's face it, people are more comfortable living among their own kind. To expect these many cultures to reside under one roof without some racial fallout is insane. This conflict will be resolved at some point in the future when Jordan will allow the Palestinians to establish their state within the Jordanian borders."

"Michael?" Rinker moved back to the controversial Snelling, hoping he would take exception to Gaon's remarks. He wasn't surprised by the response.

"Well, before Rabbi Gaon begins uprooting and moving entire states from one country to the next, I think this nation, the United States, should quit using Israel as an unwilling surrogate, protecting our interest, namely oil. After all, oil is the main reason we have such a strong presence in that area. Outside of Turkey, Israel is the only workable democracy in the near east, which is why it gets one-third of all US financial aid. That amounts to about three billion dollars annually in a country that represents one-thousandth of the world's population. Why not spread some of that money around in an effort to democratize Arab countries, therefore equalizing the monetary balance?"

"Islamic countries don't want to be democratized," said Dr Morris, looking at Tony Rinker but directing his comments to Michael Snelling. "How does it go? You can lead a horse to water, but you can't force him to drink. We must be very careful not to penalize Israel for the attacks against Americans."

"I'm not suggesting we penalize anyone," argued Snelling. "I'm saying that Israel has one of the highest per-capita incomes in the world and still gets the bulk of our financial assistance. If we are going to make friends of Islam, we need to spread the wealth around."

By the time the hour ended, Tony Rinker was convinced he and his panel had done some good in explaining how we got to where they were. To some viewers, however, it seemed only food for fodder to be used by wannabe journalists and pretend intellectuals in blogs and Letters to the Editor columns. After a ten-minute break, featuring a battery of soft drink and weight loss endorsements, Jenkins was back in his familiar spot monitoring affairs from behind the news desk.

"Interesting," he said with a slight smile, referring to the Tony Rinker piece. "It would seem an insurmountable dilemma but surely there is common ground somewhere." Jenkins cocked his head slightly. Someone was speaking to him through the hidden receiver in his ear. "We have a report coming from our person at the State Department, Gwen Sheridan. Hello Gwen, I understand you have some sobering information to pass on."

The picture moved from Jenkins to the blondish gray Harry S. Truman building where the US State Department was located. Standing just outside the entrance facing C Street was Gwen Sheridan, the CBS State Department correspondent. "Sobering indeed, Stuart...we are getting reports, conflicting as some of them may be, that troop movement in the region...I'm talking about Asia in general, and more specifically Middle Eastern countries has escalated to alarming proportions. We are being told that Russia is engaged in massive troop movements into the Caucasus Mountain region. It's our understanding that these observations are coming from the military's satellite surveillance system." A large electronic Atlas displaying the Armenian-Iranian boarder filled the television screen, taking the place of Sheridan's image, but she continued with her report audibly. "As you can see, this peninsula is boarded on the east by the Caspian Sea and on the west by the Black sea. It is one of two boarder areas the Russians are moving to protect. The other is along Uzbekistan's northern range. The Caucasus buildup is the most alarming to the State Department because of the direct descent into the Persian Gulf."

"Oil."

"That's right, Stuart, some people here at the State Department believe that if war breaks out, the Russians will try and make a move on oil installations at the invite of the Iranians. But there's more. It's long been thought around Washington by astute eastern observers that they may have their eye on more than oil."

"And what would that be?" Jenkins asked.

"Control. Control of the Persian Gulf, control of the broad amount of untapped wealth and resources that are underdeveloped in the area, not the least of which is the substantial amount of mineral deposits found in and around the Dead Sea in the Negev desert. And we're told that the Russians are not above using Iran as a deputy state to accomplish such a daring maneuver. And that's not all, Stuart, Turkey is amassing troops along two fronts as well. Observers say this building conflict would present an opportunity for the Turks to invade Iraq and take Kurdistan with the Syrians ready to pick up anything left over of the fragile Iraqi state."

"What about China?" Jenkins asked. "Wouldn't China be threatened by any American or Russian provocation?"

"Absolutely, but the people we've been talking to here at the State Department believe the Chinese will take a wait and see position, but make no mistake, they say China would not hesitate to protect her interests. We are told that the US is keeping all of these parties informed as to our objectives, hoping to defuse any idea that we intend to go on some uncontrolled rampage. But as you know, Peter, the Chinese, who have the largest standing army in the world, don't trust us very much."

"Who does in that region?" Jenkins said with a hint of indignation. "What can you tell us, if anything, about the special session at the United Nations? Do you have any insight on what's going on over there?"

"Not much, a lot of posturing, with name calling, acid accusations, and protest. Whole delegations have walked out. It's been pretty well accepted around these quarters that the UN will prove to be ineffective in this affair. The problem, they say, is that there are too many sovereign interests at stake."

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## **An Hour with God**

Seated in an oversized maroon chair, the Reverend Cedric Rollins presided. He was bordered on either side by two similar furnishings, not quite as big. On his left was Ronnie Holiday, his guest host for the short-term. On his right was a distinguished looking balding man in a black Romano clergy shirt with white collar and dark jacket. The three men were smiling as the camera slowly moved in their direction, filling the screen with Reverend Rollins. The theme song shook the soundtrack with overdone bass version of "All Hail The King". Today's guest was Father Paul Farris, a renegade Catholic priest who still adhered to the notion that the Jews killed Christ and therefore all Jews are Christ killers. The idea was repugnant to Holiday, but both Holiday and Rollins believed their guest would help them expose the expanding antiJudaism attitude among Christians today.

"Well, praise be to God," said Rollins. "We are in the third day of this fiendish standoff with the devil. The world is still being held hostage to a handful of Islamic degenerates, and...oh, by the way, before we get started today I want to remind you that next month we begin our annual summer Harvestathon. I will be counting on you to send what you can to assure that we stay on the air in your area." Rollins eyes appeared

to follow the teleprompter momentarily, searching for more about the fund-raiser. There was none so he moved on. "Along with Pastor Holiday, Father Paul Farris joins us today, the author of a new book titled *Iniquity of the Jew*. It is a controversial account of early Jewish transgression. Father Farris, thank you for coming. Is that a fair and accurate reflection of the content of your book?"

The priest was poised, congenial, and not easily shaken. He was seated slightly in front and turned in Rollins' direction, directly across from Holiday. His hands were gently clasped and resting on the arm of the overstuffed chair. "Yes, as far as you have taken it, but controversial only to those who have a limited understanding of Jewish history."

"But Father Farris," Holiday interrupted. "You have been accused of anti-Jewish sentiment in the past and this book does little to change that position. Wouldn't you agree?"

The priest's expression changed little as he directed his attention to Holiday now. "I have been called a Jew hater by zealous little men whose theological tutoring in early Jewish culture is equivalent to that of preschool. I can state unequivocally that I am not a Jew hater, but a reporter of the facts."

"I see," said Holiday. "Then you believe that the events of July 3rd have little, if anything, to do with God's interest in the state of Israel or the Jewish people."

"If you are asking me if I believe God had something to do with the destruction of Houston, Texas, my answer is no. Militant Muslims, with an agenda of their own, carried out the destruction of Houston. The new established state of Israel is a nineteenth century occurrence carried out by Europe to amend the German atrocities of the Second World War. What it is not, in my view, is a God inspired restoration for the purpose of ushering in the second coming of Christ, as I believe you aspire to." The expression on Holiday's face was revealing. He was offended and anxious to challenge the priest but Father Farris was quick to stop any intrusion. "Let me finish my thought please. The church now subscribes to a new covenant. The Jew, once the purveyor of the Holy Word, has been replaced with the church in the new covenant. Today, the God of the Bible is the God of the church only, under which all men must be sanctified, Jew and gentile alike."

Pastor Holiday was livid, but under control. "Father Farris, do you simply ignore the covenant God made with Abraham and his offspring? He called it everlasting, did He not? But let me go on, are you familiar with the document 'Nostra Aetate' penned at the Second Vatican Council in 1965?" Holiday was holding a copy of the text.

"Yes I am very familiar with that decree," answered the priest.

"Can you tell us what Nostra Aetate means?" asked Holiday.

"Yes of course, it means 'in our time'."

"In our time," Holiday repeated. "That would imply today, would it not?"

"I would agree with that," answered a confident Farris. "Well, let me read something from this document, if I may."

"Surely."

"What I am going to read are excerpts from the Vatican document, would you like to follow?" Holiday offered Farris a copy.

"I will not need a copy to follow."

Holiday continued. "This declaration was designed by the Vatican and proclaimed by Pope Paul VI over forty years ago to develop a closer relationship to non-Christian religions, for the purpose of proselytizing them to Catholicism... is that a fair statement?"

The priest countered, "No sir, it is not. Converting a nonbeliever to Christ is the commission of all Christians. This declaration was created to promote unity and love among men and nations in a smaller world."

The rift between Protestantism and Catholicism began to leak into the mood of the conversation. Father Farris was now sitting on the edge of his maroon chair in a dogged face-off with the passionate Holiday. The Reverend Rollins was beaming, happy with the dispute; it was good for ratings.

"Father Farris, let me get back to the question at hand."

"Please do, Pastor Holiday."

"I am reading from the document Nostra Aetate. 'The church therefore, cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in His inexpressible mercy concluded the Ancient Covenant.' Is that a reference to ancient Israel sir?"

"Yes, of course."

"Could the same be said of the New Testament, sir?" There was no answer from Father Farris's side.



"Let me continue...True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead, pressed for the death of Christ; still what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all Jews without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews today." Holiday shifted his weight and then resumed. "Therefore, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God." He looked up at Father Farris, smug now in his conviction, and then finished reading. "Furthermore, in her rejection of every persecution against any man, the church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.' Is that an accurate view of the Catholic Churches' position on Jewish relations today, Father Farris?"

"Specifically, sir...Therefore, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God." Farris was not surprised by the guest host's heavy-handedness. He had been through it all before.

"Pastor Holiday, a thorough study of the paper you refer to would reveal an effort by the Church to reach out to all religions of the world in an attempt to find common ground under one God, including Islam, it is not an attempt to free the Jews of any guilt." The exchange, sometimes heated, continued for the rest of the hour without any conclusions.

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## Miami

Peter Leonard joined Guerra and Armendorfer in the makeshift interrogation room. They briefly discussed the Al Jazerra broadcast in light of the Hector Fuentes interview held the day before. Overnight, Fuentes had become the central figure in the government's early investigation. Leonard explained the terms of the deal that Washington had proposed and then left, allowing the two counterterrorist agents to follow up with the questioning, although he intended to watch the interview on a closed circuit television from his office.

The copy room has changed little from the day before with the exception of a small media cart hosting a tray of coffee and donuts. Guerra was dapper as usual, wearing his standard attire, khaki colored Dockers, pallid blue button down dress shirt opened at the collar, and a light doe shaded sport coat just heavy enough to cover the Beretta .45 under his arm. His footwear was a pair of expensive Italian leather boat shoes with tassels. Although Guerra's dress was fashionable according to southern Florida custom, it paled in comparison to the trendy Cassandra Armendorfer's South Beach look.

The two task force agents took liberties that other FBI field reps couldn't. It was their covert activity that made the difference. Army had passed as a twenty year old on undercover jobs even though she was thirty-two. The little girl look has been useful in the past when dealing with drug hijinks and the like, but all of that had changed with the counterterrorism assignment. She still dressed the way she wanted, however, and the casual Versace look suited her just fine. Today she was wearing lime green hip hugger slacks with a matching jacket, cut off at the waist. Her sweater was neck high, light white wool, no sleeves. A single black pearl hung from a chain against her chest. Her shoes were green soft suede pumps with inch-high heels. The belly bag around her waist matched her shoes, the contents of which were a compact, her credit cards, Bobbi Brown lipstick (Medium Rose), and of course her .9 mm Beretta (the .45 was too heavy).

Peter Leonard was wearing a gray suit and wingtips. The three agents detailed the morning interview before Hector Fuentes was brought in. At 9:20 AM, Fuentes was escorted into the interrogation room by two unidentified Miami police officers. Pleasantries were exchanged and Fuentes was offered coffee and donuts. He took three donuts.

"Mr. Fuentes," Peter started. "We have been given seventytwo hours to make some type of progress in the apprehension of the terrorists, and or their bombs, before the United States annihilates Pakistan and anyone else that tries to interfere. Sir, do you understand the gravity of the situation we face?"

Fuentes took a bite of donut and followed it with a gulp of black coffee. "What about the money?" he asked, making eye contact with Leonard.

"I've been given the green light to assure you that all your requests will be met if the information you provide leads to arrests and convictions," Peter said, maintaining eye contact.

Fuentes considered the offer, lifting his coffee to take another drink while keeping his eyes fixed on the bureau's field boss. After a moment of contemplating his options, Hector slowly lowered his cup, smiling. He knew better than to push for front money.

"Ok, I have names and addresses. I can tell you how they were delivered and I can give you some descriptions. The catching is up to you."

"Fair enough," Peter said.

"I'll leave you three to work out the details." After handshakes, Leonard left the copy room. Ralph and Army resumed the same positions at the interrogation table they had the day before; across and in front of Fuentes.

"Ok then, Hector, would you prefer to write it down or use a recorder? You know, whatever is most comfortable for you."

"Her name is Maria Angha," Fuentes began.

"Hold it," Army said, holding up her hand in a stop gesture. "I take it recording is fine with you."

"That's right," Fuentes said, slightly irritated by Army's hand waving.

"Just a minute then," Army said, leaving the table to push the cart with the donuts away from in front of Fuentes. "Have at it," she said, sitting back down.

"Her name is Maria Angha," Fuentes said again, leaving the table himself to fetch another donut.

"She has a safe house in Baton Rouge. All the people we brought in, including their equipment, were delivered to Maria Angha."

"All the people...who are all the people?" Guerra asked, jotting down notes for his own personal use.

"These are all illegal Middle Eastern types smuggled into the United States. I picked them up in Vera Cruz."

"How did they get into Mexico?" Guerra asked again.

"That's somebody else's problem," Fuentes said, continuing his statement. "I brought in two three-man teams in two separate runs." He reflected for a moment. "Actually, there was a woman in the second cell, sassy broad."

"So what's the timeline? How long did this whole two-trip process take?" Asked Army, ignoring the broad reference.

"Two months," Fuentes said matter-of-factly. "Two months from the time I picked up the first group in Mexico and took them to Baton Rouge. The second group arrived six weeks later."

For the next hour and twenty minutes, Fuentes explained how he picked up his passengers in a small fishing village on the Bay of Campeche in the state of Vera Cruz, Mexico. The modus operandi was simple. He had been doing similar operations in the gulf for twenty years. If he wasn't smuggling Mexican aliens in for a handsome fee, he was moving illegal produce into the country from Central America, or running cocaine, and occasionally a ton or two of marijuana. According to Fuentes, Castro's reasoning for running dope into the U.S. was political: feed 'em enough dope and they'll come tumbling down and, well, beyond all the political crap it was very lucrative. But this deal was the biggest payoff Castro's little army had ever had, although the little army didn't know it. The only way Fuentes found out the magnitude of the take was when he was asked to deliver a partial payment to his boss by one of his Arab guests, and of course he picked the lock and looked in the satchel. The revolution's leaders were lining their pockets while Fuentes and the boys took all the risks. Oh, Hector was well paid all right, but he wasn't getting rich. And when he realized that he was responsible for bringing in enough enriched Plutonium to decimate the entire country, his conscience got the best of him. That, and the possibility of making 25 million dollars.

It worked like this: the Socialists provide the Arabs with false identities and phony passports. Each foreign member of Qaidat al-Jihad selected for this mission spoke adequate English. Two were U.S. citizens born and raised right here in America. These citizens had already made their way to Maria Angha's safe house while waiting for the rest of the cell to arrive by way of Hector Fuentes and his sixty-foot Hatteras Sportfish, El Escaparse. The El Escaparse was registered as a fishing charter using the Gulf of Mexico as its playground. Such charters are sometimes forced to go out a hundred and fifty miles to find fish. Referred to in the business as an 'overnight charter', these trips were very popular with foreign guests vacationing in the United States. Fuentes was the master of the overnight charter, staying out days at a time, moving up and down the gulf coast at will. In the last two months, however, he'd brought back Qaidat al-Jihad terrorists instead of red snapper. The excursion was not complicated. Pick up the guests in Alvarado, Mexico, travel north along the coast at a leisurely pace masquerading as a fishing charter until reaching the mouth of the Mississippi river. Take a hard left, pass through customs legally and then travel up the Old Muddy into Baton Rouge and the back yard of Maria Angha; a private wharf in a recreational area adjacent to her digs. She could afford the plush dock on the river in the small Iranian neighborhood because she'd made a few million bucks providing safe haven for terrorists from the Middle East, that and the fact that she was a professor of Islamic studies at the University.

The agents were skeptical; it couldn't be that easy to bring a weapon of mass destruction into this country, especially one of nuclear variety. Fuentes assured them it was merely a matter of paperwork, ducks in a row, and a few well-placed bribes. Plus, nobody involved knew they were nukes until two days ago.

"How does Maria Angha board so many foreign Arabs without creating suspicion?" Army asked, still harboring concern about how Fuentes and his boat could pass through customs legally without being searched or questioned.

"Angha is involved in an exchange program through the University," Fuentes replied. "She has students coming and going all the time. Her house is located in an Arab neighborhood; very ethnically acceptable. She has an office in her home that she runs some small businesses out of. I suspect they are fronts to cover her more clandestine activities. It's just very active around there and people in the neighborhood have come to accept all the comings and goings."

Guerra stretched and left the table as Army continued to press Fuentes on a story that seemed too simplistic. "So explain to me again how you got six Qaidat al-Jihad terrorists and four nuclear bombs into this country without creating any suspicion," she demanded, more disgusted with the idea that it was possible to smuggle bombs through customs than with the fact that Fuentes was an insensitive slob.

"Miss Armendorfer," Fuentes said, sensing her contempt. "You Americans are very proud of your open borders, 'Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.' You are also very naive if you believe they are secure, that's all. Think about it. If you can bring tons of contraband into this country anytime you want, what makes you think you can't bring in four trunk-sized nukes?"

Army glared at Fuentes for a moment before leaving the table herself. Hector reached for the last donut.

"Let's talk about Maria Angha," Guerra said from the back of the room.

Fuentes consumed the donut in two swallows and then smiled at Army. He knew it infuriated her. Slowly he turned toward Guerra, the sneer leaving his face. "I've told you everything I know. Maria Angha runs a safehouse for terrorists in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. I delivered six of them to her doorstep, along with their cargo." Fuentes' expression suddenly changed from one of arrogance to one of regret as he considered the consequences of his actions. He was looking at his own clasped hands now, reflecting on the events of the last few days. "I have no more to add," he said, slowly bringing his attention to Guerra. "These are your boys," he said. "No doubt about it."

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### **Leonard's Office**

Army, Ralph, and Leonard discussed the interview over some sandwiches brought in from a local deli. Leonard had watched the proceedings on the closed circuit television. They viewed the Bin Laden broadcast again a couple of times while finishing their sandwiches. They decided that Hector Fuentes was credible, especially since his story corroborated the Bin Laden statement. It was also decided that Army and Ralph would leave for Baton Rouge as soon as a flight could be arranged. An agency jet would be available within the hour. A call was placed to the Baton Rouge field office asking them to run a check on Maria Angha and gain as much information as possible on any businesses she may run or own.

Armendorfer and Guerra had just enough time to go home, pack a few things, and meet at the airport. They would discuss their strategy on the way to Louisiana. Meanwhile, Fuentes had been placed in protective custody in a jail cell at an undisclosed Miami precinct.

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### **Opa-Locka Airport**

At 2:40 PM, the Gates Learjet carrying the two Miami agents made its way from the tarmac to the runway, awaiting its final take-off instructions. The flight would take less than an hour and a half and they'd gain an hour due to the time zones. They would be in Baton Rouge by around three o'clock. A written transcript of the Fuentes interview was created for review on the flight.

Army and Ralph were used to the hurry-up mode of operation. It's been their lifestyle since being assigned to the counterterrorism arm of the Justice Department's southeastern taskforce. Guerra was

married with a small boy and a baby on the way. Armendorfer was not, and wished Guerra wasn't, but Raphael Guerra liked being married. It was probably his Cuban heritage; family was very important in his community. Ralph's wife, Lindsey, was a part-time law student when she wasn't busy having babies. Lindsey and Ralph met while Ralph was working at a summer job on the docks just prior to his senior year at college. Lindsey was a year out of high school working for a transport company on the same docks. It was love at first sight for the sheltered Lindsey Avila, who came from a very traditional Cuban family as well. It was unusual to find a young man of Raphael's stature and purpose in the Cuban neighborhood. Lindsey's mother pushed hard to connect the two. By the time Ralph had graduated, he had fallen madly in love. He and Lindsey married two years later after a proper courtship, and then she started having babies.

Cassandra was a diplomat's daughter, settling down into something as sedate as marriage right now was just not the amiable agent's first priority. Harold Armendorfer was Deputy Ambassador to Iran during Shah Pahlavi's era. It was in Tehran where he met, fell in love, and married Naheed Umm Zaid, a university professor's daughter. This was the real reason Cassandra was fluent in Middle Eastern dialects. Her mother insisted she learn her native tongue when Cassandra was very young. It also explained the dark, mysterious, eastern look Army could slip into when working undercover. Although Cassandra seldom saw her father, she had a genuine respect for his work ethic. Harold was never home when Cassandra was growing up, leaving the rearing duties to Naheed and the local motion picture theater. Army preferred spy movies to chick flicks. The two federal sleuths were worlds apart when it came to background. One was raised on the run, the other brought up very reservedly, but the chemistry was there. They thought alike when it came to their work. They'd developed an infamous reputation within the ranks of the bureau as hard-hitting mavericks that take names...take the names, that is, if they can spare the time. This was the most important case they have ever had to deal with and both are infinitely aware of the madness of the hour.

The Lear 35A shook as the pilot throttled down for takeoff. On board, Ralph and Army were joined by a lawyer assigned to the project from the Attorney General's office. The two agents couldn't figure out why he was along, but both agreed it was a pain in the neck; kind of cramped their style. They had been asked to brief him on the way to Baton Rouge. Both didn't mind since they planned to lose him as soon as the plane landed. They assumed he was along to make sure there were no legal screw ups that might hinder the case if they do find something. A provisional agenda was worked out between Ralph and Army over colas and the Attorney General's man was filled in on the Fuentes interview. In turn, he informed the taskforce detectives that they had less than seventy-two hours to find something significant, or bye-bye Pakistan. It was a worn-out phrase. They'd heard it before.

"Ouch," Army mumbled for the lawyer's sake while taking a sip of her Coke.

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## **Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

Touch down in Baton Rouge was at approximately 3:15 PM, Central time. The plan was not complicated. There was not enough time to be complicated. Army would go to the FBI field office to examine what the local agents had come up with on Maria Angha, including her interest in local businesses. Army's gut feeling told her there was a connection. Guerra would head for the university to talk to Maria. The government's attorney would accompany Army. Two Chevrolet sedans were waiting on the tarmac. A city detective was the driver of one, a local FBI agent the other. Guerra joined the city police officer. The ride to the university was quiet and creepy. Guerra thought the cop was creepy as well but maybe it was the overcast day. The mist was heavy enough to use the windshield wipers but the local Gendarme just continued to drive without them. But what really creeped him out was that there wasn't one pedestrian on the street.

"What's up?" Guerra asked, breaking the silence. "Fallout alert," the cop answered blankly.

"Fallout?" Guerra repeated, not thinking.

"That's right, radioactive fallout," the cop uttered again, wondering where Guerra had been the last two days. "Oh my God," Guerra said, thinking out loud this time. He'd been tied up with Fuentes so long he hadn't had a chance to consider all the ramifications of the past forty-eight hours. "How far is Houston from here?" he asked numbly. It was a stupid question. He had a good working knowledge of the geography but felt an overwhelming need to cover up his previous brain drain.

"About three hundred miles," the cop said, slowly turning his head to face Guerra.

"Right," Guerra said, facing straight ahead.

The trip to the university remained short on conversation the rest of the way. Guerra took advantage of the silence to consider how he would address Miss Angha.

Army, it was agreed, would go undercover as a visiting Iranian graduate student if Guerra was unable to make any initial progress. The problem with that idea was that there wasn't time enough to pull it off. How do you gain the confidence of someone like Angha in less than forty-eight hours?

You don't, he thought, answering his own question. Guerra had been authorized by the Justice Department to do what he felt was necessary to gain the needed intelligence to locate the remaining three bombs, if in fact there were still three bombs out there to recover. He'd brought a paper-pusher along just in case he needed some weight. That is, if Army hadn't disposed of him yet.

Since 9/11, Capitol Hill had provided the intelligence community in the United States with a tough but flexible policy on the collection of clandestine information as long as the best interest of the country was at stake, or if it could be pulled off without getting caught. This was far different from the position taken after the Vietnam War when the fangs of the intelligent networks in this country were systematically pulled by bleeding-heart liberals, leaving a toothless lion to confront the new terrorist threats of the twenty-first century. The results of this conciliatory attitude were the reprehensible attacks against the Twin Towers, the Pentagon, and now the unthinkable destruction of Houston, Texas.

"Not on my watch," Guerra said to himself. "I'll pull her fingernails out one by one, and when I'm through doing that I'll cut her up and feed her to the catfish in her own backyard.

Then when I'm through with that, I'll keep it hidden from the Civil Rights lobby and the ACLU because they're the only sympathizers in this country that would care if I pull her fingernails out one short yank at a time."

\* \* \*

## **Maria Angha**

The campus was a sprawling landscape, diverse in the old and new southern architectural tradition. Not unlike many of the old colleges in this country, you could easily distinguish the growth stages by observing the buildings. They are never torn down and replaced, wings are just added. The continuity is screwed up but it's more practical that way.

The police car slowly made its way down Broadway onto the tree-lined University Avenue. The trees overpowered the landscape, giving the street a strange gloomy look, especially when the sky was overcast as it was today. The grounds were deserted as the two cops pulled up to a fairly new building that looked like it had been added to an older one. The inscription over the entrance read International Language Studies. There was a parking lot directly across the street. The unmarked police car made its way into the lot and parked facing the entrance of the building. Guerra unbuckled his seat belt and opened the door all in one motion. He was about to exit the car when he felt the detective grab his shoulder.

"Hold it," he said, putting pressure on Guerra's shoulder while pointing to a marked police car that was slowly moving between the building and the parking lot. The two cops watched the car pull into the lot and take the parking lane next to theirs.

"What's this?" Guerra asked.

"Campus police," the detective answered. "It's their jurisdiction."

"Who contacted the campus police?" Guerra asked, leaving the Ford Taurus and walking toward the front of the car. The detective did the same from his side. The two men met in front and waited for the campus officer to join them.

"It's their jurisdiction," the cop said again blankly without looking at Guerra.

The three officers traded names and then walked across the street and entered the building. Marie Angha had a class scheduled for 7:00 PM that evening. It had been her practice to come in around 5:30 to prepare for the class. Guerra made his way to the building directory that hung on the wall of the foyer - Advanced Islamic Studies: 7:00 PM, Room 108, teacher: Maria Angha.

"Here it is," Guerra said pointing to the class directory.

"This way," the campus cop said, taking the lead.

When the men arrived at room 108, they found the door locked and nobody in sight. The two local police officers left, one to find a building administrator or a custodian to unlock the door, the other to take a

smoke. Guerra checked his watch as he leaned against the corridor wall. The Timex Expedition read 5:25 PM. At the same time, his cell phone vibrated against his chest, giving him a bit of a start.

"Guerra."

"Having any luck?" He recognized the voice on the other end to be his partner.

"Not yet, I'm waiting for her to show up in her classroom. What about you?"

"We're on our way to Angha's house right now. Some people from the city attorney's office are going to meet us there. They're supposed to have a search warrant with them. I'll keep you posted if there's anything significant."

"Right."

"Hasta luego," Army tried her Spanish.

"Adios," replied Guerra, smiling.

As he put his cell phone back in his pocket, he caught a glimpse of a figure heading his way from the direction of the foyer. The elegant woman was dressed in Middle Eastern garb, a long colorful wraparound that hid everything, including her head but not her face. Her face was made up, not excessively, just right as a matter of fact, not knockout gorgeous but stylishly mysterious. Beaded necklaces of various shapes and colors draped her neck. He was taken by her appearance; it was more like that of a modest belly dancer than a college professor. He was jarred back to reality when he noticed the city detective not far behind.

"Maria Angha?" he asked.

"Yes, I am Maria Angha," her accent was hardly evident. Guerra indicated the identification card that hung from his neck.

"Miss Angha, my name is Ralph Guerra. I'm with the Federal Bureau of Investigation." He then introduced the detective, mispronouncing his name. The cop nodded without correcting him.

"What is this about?" She asked, noticeably shaken.

"Is there a place we can talk for a few minutes?"

"My classroom," she said, wrestling with the room key that hung from a wristband on her arm.

The classroom was a tableau of militant Islamic culture. Life-size posters covered the walls, the majority of which were young men in various fighting positions with their faces wrapped in Arab war bonnets and their hands full of AK-47s.

"Interesting decor," Guerra said surveying the room as they enter.

"It's a struggle," Maria said softly, placing her briefcase and books on the desk.

"What may I do for you, Mr. Guerra? I haven't much time. My students are due at any time."

"7:00 o'clock," Guerra said matter-of-factly.

"Yes, but I must prepare," Maria replied nervously.

"This shouldn't take too long, Miss Angha... may we sit?"

"Yes of course." She pointed to a student desk directly in front of hers. The two sat, Maria at her desk and Guerra in the front row. The city cop remained standing, preoccupied by the posters.

"Miss Angha, do you know a man named Hector Fuentes?" Guerra handed Maria a Polaroid picture of Fuentes that he took in Miami.

"Please call me Maria," she said, straining to look at the picture without taking it. "No, I do not know this man."

"Miss Angha," Guerra said, ignoring her request, "We know you played a role in the Houston disaster. We have a team searching your house as we speak and I'm not going to play any question and answer games with you."

"I do not know what you are talking about," Maria interrupted.

"I think you do," Guerra continued. "Now listen to me very carefully, Miss Angha, should you be prosecuted and found guilty, the death penalty would be invoked."

"Death is not my enemy, Mr. Guerra," Angha said coldly.

"Well, how about this, we post your name on every front page in the country as a cooperating witness. That ought to create some friends for you in low places. They'll be crawling out of every cesspool in the world to torture your family and then kill you and feed your sorry remains to the rats." Guerra's tirade gained the attention of the detective but did little to shake Angha.

"I have no idea what this is about," Maria countered.

The two stared at each other for a moment, giving Guerra time to compose himself.

"Alright, Miss Angha, you're being arrested."

"For what?" Maria protested.

"Suspicion of murder," Guerra said, walking toward the door.

"What about my class?" A frantic Maria yelled after him.

"Screw your class," Guerra said, passing two students as he left the room. "They're not coming anyway."

The two police officers handcuffed Maria and escorted her past the waiting students, down the hall and into the street where a second campus police car had arrived.

The two campus cops would take Maria to the city's southwest precinct where she would be placed in custody and held until Ralph and Army had a chance to look over the evidence recovered at her house.

The detective drove Guerra to the Baton Rouge FBI field office after a short stop at a fast food restaurant for some value meals. Arriving at the field office, Guerra introduced Baton Rouge's finest to Army, mispronouncing his name again. The cop nodded, spreading the value meals out on the nearest desk. Two local FBI agents joined Ralph, Army, and what'shis-name. They discussed the day's findings over hamburgers and fries.

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## **Damage Assessment**

All major television programming had been preempted for three days running in favor of continuous news and there was no immediate plan to change the format. Rolland Graybill would take over the anchor chair, giving Stuart Jenkins a respite. Graybill had been on the job for two and a half days as well, but had an opportunity to catch a few hours of uninterrupted sleep. His tie was straight but his eyes were hollow, mostly because of the demoralizing event he was covering. The fact that he hadn't had much sleep didn't help. Graybill explained that he was filling in for Stuart Jenkins while Stuart took a well-deserved break. The face of Rolland Graybill faded away while he was speaking and images of what was Houston appeared on the screen. The coverage was now coming from every angle, format, and system available to the television industry. The radioactive debris cloud had started its journey across the southeast United States, revealing a shattered Houston, Texas. A two-mile radius from the center of downtown was completely destroyed. A pile of smoldering rubble rested where a bold skyline once stood. There was no sign of life within this circle of destruction. It would be ten years before this area was safe to inspect. An estimated three hundred thousand people were instantly vaporized when the bomb exploded. Pictures from aerial television cameras raced across the screen continuously, while analysts, experts, and reporters described the mayhem. Two miles beyond the initial circle was a picture of near-total destruction. What was left of the Houston business district was not identifiable. Some building skeletons still stood and a few charred trees could be seen, but there was no sign of life and there were no immediate plans for rescue teams to enter these locations. It was estimated that another three hundred thousand were killed instantly at detonation.

Outside the four-mile radius of total obliteration from center zero was a world of incredible suffering. People burned beyond recognition. Hundreds of thousands exposed to lethal doses of ionized radiation. They could expect to live only a few days and then die in excruciating pain. There was no one to help and no one coming to help. The area was a wasteland of deadly contamination. Five hundred thousand would die without the aid of medical help within the week. A half million more would undergo agonizing effects of radiation poison. Most would die within the year. Untold thousands more would suffer from the effects of REM "Roentgen Equivalent to Man", a measurement used to quantify the amount of radiation that would produce dire biological consequences. These people could expect a life span of no more than ten tormented years and would die of internal complications including nerve, cell, and blood damage.

The radioactive cloud of dust and debris created by the nuclear blast had started an indiscriminate path that would cross the southeastern United States, endangering the lives of all who lie in its toxic course. Within 30 miles of detonation, the REM was 3,000. Deaths can occur within hours. For the next 200 miles, the REM levels ranged from 900 to 90, causing an indescribable amount of suffering and grief. The final death count attributed to the Texas catastrophe would take decades to calculate, but educated guesses placed the losses in the millions. It was by far the worst single human-inspired killing event in history.

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## **FBI Field Office, Baton Rouge**

Ralph, Army, and the local compliment finished eating, but continued their discussion. Not much was found at Maria Angha's house that could tie her to a terrorist plot or organization. The house was spotless with no sign of recent boarders. There was one noticeably peculiar conundrum, a disproportionate amount of beds. All of Angha's records, both personal and professional, were found in a small office located next to the kitchen in the back of the spacious house. Of most interest to the investigators were the three businesses Maria Angha owned that accounted for the lion's share of her sizeable income. The discussion was centered on these questionable enterprises. Right in the middle of someone's line of reasoning, Baton Rouge's finest stood up and bid his farewell, assuring them that he was available should they need him, but his shift was over and his girlfriend was waiting. Anyway, he said, there were plenty of cops coming on duty and any one of them could assist the Feds as well as he could.

"Oh, by the way," he said as he left, "some of those cleaning addresses are bogus."

"Kind of a jerk," Guerra said as the cop shut the office door behind him.

"Who needs him?" responded Army.

The two agents from Baton Rouge helping Ralph and Army in the Angha investigation had left to do some background on Maria's exchange program. They would be arriving at the university's administration building any time. The agents had made contact with people in the cultural exchange department and arranged a meeting with them. The three businesses in question were house cleaning, real-state management, and a small accounting practice. None were licensed in Maria Angha's name but all were registered with the city of Baton Rouge. The Federal lawyer has done the legwork on the authenticity of the three businesses and found that they were all in good standing with the city. A stop by city hall revealed that all license fees were up to date and there was no evidence of any violation against them within the year.

The books found at the house revealed that the real-estate management company dealt mostly with small properties; a small number of four-plexes, a few duplexes, and some commercial rentals, a lot of income but little expenditure. The house cleaning business listed forty-seven residential addressees. The posted rate for cleaning was forty dollars per hour. The recorded income on average days totaled sixteen hundred dollars with an expenditure of less than two hundred. Once again, good gain with little outlay. There was one exception, though. The company was started three years earlier under the name Satin Clean. It was listed as owning one vehicle, a used compact Chevy that was purchased outright. Six months ago Satin Clean purchased four used telephone repair vans from a local phone service provider. Angha's accounting business listed only two accounts; Satin Clean and Quality RealEstate. The books were well kept and documented - "cooked" was a better way to put it, thought Army. The place to start checking was the house addresses listed for Satin Clean. If they were legit, then the van purchases seemed reasonable. It would be easy to check the authenticity of Satin Clean; simply call the house owner and ask if they used the cleaning service. There was a snag from the beginning; there were addresses on the cleaning report forms but no phone numbers. Maybe the Baton Rouge gumshoe knew what he was talking about after all.

Army seated herself at one of the office computers. She pulled up the white pages and entered the first address. The computer gave her a list of four similar addresses but not the one she was after. She tried the next one, and then the next, all with the same results. Finally, after ten or eleven tries, she found a listed address with a phone number, as she expected the homeowner had never heard of Satin Clean. Army randomly picked five more addresses all with the same results. So what were the vans intended for if there was no cleaning going on? She shuddered at the thought. If the vans could not be accounted for or found, then it wouldn't be hard to accept that they were traveling time bombs with the equivalent of thirty kilotons of explosive destruction. It wouldn't be hard to trace the plates if the plates and the registration were valid, and that was highly unlikely. Surely, she thought, they were not that stupid. It was becoming more and more apparent that Army was going to need the cooperation of Maria regardless. Army reasoned that if all of this was the way it was done and the vans were the delivery system then it was possible, although unrealistic, to locate the remaining three vans in time. At any rate, it was all they had.

In reviewing the Fuentes interview, Ralph and Army focused on the part where Fuentes said he thought Maria was more opportunistic than devoted.

Guerra arranged for the Baton Rouge PD to bring Maria to the FBI field office as soon as possible. They would question her here. They could offer her anything she would accept that would lead to the apprehension of the three remaining cells and/or the location of the missing vans. Of course, they didn't have to keep their promise. They could offer her the world and give her Bangladesh if they wanted to. They could pull every tooth in her pretty head if they had to, Guerra thought. Anything to obtain the information they needed. This was no ordinary incident.



Angha arrived at the field office at about 8:15 PM. She was still wearing the same colorful wraparound, tied smartly at the waist. Her makeup was impeccable and she still looked like a Persian belly dancer with an attitude.

Guerra pulled a chair out from the same desk they ate at. "Please have a seat, Miss Angha."

She immediately interrupted him, "Why am I here? Am I under arrest? I want an attorney."

"Please have a seat, Miss Angha," Guerra continued.

"Please sit down and I will explain to you why you are being held."

The three sat and faced each other. The federal attorney was seated at the desk next to theirs. The Baton Rouge Police were running down the plates, and anything else that could be used to identify the vans as Angha is being interviewed. Army started the interview speaking in Arabic. The idea is to help Maria to relax.

"Maria, listen very closely to what I am about to offer you." The tension in Maria's face loosened slightly as Army continued her interrogation in Arabic.

"We know that your business enterprises are only fronts to launder large amounts of money whose source is not accounted for. We have a witness that will testify that he delivered foreign Arab speaking illegals, supplying them with forged passports, and landing them on your doorstep. We know that four vans were recently purchased through Satin Clean. We know through interviews with the heads of the Cultural Exchange Department at the University that you don't try to hide your sympathies for militant Arab causes. We have found documents along with other items in your effects that would seem to verify those attitudes." Army paused for a moment to allow the indictment to sink in and then continued in English. "Our time is short. We have two days to find the remaining three vans and their occupants or all hell is going to break loose. And all causes you deem worthy could be lost anyway." She paused again for a split second and then said, "Oh, and by the way, see that man over there?" Pointing in the direction of the federal attorney. "He represents the United States Attorney General's Office and he has the authority to send you off to Uzbekistan or even Israel to be questioned, should we fail here."

For the first time in the interview, Maria squirmed in her chair. She was aware of the methods used by the Israelis to attain information. She knew persuasive interrogation was a way of life for the Mossad, Israel's secret service. She had heard horror stories about the shaking methods they used. They shake you until your brain becomes scrambled eggs. Not me, she thought to herself.

"On the other hand," Army continued, "should your cooperation lead to the seizure of the remaining three bombs without deadly incident, the US is prepared to give you twenty-five million dollars and forget that you exist...total immunity. The money would be deposited in a bank in the country of your choice under a fictitious name where you could live happily ever after." Army, satisfied with her proposal, leaned back in her chair, folded her arms, and waited for Maria to respond.

Maria Angha believed desperately in the liberation of Islam but the emptiness she felt reminded her that she was a second-class citizen in that world. She pondered the offer without giving away much in facial expression. The truth was, her life in the US had been good and she didn't expect to be implicated in any way. That idiot Fuentes, she thought, gritting her teeth. It's the only emotion she had shown throughout the interview. "How do I know I can trust you?" she asked, her face still expressionless.

"You have two choices." Army returned to Arabic in a condescending tone. "You can walk out of here a free woman with a lot of money or you can be taken to Israel to be questioned and most likely die unknown on some filthy, obscure floor."

Army left the desk to run down to a Coke machine she had noticed earlier in a small break room. Guerra sat quietly staring at Maria as she looked off into space considering her two options. Army returned with two Cokes and places one in front of Maria.

"No thanks," she said meekly, looking up at Army. "I'll tell you what I know." Army nodded in appreciation while Guerra grabbed the Coke from in front of Maria and took a slug.

For the next hour, Maria explained her role in the Qaidat al-Jihad plot to blackmail the United States. As the agents suspected, there were four original cells, with three remaining. Each cell had three members; a driver, a technician taught to detonate the bomb, and an orientation officer who spoke passable English. This person was familiar with the United States and its cultures and it was their responsibility to choose the targets, establish the route to be taken, and generally craft the deadly plan. The driver and the technician were expendable and most likely martyrs. The orientation officer would fade back into the general population to be called on later if necessary. Of that Maria was sure. She was also satisfied that with a new identity and twenty five million, she herself could disappear into oblivion even if the United States

deported her. She went on to explain that she was paid very well for her part and believed the money came from Afghanistan's billion-dollar heroin industry and financed by smack heads right here in this country.

Maria confirmed what the FBI has long suspected, that Bin Laden had financed his war with a limitless supply of drug money. Maria insisted she was not part of any scheme to do harm to the United States. She simply harbored illegal immigrants for a nice fee. She was brought into this operation because four vans were needed and she was asked to purchase the vans. She became knowledgeable about the plan to explode the vans through one of the weaker cell members, but swore she had no knowledge of the content or type of explosive to be used.

When pressed by the agents, she acknowledged the trunksize crates Fuentes brought in but claimed she had no idea what they contained. For all she knew, they were going to blow up some post office somewhere, certainly not the entire city of Houston. As far as Maria could tell, each cell operated independently, but seemed to have the same purposes in mind. One thing was certain, three of the four vans left the small warehouse Maria had rented to keep them in, two days prior to the Texas explosion. The fourth needed some kind of repair and couldn't leave with the others. Maria didn't know whether it had left yet or not. All the vans were using stolen license plates and renewal tabs.

The interview was concluded for the time being, but the agents were convinced Angha knew what was going on from the get-go and may have additional information that could be used later.

\* \* \*

## **The Warehouse**

Ralph, Army, the two local agents, the federal attorney, and a Baton Rouge SWAT team arrived at a small inconsequential warehouse in an industrial area near the river, using the directions Maria gave them. It was a moonlit night after a rainy, dismal day.

The moon's reflection could be seen glistening on the river in the background. Small industries with gravel drives full of rainwater puddles surrounded the warehouse. The SWAT team would enter through the front and secure the building. The four feds would cover the two small exit doors; one in the back of the building and one on the side. Army and Ralph stationed themselves on the side door, guns drawn. Ten minutes pass like twenty and then the lights went on inside the building. The two agents inhaled, their guns still in ready position.

Just when Army finally began to relax, she made out a vague figure through the glass paned door. The man was heading in their direction. Army's heart started to race again as she hid herself in the darkness of a large azalea bush. Her firearm was pointed at the approaching individual. The door slowly slid open, a police officer appeared and assured them that the building had been secured. Ralph and Army both exhaled, Guerra holstered his revolver, while Army slowly reached for her belly bag.

Suddenly a very loud alarm sounded, startling the three officers. Army, who hadn't holstered her weapon, drew it, swinging around toward the sound of the alarm. She accidentally smacked Guerra in the forehead with the side of her pistol, knocking him over the azalea bush into a mud puddle. Guerra rolled through the puddle, righting himself on one knee, and grabbed for his forehead all in the same agile movement. The alarm was set off when a SWAT team member entered a small office in the warehouse. Army was embarrassed but said nothing as she helped her partner to his feet.

Guerra steadied himself for a moment. He was more uncomfortable because of his wet pants than his bruised forehead. He checked for blood, there was none. The SWAT team sergeant looked at the two agents, slowly shaking his head, and then took the lead as the three entered the building. Inside the building, there was a large, open area the size of two basketball courts.

Two small offices occupied a corner of the building. They are constructed of transparent safety glass used as window siding with a three-foot plywood boarder at the bottom. There was nothing in the offices, or in the storage area, except sitting directly in the middle of the open space is one slightly used white Chevrolet van.

\* \* \*

## **The Incident, Dearborn Michigan**

News producers of the major networks had begun to grapple for airtime information worthy of broadcast in their commitment to run continuous coverage of the crisis plaguing America. Human interest always takes a back seat to hard news, but it becomes of primary concern when the stakes are life and death. Such was the case in Dearborn, Michigan when a local television station dispatched a news team to cover a meeting of Islamic fundamentalists in a predominantly Muslim neighborhood.

The meeting was peaceful in nature, condemning the carnage caused by jihad-minded Middle Eastern radicals, but calling for restraint in handling any retaliation the U.S. might be considering. The cameras were not allowed in the mosques but after the meeting a resident cleric agreed to an interview. On camera, the reporter and the cleric were facing each other with the mosques in the background. It was a building with no particular ethnic significance. The interview was conducted at night so floodlights were used to provide light for the taping. Standing behind the cleric was a large group of distinctively expressive men of Semitic heritage, some wearing traditional Arab headgear. Somewhere out of camera range, but not far from the interview, another crowd had gathered. Some of the Arab men standing in the background of the televised picture seemed to be looking in a direction just to the right of the reporter. They strained for better vantage into the darkness beyond the floodlights. The interviewer's microphone was not strong enough to pick up the chant coming from across the street but it was plainly heard by the Muslim delegation.

"Ragheads go home...ragheads go home."

Standing on the other side of the street in front of the mosques was a small group of agitators chanting slurs designed to incite reaction. All of a sudden, a middle finger shot up in the direction of the demonstrators, then a second finger was seen, and a third, and then an inaudible verbal exchange. The interview ended but the camera continued to roll as the crowd broke up. Off to the left of the television crew in the darkness, a fight started. The photographer nimbly swung his camera to capture a small group of young demonstrators beating a man wearing an Arab cap. The police arrived in time to stop any serious altercation and disperse the opposing parties in different directions.

The next morning, when portions of the taped interview were played on the local station, the fight was also run without explanation, portraying the idea that an indiscriminate beating of a Muslim man took place in Dearborn, Michigan. National news was quick to pick up the story, and within hours of the original broadcast, every network in and out of the country was showing only the beating of the Muslim man by white Americans. The incident acted as a catalyst to inflame passions, incite riots, and demonstrations in Muslim districts throughout the world. The tape continued to play on the hour, every hour, to the utter dismay of moderate government officials.

\* \* \*

### **Baton Rouge Hotel, Day Four**

The phone rang at four-thirty in the morning, shaking Army from her much needed six hours of sleep. It was the wake up call that she requested the night before.

"Ok, thanks," she said, hanging the phone up. Half asleep, she missed the receiver.

She struggled to pull the covers up over her head in a feeble attempt to escape the day, but after awhile she remembered that she had agreed to meet Guerra in the hotel coffee shop at five AM. Rolling out of bed, literally, the diminutive sleuth landed on the pillows that she threw to the side last night because they are always way too big to sleep on. Falling out of bed was the only way she could force herself to get started. By the time Army was showered, dressed, and in the coffee shop, it was twenty after five and Guerra was working on his second cup of Juan Valdez, black.

"Am I keeping you waiting?" he asked sarcastically as Army sat down.

"Not really," she said, looking around for the waiter. "Where's the waiter?" she asked, looking back at Guerra.

"No waiter," he said, pointing to the lone employee behind the counter.

"Just great," she said, pushing herself away from the table. She made her way to the coffee bar, ordered a large Coke, took a big swig and immediately had the feeling she would live again.

By five thirty AM, the two agents were on their way to the warehouse where the white Satin Clean van was located. Meanwhile, teams of forensic specialists, along with various members of the local law enforcement community, had worked through the night inspecting the van. An expert with the nuclear

fission commission was flown in as a calculated precaution, should a nuclear device of any kind show up. Buddhadev Singh was on loan from the office of the Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation arm of the National Intelligence Center, to help in the investigation. The warehouse had remained cordoned off in all directions by uniformed cops and their blue and white cruisers since the night before.

"Good grief," said Guerra as they pulled up to a roadblock a quarter of a mile from the warehouse.

"Sorry, this road is closed," said the young officer through the window.

"We're agents with the Federal Bureau of Investigation," Guerra said, showing the cop his identification card. The cop took a long look at the card, looked at Guerra, across the seat at Army, then asked them to hang on for a minute while he checked something. He walked the short distance to his cruiser, pulled a cell phone out of his pocket, and had a short conversation with someone while looking at Guerra's ID. He slowly walked back to the unmarked bureau issued vehicle and gave agent Guerra his ID card back.

"Ok, carry on," he said. Guerra pulled his car through the blockade a short distance and then rolled to a stop. The two turned and looked at each other and then back to the road. "No self-respecting terrorist would stumble into this circus," said Army. There was a moment of silent conjecture and then the two broke into uncontrolled laughter. It's the first time they'd had a laugh in three days. It felt good.

The briefing took place in one of the two small offices located in the warehouse. Present at the morning meeting was the Baton Rouge Deputy Chief of Police, the local FBI representative, Norman Yarbrough, the federal attorney, Guerra, Army, and Buddhadev Singh, the government expert from the National Intelligence Center. Outside the office standing at the door smiling sheepishly at Army was her favorite Baton Rouge flat foot waiting to escort them around the Louisiana State Capital.

The van was examined top to bottom with the following preliminary results: eight different fingerprints were lifted from the interior including one found on a screwdriver. The prints were on their way to the FBI identification bank in Washington for evaluation. There were three personal items, two maybe all three that could contain DNA; a strand of long black hair, a pair of old sneakers, and a Turkish cigarette butt, also on their way to D.C. Two other items found of major interest to the investigators was an empty lead-lined trunk measuring two feet by three and one half feet and a small hand drawn map with roughly diagramed routes from Baton Rouge to four major cities in the United States, one of which was Houston.

The trunk and the map remained in Baton Rouge to be more thoroughly examined by the agents. The discussion in the morning meeting revolved around these two objects and in particular the lead-lined trunk. The chest was not unique in any particularly way, artificial material of little appeal covered the outside. It was a common universal design, greenish in color that would hardly attract attention. The defining component of the generic trunk was the lead lining.

"So, Mr. Singh what do you make of the trunk, sir? Is it big enough to house a bomb that could blow up Houston?" The Deputy Chief of police asked the East Indian nuclear physicist.

Buddhadev Singh was born in India, went to the University of Hyderabad where he received both his undergraduate and graduate degrees. He came to the United States in the early nineties to do his doctoral work at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He was subsequently invited to teach at the Laboratory for Nuclear Science MIT where he received a full professorship and is considered to be an expert on nuclear fission. When the National Counterterrorism Center was established after 9/11, Singh was recruited by the NIC to serve on the WMD Proliferation board.

"Just call me Buddhadev," Singh said to the Deputy Chief, knowing he couldn't pronounce it and sensing some cynical prejudice in the policeman's voice.

"Yes sir. So, do we have a bomb here Big-dad-vy?"

"That's Budd-had-ev, and the answer to your question is yes. It is possible to construct a nuclear device of some magnitude that would fit within the size of this trunk. By the way, why don't you just call me Bud." Bud Singh immediately gained the attention of those present with his yes answer to the bomb size question.

"What's the lead all about?" asked Army.

"Scanning protection is my guess," stated Singh. "Most Scanners have a hard time penetrating lead."

"That explains how they got the stuff into the country then," Army thought out loud.

"Could be," acknowledged Singh. "Most likely, the trunk was just the carry-on luggage to smuggle the bomb in. If a cell phone is used as part of the trigger mechanism, it would require rigging outside of the trunk because the radio frequency used by the phone cannot penetrate the lead. But the rigging could be done easily enough, and I think we can presume it was a long distance trigger."

"Why is that, sir?" somebody asked.

"Well, unless it was a suicide mission, I think it can be taken for granted that they called from out of town." "How does it work?" Guerra asked, smiling slightly. "You mean, how does a nuclear bomb explode?"

"No, well yes, no, well, what are the components of such a bomb?"

Bud Singh cleared his throat - a nervous reaction to Guerra's question. He knew that no amount of time could catch this crowd up on atom splitting. "When a fissile material, such as enriched uranium, is added to a critical mass a condition of supercriticality results. The chain reaction in a supercritical mass increases rapidly in intensity until the heat generated by the reaction causes the mass to expand so greatly that the assembly is no longer critical." Singh paused, the blank stare from virtually every person in the room reinforced his initial conclusion - they had no clue.

"Let me put it this way," he started over. "If you compress a lot of stuff that blows up into a very small space and then you light a firecracker and throw it in, you had better high-tail it, because it's going to blow sky high." The bewildered faces smiled, not sure whether it was appropriate. "The simple answer to your question is yes, a thermonuclear device could be made to fit into this trunk. The Soviets made hundreds of them. The pressing question is whether or not they have an adequate fail-safe system."

Guerra asked, "Are you suggesting that the remaining three bombs could go off at any time?"

"I am suggesting that detonating this type of device is tricky business."

"Ok, you're saying that one of these things could go off by accident?"

"That's what I'm saying. It's as complicated to make them safe for transport as it is to arm, fuse, and make them explode properly. And, if it were to go off accidentally, chances are you would not get the blast you expect if detonated correctly. But, you could get a dirty little replica that would be lethal. We are most likely not dealing with highly sophisticated technicians here."

Army broke in, "Does it need the trunk housing, to blow up?" she asked, wondering if that was a stupid question.

Singh reached for his briefcase, pulling out a yellow legal pad. He quickly scribbled down a rough diagram of a cylinder shaped object, and laid it down in the middle of the desk for all to view.

"The bomb is likely a gun-device. It would be the easiest to construct and detonate. If that were the case, it would contain three essential parts; two pieces of fissionable material at either end of the tube and a highly explosive conventional substance at one end that would act as a trigger firing one fissional product into the other, creating the reaction necessary to create a nuclear explosion."

"Hmmm," uttered the chief, slightly cocking his head to better view the diagram. "That simple, huh?"

Singh continued ignoring the Deputy Chief. "The shelf life of the enriched uranium is about six months."

Army left her seat, walked over to the glass office partition, and gazed into the open space where the van rested, pondering Singh's last statement. Seated on a folding chair outside the yellow barrier encircling the van and grinning at her, was detective what's-his-name. She lost her train of thought for a moment but quickly regained it, turning back to the desk. "Does that mean that if we can prolong this thing for six months, we are out of the woods?"

"I am afraid not, Miss Armendorfer. There's a ton of this stuff to be found in the back rooms of the world's market places," said Buddhadev Singh.

After twenty minutes of discussion on how to proceed, it was decided that Ralph and Army would use the warehouse as a temporary office for the next twelve hours, giving the FBI labs in Washington time to process and evaluate the evidence recovered from the van and the warehouse.

They would handle all communication with cell phones, being sure not to tie up the warehouse land lines. Army, using a Middle Eastern accent, would handle all incoming calls on the chance that a terrorist team member might call. Barring any passwords or codes, the delayed Qaidat al-Jihad cell might be using, the caller just might be comfortable enough to accept Army as one of theirs. The two special agents believed it could work if they alleviated the carnival atmosphere and got the cops out of there.

It was possible, though unlikely, that a competent terrorist still might show up. After all, his job wasn't done and his delivery system was still parked in the middle of the floor. All parties agreed to the plan. Singh, the attorney and remaining FBI personnel would head back to the local field office to wait on instructions from Washington.

The Baton Rouge police department would leave the premises as they found it the night before. Two unmarked cars would guard the two entry roads leading to the warehouse. A van with five elite SWAT members would be stationed five minutes away, should they be needed. And of course, the city detective would be left with the agents, should they have any questions regarding Baton Rouge. By ten forty-five, the lab techs have moved out of the warehouse. At eleven, Guerra received a call from one of the two

unmarked sentry cars informing him that the pullout was complete. He suspected that if someone didn't show up by day's end, they wouldn't show up at all. The taskforce agents had hit a dead end for the time being, so they might as well hang out with the van. It was the closest thing they had to a suspect.

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## **Diego Garcia**

Somewhere in the vast reaches of the Indian Ocean lies the tiny island of Diego Garcia, America's sentinel to Asia and the Middle East. This small island is located one thousand miles off the tip of India. Diego Garcia would become the staging area for the nuclear assault on the mountain fortress of Osama bin Laden's terrorist organization, placed somewhere near the Pakistani village of Dir on the border with Afghanistan. Diego Garcia was part of the British Indian Ocean Territory connected to the Chagos Archipelago. The American presence on the small atoll was by permission of the British Government and in conjunction with their position in the region, although it was exclusively a U.S. military base. What was not generally known was the overwhelming military might associated with this little piece of acreage. Since the first invasion of Iraq in January 1991, Diego Garcia has become a signature for mayhem, accommodating one of the foremost Naval and Air Force combination strike forces in the world.

On this day, Thursday July 6th, it would see preparations for what would be the most crushing single air strike in history. The mission operations would originate from Diego Garcia and employ two low observable high-altitude B-2 Spirit bombers on loan from the 509-bomber wing stationed at Whitman Air Force Base, Knob Nobster, Missouri. One B-52 Stratofortress from the 40th Air Expeditionary Wing would accompany the two stealth bombers from Diego Garcia. The B52 was conventional, equipped with electro-optical viewing systems, and would use platinum silicide forward-looking infrared and high resolution low-light-level television sensors to augment and assess the damage. In addition, the Stratofortress would launch two low-level reconnaissance drones to evaluate target preparation. The three crews had been placed on ready standby and were prepared to go at the command of the President. The sortie would commence at 12 AM regional time, standing the two B-2's off the coast of Pakistan in international waters by 01:00 hours.

The payload for each bomber would consist of four Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missiles (JASSM). With a range of fifteen hundred miles, they needed a little better than half of that to reach their target area. Five JASSM's would be armed with earth penetrating munitions using delayed fused nuclear warheads. Their objective would be five known cave complexes in the Hindu Kush mountain range thought to be used by Bin Laden or his henchmen within the last year. The remaining three missiles would launch against surface targets; Miram Shah on the Afghani border, Dir in the Northwest Frontier of Pakistan, and Gilgit in the Gilgit river basin on the disputed border of Pakistan and India. The eight nuclear-laden Joint Air-to-Surface Missiles would use Global-Positioning Systems (GPS) to guide their payloads. The Spirit of Missouri, the B-2 program's maiden bomber, and the Spirit of America, the last stealth to be assembled, would be the two B-2 aircraft used in the operation. The B-52 Stratofortress would follow at 12:30 hours, flying over the target areas at an altitude of 50,000 feet using onboard technologies and highly sophisticated recon drones to assess mission effect. If the result proved negative, they would load up and do it again.

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## **Uncertainty**

Stuart Jenkins was back in his familiar seat on Thursday morning. He had little more than a night's sleep over the last three days but that's the way he liked it, full control. His voice was raspy, his eyes bloodshot, his dress immaculate. Stuart Jenkins was the General George Patton of the newsroom. For him, all other forms of human endeavor shrink to insignificance when compared to TV news, and God knows he loved it.

The network's cast of players had been steadfast in their effort to keep the nation informed on all events of the past seventy-two hours as they unfolded. People throughout the world were tuned to their local broadcasting system with a anxious concern of what may lie ahead, believing that somehow the answers to all of their worries could be garnered from watching the TV.

The exceptions were those millions of people who had begun their exodus from the major cities of the free world. The President was expected to make another statement soon, to assure the country that he had everything under control. He was expected to order all financial institutions to shut down indefinitely in an effort to stop a monetary disaster. Many community banks in small towns across the United States had already locked their doors to avoid a run. The police departments and law enforcement agencies throughout the country had been brought to full capacity in anticipation of the Presidential edict and the potential rioting it could trigger. The President would portray confidence in his administration and the people heading up the effort. He would boast of our military superiority and its ability to keep us safe from further hostility. The image on the screen moved from the charred ruin that was once Houston to the network studios in Time Square and Jenkins' familiar set.

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## **Mood Of The Nation**

A regal southern church was the background for the handsome young reporter with chiseled features. He had been assigned the responsibility of following the religious rumblings of the nation. He played around with the microphone while waiting for a prompt from the receiver hidden in his ear. There was enough wind to create a vanity panic for most onair people, but not him. His thick mane only slightly waved in the breeze. The red and gray paisley was not so sedate. The tie blew out of control across his shoulder, sometimes reaching his face and hiding a mouthful of perfect white teeth. That was why he was here. He looked good. Never mind that he was not the most compelling reporter to hold a microphone.

The church grounds were worthy of notice as well. Cut, shaved, and manicured giving it the appearance of a Hollywood studio set. Flowerboxes with multicolored annuals were symmetrically positioned along the front side of the bricked building. Trimmed hedgerows lined the sidewalks leading to the large glass entryway. The young broadcaster was standing just to the right of the bricked announcement case strategically located on the front lawn next to the parking lot driveway. Today's message, in bold, black letters read: "PRELUDE TO ARMAGEDDON".

The prompt finally came. "I am standing in front of the Patriot Crossing Baptist church in Williamsburg, Virginia, the home of the American revolution. There's a new revolution taking place today in Williamsburg and throughout rural America. A religious groundswell is beginning to ripple through the nation like a shockwave since the destruction in Houston. Leaders of the evangelical movement are calling for the country to pray, repent, and seek forgiveness, or suffer the wrath of God. They are saying Houston is a warning that cannot be ignored and that the end is near. Churches throughout protestant America have been packed to capacity the last two nights. Ministers from mainline denominations are saying they have never seen anything like it. The end of time is being preached across this nation and people are buying into it; hook, line, and sinker."

The youthful reporter, his tie still flying aimlessly in the wind, looked quizzically into the camera as if asking for help. A perceptive Jenkins, sensing the young man's plea, offered an intuitive question. "I mean no impertinence, but haven't we heard this before? Every time there is a catastrophe of any kind, be it man initiated, or natural, this sort of religious fervor follows. What makes this different?"

The reporter nodded in approval as though the question was prearranged. "Well, Stuart, I had a chance to talk to the minister holding these meetings at Patriot Crossing a little earlier and here is his response."

The picture morphed to the earlier interview. "Pastor, are you surprised at the remarkable show of support among your patronage, and what do you credit this unusual zeal to?"

The evangelist was the guest speaker at Patriot Crossing and considered to be an expert on the end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it-times and the second coming of Christ. He was a distinguished looking middle-aged man with a disproportionate amount of white hair. Both hands were adorned by rings that conjured memories of Super Bowl victories. He was comfortable in front of the camera and sported an air of confidence when he spoke.

"Isn't it obvious sir, for the last sixty years we have witnessed the creation of destructive run-away power shaped by a generation without the slightest idea of how to harness it? The inevitable has happened. Madmen who renounce Christ are now in possession of this force and threaten to extinguish the very existence of life. Couple this with the increasing amount of natural disasters, most likely the result of our failure to preserve the earth as we were commanded, and a culture with the moral equivalent of hell and,

well. . . Simply put, young man, we are on the last page of history. Jesus put it this way when speaking about this moment in time. 'Iniquity will abound.'"

There was a moment of reflection while the interviewer paused, expecting more of his tirade, and then realizing an opening, he asked the obvious question. "But hasn't iniquity been abounding for a long time now?"

The amiable evangelist was looking for a venue, not a fight. "You're absolutely right my young friend. Evil has been a part of life from the beginning, but not until the nuclear age have we had the capability to destroy ourselves. We need a savior sir. We need the promised return of the Lord Jesus Christ."

The reporter, uncomfortable with the answer, pressed for an explanation of the timeline the Evangelist seemed to be following, and at the same time trying to hide his own skepticism. "But if the detonation of a nuclear bomb on a populace is a warning that the world is ending, why didn't it end when we dropped the atomic bomb on Japan?"

The experienced preacher was not surprised by the inquisition. Non-believers never understand. He chuckled, suggesting a slight sense of elitism as though he knew something no one else did. "It is not one incident that we focus on, but a combination of predicted events, which have come to pass in recent history, that we draw our conclusion from. Not the least of these events was the restoration of the nation of Israel in 1948, four years after the Hiroshima bomb. Start your timeline there young man. Now, I must go."

"Thank you for sharing some time with us sir." The pretaped interview faded back to a smiling, wind-blown reporter in front of the Patriot Crossing Baptist church. "Some religious pragmatism to chew on from Williamsburg, Virginia. Now back to you, Stuart."

"Well, it was certainly rational to a large segment of middle America," Jenkins said, trying to soften the context of the inexperienced reporter's mildly arrogant manner.

"Thank you from Williamsburg. I have a feeling we will be hearing a lot more about these gatherings in the days to come."

The camera came back to the New York studio and an even Stuart Jenkins. "The doomsayers have been with us throughout history. I suspect they will remain long after I'm through reporting the news. No impudence intended to the millions of fundamental Christians that help make up this great nation. This is what the forefathers intended when they penned the first Amendment to the Bill of Rights." Jenkins quoted the passage, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." He paused momentarily to collect his memory. It was an amendment he was familiar with, the one that provided the buttress to his own personal journey. It moved him. His voice quivered as he finished the quote. "Or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances." Jenkins was a proud and grateful American and would never deny the rights of others to think or worship the way they want; in so doing, he exercised his own right as a journalist to tell the story as he perceived it. "Now we want to go to the Pentagon and our Pentagon correspondent, Martha Rinek. Martha, are you there?"

The screen split and Martha Rinek appeared on one side with Jenkins remaining on the other, as though they were speaking face to face. "Yes, Stuart."

"I understand you have learned something about a military buildup being staged somewhere off the coast of Pakistan. Can you tell us something about that?"

"Yes, well, it is an unconfirmed report, but it comes from a very reliable source here at the Pentagon. We are being told that an unspecified number of nuclear subs are en route to the Indian Ocean with warheads armed and ready. We are also being told that an indeterminate number of B-2 stealth bombers have left Whitman Air Force Base from Missouri. We are assuming they are heading for the same general location."

"Would their destination be Diego Garcia, the bombers, I mean?"

"That's our understanding, Stuart."

"The B-2 is of course the world's most advanced bomber aircraft and was designed with this purpose in mind. Would that be fair to say, Martha?"

"Yes, and one more thing, our source tells us that the combined Army, Navy, and Air Force effort will constitute a massive buildup and amass enough nuclear force to destroy the continent in a matter of minutes."

"So can we assume that an attack is eminent and will be centered in the Pakistani-Afghan region?"

"That's the way it looks, Stuart."

The studio switcher filled the screen with Jenkins as he shuffled through his notes. He wasn't reading them, but searching within himself for a response to an insufferable answer. Finally, looking into the



camera, he said, "Frightening." The station went to a network break and then to a thirty-second health care service endorsement.

Jenkins was back to carry on after the short intermission. "I want to go to Jan now, in New London, Connecticut, in our endeavor to discover the mood of the nation. Hello Jan, what do you have for us from New London?" Jenkins smiled as he asked the question, unintentionally conveying a pretentious demeanor. It seemed like business as usual, as though the destruction of Houston was just another news item. It was becoming routine now, not that Jenkins was impassionate or callous, but his sensitivity had numbed after four days of continual reporting.

"Yes Stuart, I'm standing here with Connie Amandillo. And, as you can see, we are on a very empty shipping wharf. Connie is a dock supervisor for the New London, Connecticut Port Authority, and an extremely unhappy man at the moment."

"What's his story?" Jenkins asked.

Shoving the microphone in his face, the reporter asked Amandillo the same question. "Connie, talk about what is going on here in New London, and in particular your pier."

"Well look... We're shut down. No boats leaving, no boats coming in. We got perishables rotting away here right now, and we got perishables rotting away out there." He pointed toward the flotilla standing off the harbor in open water, without looking in the direction he was pointing. "It's a crying shame," he said in disgust. "If they don't let us open these here ports pretty soon, the entire shipping trade is gonna go bankrupt."

Jenkins was perturbed by the wharf boss' selfish attitude and broke in through the reporter. "Surely Mr. Amandillo understands why that's not possible."

"Stuart is asking why you're so upset. Under the circumstances, isn't it better to be safe than sorry?"

The burly Amandillo looked at the petite reporter for a moment, contemplating his response to such an insensitive question and then asked one of his own. Looking straight at the camera in a determined manner, he asked, "You're still getting paid, ain't ya? Well, three thousand workers on this dock ain't and ain't gonna be paid until this harbor opens up. That's why I'm upset. We got the best security system in the world. No stinkin' atomic bomb is comin' in this here port. Anyways, what happened fifteen hundred miles away from here don't have no effect on us here."

The bewildered reporter faced the camera with a perplexed expression. "Back to you in New York."

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## **Deadly Stakeout**

It was late afternoon and the warehouse was hot and stuffy. Cassandra Armendorfer was getting fed up with lack of activity, or maybe she just couldn't stand to watch her helpless city liaison sitting on his can in that folding chair looking at his shoes for one more minute. She was about to say something snotty when she noticed Guerra answer his cell phone in the office. After a few moments of discussion, Ralph motioned Army to come into the office while he was still talking on the phone. It was a call from one of the sentry cars. There was a small blue compact heading toward the warehouse with two suspicious looking characters in it. Guerra asked the police not to interfere unless he called for help. He was afraid they would act too soon and scare them off. Guerra would leave his phone on two-way intercom in case of trouble. The car was expected to arrive at the warehouse within the next three minutes. With a southern drawl slow as dripping honey, the cop in the car suggested they proceed with extreme caution. The occupants of the compact appeared to have olive complexions.

Army, Ralph and their city escort hurriedly stationed themselves in strategic locations within the warehouse, weapons drawn. The three officers knew that if these men were who they were looking for, they could be potentially very dangerous and might not hesitate to engage in gunplay if they got the chance.

Army could feel the sweat trickle down her ribs into her belly button. She had never been in a face-off like this before but she knew that Guerra had discharged his weapon in the line of duty before, and somehow there was comfort in knowing that. She didn't know how the Baton Rouge police officer would respond. She could only guess. One thing she thought for certain was that he had stationed himself way too close to her.

The idea was to take them alive and do their best to avoid a fight. The SWAT team would slowly start their move toward the warehouse as soon as Guerra gave his okay through the cell phone two-way. There

was silence in the warehouse as the officers waited. Army thought she could hear her own heartbeat as a car door slammed outside. Her eyes caught Ralph's. He looked at her with a reassuring smile, and that's when she realized he was enjoying this. "Oh my God," she thought, almost speaking out loud, "How did I get myself into this?" Just then the door opened and two young men entered, seemingly unaware of what was waiting for them.

"Hands over your head!" Army yelled in Arabic. The two men, noticeably startled, looked in Army's direction. They appeared to be unarmed and slowly began to raise their hands. The three cops exposed themselves, guns pointed at the two Arabs.

Army yelled again, "Get down! Get down on the floor!" Guerra gestured to the floor, saying something vulgar. The two men began their descent to the floor, when suddenly one reached for a gun hidden in the belted waistband under his shirt. The Baton Rouge detective, with split-second reaction, moved toward Army in an attempt to shield her. A shot rang out; and then a second, and then a volley.

"No shoot! No shoot!" yelled the second man. "No shoot, no shoot."

Army's senses went haywire. Her consciousness moved to slow motion. Time was suspended for a moment. Her gums went numb. The blood had rushed from her head making her dizzy. She shook. She thought she might vomit. It all happened in a split second that seemed like a lifetime. Then, as abruptly as she lost them, she regained her wits. There was movement. It was Guerra. He had a firm grip on the neck of the terrorist, forcing him to the pavement. Army straightened herself from firing position. There was a hazy atmosphere in the place now. The smell of gunpowder filled her nostrils. The police training gave way to self-control. Army surveyed the scene. Two bodies lay prone on the floor. Their life's blood surrounded them in a pool of crimson. Army checked the pulse of the detective. He was dead. She slowly moved to the second man and checked his pulse, dead as well.

Guerra had secured his prisoner with handcuffs, but continued to hold him down with a knee in the middle of his back. Army placed her Beretta on safe and checked the clip, one cartridge left. Her stomach felt queasy again. This time she did vomit. The SWAT team had made their way into the warehouse and begun to secure it for a second time as a major crime area.

Within minutes, the forensic people were back. The Deputy Chief was in control and this time the coroner's office was represented. The cuffed insurgent was led to one of the small offices in the warehouse where he was detained for the moment. Guerra wanted to question him as soon as he finished briefing the Chief on the shootout. He concluded his discussion with the veteran cop and started for the office when he noticed Army standing alone in a corner of the building. As he headed in her direction, she turned her back to him. When Guerra reached Army, he gently caressed her shoulders and turned her to face him. Her eyes were swollen.

"It's ok," he said to her. "It's ok. You did great. You took him down."

"I didn't want to take him down," she said, bursting into tears and burying her face in his chest. "I didn't want to take anybody down," she said again softly.

Ralph tenderly pushed Army back and brushed a tear away from under her eye with his thumb. "It's dirty business, Army, very dirty business."

Army slowly looked up at Guerra. "What was his name?" she asked, tears welling again in her eyes.

"Whose name?" Guerra asked.

"The detective," she said faintly.

"I don't know," said Guerra looking away.

After a moment, he pulled Army back toward him, kissed her on the forehead, and then turned toward the office where he would question the remaining man while he was still in a state of trauma. Halfway to the office, he turned back in Army's direction. "Get it together Army. I need you to interpret."

Army blew her nose and then followed Guerra to the office. The man was a Saudi and a low-ranking member of the team. He claimed he was a simple driver and knew nothing more.

"That's just not true and you know it," Guerra railed. The more he thought about his friend, the detective, the more enraged he became. He took the Saudi by the hair and slammed his head into the desk. The man's head bounced off the desk like a basketball. His eyes were the size of quarters as he looked around the room in a feeble effort to gain support against Guerra's rage. There was none. Guerra grabbed hold of his hair and slammed his head into the top of the desk a second time, causing his forehead to burst open and bleed. The man whimpered as his eyes filled with fear. Guerra grasped a handful of hair for a third time pulling his head back, forcing him to look up and make eye contact. "Now you listen to me, you low-life scumbag. I want some answers and I want them now."

Army allowed Guerra to finish his bullying before starting the interpretation. She was soft spoken in technique and comforting in her manner. The Saudi-born terrorist relaxed when Army began to speak his language, even smiling in a pacifying way while keeping one eye on Guerra all the time. Army completed her interrogation and then suddenly without provocation jumped to her feet, out of her chair, and screamed in English. "OR YOU'RE ON YOUR WAY TO UZBEKISTAN."

She then left the office, slamming the door behind her. Guerra was amazed how cooperative these killers became when given the opportunity. In the ensuing hour following Army's clarification of his delicate position, the prisoner informed the agents that the map they recovered from the van was in fact routes taken by the other three vans, all containing the same payload.

The agents learned that the cities chosen for destruction were based on population. Kill as many people as you can, was the deranged mindset. Houston was the fourth largest populated city in the United States, and closest to Baton Rouge, and that's why it went first. He also told the agents that he didn't know where the other vans went but he did know that his destination was to be New York City. He proved to be what he says he was; a simple driver, with limited information. The man killed in the warehouse shooting was the higher-ranking man and leader of his team.

The Saudi went on to explain that this is not a suicide mission and that detonation would be initiated by a phone call but he did not know how it worked. He also claimed to have no idea where the bomb components of his van were, but he could lead them to the third member of the team, the technician who could be in possession of the components, or know where they are.

A call was placed to the FBI field office in Baton Rouge asking Bud Singh if he would review the detonation procedure, given the captured Saudi's muddled explanation, and if he would then try to determine if the process could be traced or interrupted. A police unit was assigned the responsibility of picking up the remaining cell member who, with any luck, would be able to provide more information on the bomb and how it was set off. If they were really lucky, they would recover the fourth nuclear bomb's elements. The one thing that seemed clear from the interrogation of the Saudi terrorist was that Los Angeles and Chicago were the remaining two targets.

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## **Colorado Conference**

The President had assembled his war party around the large conference table in the NORAD boardroom to discuss the readiness of the U.S. military reprisal, should all attempts to locate the three remaining nuclear suitcase bombs fail. Present at the meeting was Rupert Langford, Martin Kerr, Defense, Admiral Buzz Atchison, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Abraham Strickland, Vice-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and General Tony Radcliff, operations commander of the project titled 'Thunder Recourse'. General Radcliff reported that he and his staff were prepared to launch, pending the President's notice. He read a brief description explaining the technicalities of the operations procedure. He was firm in his expression as he calmly described the carnage that would transpire as a result of this action. Tony Radcliff's son, lieutenant Anthony Radcliff, was blown to smithereens by a roadside bomb in Iraq. The General's compassion for his fellow man ended where religion was used to justify indiscriminate killing. As far as he was concerned, the fewer the Arabs, the better the world.

The General finished his report and then asked if there were any questions. Martin Kerr cleared his throat, shuffled a few papers containing the written report just presented, and then asked the loaded question. "How much more time will be needed to assemble a force large enough to disable Iran's nuclear capability?" There were no startled expressions at the table with the exception of the President's.

"Twenty-four hours," was Radcliff's reply.

The President pushed against the table, forcing his chair to roll backwards. He then stood and walked over to the big world map on the wall and studied it at length. "What do you have in mind, Mr. Secretary?" He turned back to face the table of distinguished warriors. This time, it was Martin Kerr's turn to stand as the President sat back down.

"We're not going to make any friends if we take action in Pakistan, so if we're going to make enemies, we might as well get that job done at the same time."

"I'm not so concerned about Iran, the Europeans would publicly denounce any action taken there, and would secretly welcome a military strike of some kind." The President was standing again. The two men were not at odds with each other, but one was a gladiator, the other a statesman.

"I'm not so sure," the President said, looking wearier now than when the meeting began.

"Are you advocating using nuclear weapons on both these countries?" he asked, looking around the room, not knowing where the answer might come from.

"It's the only way we can be sure to achieve our objective and actually minimize the loss of life," Martin Kerr said shamelessly.

The President focused on a stern Hugh Atchison, "What about you Buzz, what do you think?"

"I agree with Kerr. Let's complete the job."

"What about the Russians?" the President asked. "Screw the Russians," somebody said.

"All right, let's put it together." The President was satisfied they had made the right decision.

"What about the FBI investigation?" Kerr asked the President as the meeting adjourned.

"No kewpie doll yet."

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## **Canal Street, Baton Rouge**

It was eleven fifteen that night when the police arrived at the dingy apartment building on Canal Street, not far from Maria Angha's neighborhood. Where Muhsin Al-Msalam was rousted from an uncomfortable sleep and taken into custody. It was twelve thirty after an already long day when Ralph, Army and Bud Singh arrived at the police station to meet AlMsalam, the third member of the New York's death squad delegation.

On the way to the police station, they discussed Singh's assessment of the nuclear mechanism given the limited information attained by the Saudi. He was uneasy with the results. If the method used was as the Saudi said, then he thought he was familiar with the way it may work. While they continued their ride to the station, Singh fumbled through his brief, looking for something but was purposefully not sharing his thoughts with his new colleagues. Army noticed the contents of Singh's briefcase, suggesting it looked a little like the trash can in her garage and advised that some sort of filing system might be in order.

After a frustrating ten-minute search, Singh pulled something resembling an outline from the depths of the refuse pile that was his briefcase. Finding what he was looking for, his face drew tight as he examined the document. It was an old, hastily assembled lesson plan from a class he taught a few years back at MIT. What made this plan so memorable among hundreds he had composed over the years was the innovative design of the subject, that was exclusively Buddadev Singh. Distraught with the idea that he may have had something to do with the design of the device used, he remained silent the rest of the way to the police station.

When the three feds arrived at the station, they were introduced to Muhsin Al-Msalam through a one-way mirror. The three agents studied the young man seated at the table for a few minutes before Singh spoke. "I was afraid something like this could happen," he said, talking mostly to himself. "I know this kid."

The two FBI agents continued to stare at the nervous American-born terrorist through the window while they waited for Singh's explanation.

"This young man was a student of mine at MIT a year or so back. I knew him as Mark Salam. I remember him because he had an unhealthy curiosity for unconventional nuclear warfare, but he showed no sign of any adverse political interest. If I remember right, he came from an upscale family, first generation I believe. I don't know what country his family is from, but I do know this, he's a smart guy, very smart."

Army waited for Guerra to ask the obvious question. When he didn't, she did. "What do you mean by, 'something like this could happen'?"

"I used to teach a class," he said apologetically. "An elective, a time filler. Very popular, all about building bombs and making them work. From Ammonium Nitrate, simple farm fertilizer, to a more sophisticated nuclear fission gun device. The kind of thing you can get on the Internet at anytime if you're so inclined. We played with it, mostly theoretically; what would happen if you did this, or how would this effect that, you know, that sort of thing. All slate board and talk, nothing concrete." Singh continued to stutter around but convinced no one including himself that he could justify teaching anyone how to build

bombs. Army turned and lead the way into the interview room before Singh finished. The two men followed, Bud Singh still making excuses.

The interview went nowhere. Mark Salam was articulate, well mannered, and believed he would be released as soon as the family attorney arrived.

"Yeah, when hell freezes over," Army said cynically.

He claimed to have nothing to do with any terrorism plot and would sue the FBI for unlawful profiling. "Right," Army said, leaving the room. The other two followed her lead and left as well. It was one thirty in the morning. Army needed a tranquilizer and eight hours of uninterrupted sleep. She'll call her dad in the morning. Guerra needed a stiff drink and Bud Singh would try to make the best of a sleepless night while he grappled with his conscience.

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## **American Made Terrorist**

There was no need for the 6 PM wake up call but it came anyway. Army had spent most of the night awake. The sleeping pill she took only made her head ache. Normally, when there was a shooting with a fatality, counseling is mandatory, but there was no time, no time to talk to anyone. Not Guerra, that's for sure - "Suck it up and live with it, comes with the turf," would be his counsel.

She didn't want to talk to Guerra this morning. She didn't want to talk to anyone this morning. She pulled the covers over her head and for a moment wished she was a cashier at a Publix supermarket in downtown Charleston. The phone rang again. This time it didn't stop until she picked up.

"What!?" she said, aggravated.

"Just wanted to be sure you were alright," Guerra said unconvincingly. He had his own engaging way of expressing his feelings, but when he tried to be sensitive it sounded awkward and didn't work. It was all right though. Army understood and appreciated the effort.

"I'm fine. I'll be down in a minute. I want to call daddy and then I'll be right down."

Army was never able to talk to her father all that much but she had to tell someone and she was sure he wouldn't be disparaging. Hank Armendorfer was loving and supportive enough, but busy, too busy, as a matter of fact. Cassandra never had an earnest conversation with her father that she could remember where he listened very much, but it seemed like he did a lot of expressing, prognosticating, and ranting. Army decided she would call her father later when she understood better herself what happened yesterday in the warehouse. Guerra would have to do as a sounding board for now. Breakfast was a cup of coffee and a Coke. Neither felt like eating much. They would try again this morning to crack Mushin Al Msalam, alias Mark Salam.

When they arrived at the police station it was 7:15 AM. Salam, his lawyer, mother and father were waiting in the interview office. Norman Yarbrough and Bud Singh met the agents there. Three members of the team would conduct the interview; Yarbrough, Armendorfer, and Guerra, while Singh and Deputy Chief Harry Campbell would watch from the observation window.

Guerra had brought along his 'in public' demeanor for this interview but was glad that the Justice Department's attorney was along just in case his conduct went from controlled public servant to just plain unhinged, and start unloading on the kid. The two sides faced each other. The suspect and his attorney were seated. Mother and father stood directly behind them.

Guerra made eye contact with all four, at last focusing on the young suspected radical. "How should I address you, Mr. Salam, or Mr. Msalam?"

"Please call me Mark Salam. This is my mother and father, Mr. and Mrs. Akim Salam," he said, looking up and smiling innocently at his parents. "And this is Mr. Oscar Wielding who represents my family," Salam said, placing his hand on his lawyer's shoulder. Wielding's expression was one of strained tolerance as he shrugged his shoulder in an effort to dislodge the kid's hand.

"What is this all about?" The lawyer asked, addressing the investigators in a condescending manner.

"We have reason to believe that your client Mushin Al Msalam is a conspirator in a plot to do irrevocable harm to the citizenry of the United States and may have played a roll in the Houston disaster," Yarbrough countered in his own pompous style.

"Is he under arrest?" Wielding asked.

"Detained," said Yarbrough. "We would like to ask Mr. Msalam some questions with regard to his activities over the last six months."

"Mark Salam," the kid said emphatically. Yarbrough looked blankly at Msalam for a moment, then back at his attorney.

"We would like to know what he is doing in Baton Rouge and what his connection is with Maria Angha."

"Who's Maria Angha?" The kid interrupted again, and received another blank look from Yarbrough. The government attorney settled back in his chair, looked at the boy's parents, then back at Oscar Wielding.

"This young man is in very serious trouble, and I suggest he be in full cooperation with these proceedings."

"You got nothing on me," the kid butted in again.

"Shut up, Mark," his attorney said, disgusted with his antics.

"Mr. Yarbrough, would it be possible for you and I to have a brief conversation privately?" asked Wielding.

"Of course," said Yarbrough.

The two attorneys left the room, followed by the two agents. The four joined Singh and the Deputy Chief outside the soundproof interrogation room for a brief chat.

"Mr. Yarbrough, what evidence is it that you have to hold my client? You pick him up in the middle of the night, haul him down to the police station, and then harass him because he is of Arab descent. I would like him released please. We will make arrangements for you to question him in my office in Boston after I have an opportunity to study the indictment."

"Wrong, Wielding," Guerra said breaking in. "The only way that punk is leaving this police station is in the back of a paddy wagon or on a stretcher."

"Just a moment Ralph," Yarbrough said, resting his hand on Guerra's forearm. "Let me handle this please... Mr. Wielding, one of the men arrested yesterday in a deadly incident here in Baton Rouge has identified your client, Muhsim Al Msalam, as a member of his assassins team whose mission it was to blow up New York City with a nuclear bomb."

The Boston attorney's expression became one of detached caution as he surveyed the stern faces of the four federal agents. "You mean, don't you, that you esteem the word of a thug over that of a highly regarded American citizen with an indubitable reputation...I'll have him out of here within the hour," Wielding said confidently.

"We have another witness that will swear that your client is part of an Qaidat al-Jihad terrorist conspiracy to commit mass murder in the United States," offered Yarbrough.

"Mark Salam, or whatever his name is, will not leave that interrogation room until we have some answers." Yarbrough was now pointing a finger at the startled Wielding. "So I suggest you get your rear in gear and get those two people out of there and explain to that pompous little whiner how much trouble he is really in." Yarbrough, red faced now, stared down the bullied Wielding. Guerra, who was standing slightly behind Yarbrough, folded his arms and smiled sadistically. "One other thing, Mr. Wielding, we also have information suggesting that Mark Salam attended a Madrassas in New Jersey during some of his formative years. If this is true, it is safe to say that the seeds of hate have been firmly planted."

"And what are you implying, Mr. Yarbrough?"

"A Madrassas is a religious school ruled by Islamic extremists."

Oscar Wielding was a lot of things, but not a sympathizer for misguided Islamic causes that threatened municipal harm. "I'll see what I can do," he said. "But I want a deal."

"Good," Yarbrough answered.

"We'll see," he said, turning to face the Deputy Chief of Police. "I don't want the father released until I have a chance to question him." He turned back. "Here's the deal, Wielding. The kid comes clean with all he knows or we ship him off to Uzbekistan, where we will get the answers one way or another."

"You can't do that, Yarbrough, and you know it. The boy is a United States citizen."

"There are millions of United States citizens whose lives are at stake, Mr. Wielding. We can do what we have to do." Wielding frowned as he returned to the interrogation room.

"Do you think he buys that crap, Norman?" Army asked.

"No, but I believe he's honest and I don't think he wants another Houston. Anyway, that's all I could think of at the time," Yarbrough said, smiling at Guerra. Ralph nodded his approval.

The five officials gathered around the one-way window to watch Wielding question Salam. The intercom system had been shut off to protect attorney-client privilege. The consultation appeared to be going smoothly at first and then young Salam began to shake his head no, first deliberately, then more violently.

Suddenly he jumped to his feet and smacked the table with his fist, startling everyone except Akim Salam who stood passively by while his wife sobbed openly. Oscar Wielding gathered himself and then looked up at his young client, obviously disgusted with his outburst, and calmly said something. Army thought she made out the last syllable. It looked like "-stan". Akim Salam seemed to have grasped the weight of Wielding's statement better than his son and grabbed Mark by the nape of the neck and a shoulder and forced him back down yelling something at him. Army thought she read his lips as well. "Shut up and sit down...now."

After a brief one-sided discussion with Wielding, Mark Salam shook his head yes. Guerra gave Army a congratulatory wink as if to say, "halfway there." But Army was in no mood to celebrate.

Smiling, she acknowledged his gesture and then asked directions to the bathroom. Army hadn't eaten since the shooting yesterday. She wondered if she would ever want to eat again. Her stomach was one big knot with no sign of relief anytime soon. The bathroom mirror was no help. Her hair looked as though someone steam ironed the side of her head. It was a result of too many big pillows and not enough time or desire to wash and blow dry it. In general, she looked and felt rotten. The tube of Bobby Brown in her belly bag laid against the cold hard steel of the very proficient Berretta. She'd do without lipstick this morning. She didn't want to touch the gun again, not today anyway.

The two attorneys, Wielding and Yarbrough, took some time to discuss how best to proceed after Salam's sudden interest in cooperating. Army snuck outside for some fresh air and to get away from Guerra. Being partners with Ralph was like being married to him without all the benefits. He was a pain in the backside most of the time, but he was all she had at the moment. Like most men, he had trouble connecting with his feminine side and just didn't understand a girl's needs when she needed him to. Anyway, she had to get away from him and all the rest of the testosterone for a few minutes. Strangely enough, the only person she felt close to in that interrogation room was Mark Salam's mother. The pain in her eyes at the thought that her son might have had something to do with Houston was heartfelt by Army. She thought of her own mother, and how she might have felt if Army had been in that position. She could identify with the deadly look Mark's mother gave Akim Salam when she finally realized that Mark was guilty of something. It was a look that held his father responsible.

Army's mother, Naheed, fell victim to ovarian cancer and died alone when Army was midway through college. She always resented her father for not being there, and for not explaining to her how serious her mother's illness was. God, how she missed her mother. Naheed Armendorfer was the woman every young lady aspired to be; brilliant, beautiful, and full of unconditional love. Army hoped she had at least two of her mother's attributes. It was the unconditional love part she struggled with. Maybe she needed to have a baby, get out of the dirty business of killing people and have a baby. She knew she could love her baby unconditionally. She decided after this is all over, that's exactly what she'd do. She felt better now, after hashing it over with her alter ego as she found herself back at the interview room.

Wielding and Yarbrough had made a deal. Mark Salam would disclose all he knew about the alleged Qaidat al-Jihad plot to ransom America, and in return he would stay in a safe stateside jail until charges could be determined. The more Wielding heard, the more he frankly didn't care what happened to Mark.

Akim, the elder Salam, would be held on trumped up charges for as long as the government could get away with it. They would say he contributed to the delinquency of his own son by requiring him to attend a school that propagated hate. That was the best Yarbrough could come up with on such short notice. Yarbrough believed Akim Salam was a player in the whole scheme, if only from a distance, but needed time to prove it. Wielding, tired of the stress and strain involved in the whole muddle, wanted to find a way out so he agreed to play along.

Mark Salam's information proved to be weighty. He claimed to know nothing of the whereabouts of the nuclear components which allegedly came housed in the lead-lined trunk that has now been flown to Washington to be examined. The only people who would know where the bomb was to be found were the three-member cell team, two of whom were in custody and denied any knowledge of the location. The third conspirator took all he knew with him to paradise.

The agents speculated that it is possible that the bomb was bogus and didn't exist from the beginning. If that was true, then the other two bombs might be phony as well. A call was placed to the FBI lab as the interview with Salam was in progress, to see if there was any development in the examination of the lead trunk. The results of the preliminary findings showed that there was no sign of radioactive material. This led the agents to seriously consider the possibility that no other bombs remained. Singh cautioned not to get too excited. These findings were inconclusive at best and there was the possibility that a nuclear bomb

could be housed in a material that would repress uranium emission. Ceramics could be the substance of choice, and there were other materials that could be used.

Army concluded that only two options need be considered; either the bomb is still out there but nobody knows where it is, or it doesn't exist at all and they are on a wild goose chase. She preferred to believe the latter. At any rate, the Baton Rouge police department retraced the steps of the three cell members as best they could with the information they had been able to ascertain through interviews compiled from the parties associated with Maria Angha and Hector Fuentes.

The spirited interview with Mark Salam continued as Wielding jockeyed with Yarbrough on Salam's behalf. Salam revealed the identities of the six fugitives still at large. The names used were likely pseudonyms. Mark was given computer file access to the latest FBI identity database and came up with encouraging results. Two of the six were known to have Qaidat al-Jihad links and were on the FBI's top twenty most wanted list. These two men were the cell leaders of the two remaining Satin Clean vans. The man killed in the warehouse shootout was also identified - Saif Al Yacoub, a high-ranking member of the old Al Qaeda network. He was Egyptian and was wanted in connection with the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings in Tanzania and Kenya. Anas Al-Hamed was believed to be the Chicago-bound leader. He was of Libyan descent and fluent in English. Al-Hamed lived in the UK for an undisclosed number of years and was also wanted for questioning about the same Embassy bombing.

It was the Los Angeles van that quickly gained the most attention from the investigators. Abdul Fayez Abdullah was the identified leader of this cell. He was an Egyptian as well, and possessed a high Qaidat al-Jihad profile. He was the reputed mastermind of the African Embassy bombings. Both Al-Hamed and Abdullah were master bomb makers and considered very dangerous. It was one of Abdullah's cell members that flamed the excitement. She was Chechnya-born Elena Radayeva, alias Ellen Rissan. Salam produced a snapshot of Ellen from his billfold. It was forbidden to socialize with cell members outside of your respective responsibilities, but Mark believed he and Ellen had a thing for each other and were planning to meet in Phoenix after all of this was over.

The picture of Ellen Rissan was electronically mailed to the Russian Embassy in Washington DC where it was then forwarded to the Federal Security Service, formally the KGB in Moscow. The FSB terrorist databank was searched and within a few minutes a profile of Elena Radayeva was on its way back to the Baton Rouge police department. The excitement revolved around the idea that a blond European woman was traveling with two distinctly Middle Eastern males. A nationwide APB was placed to all law enforcement agencies describing the three assailants. As information was being gathered at various databanks on the six at-large radicals, Singh pressed Salam about his knowledge of the bomb.

Salam hesitated to divulge anything about the bomb structure, fearing that his participation in the bomb assembly might jeopardize the deal that the Feds offered. He was becoming more and more elusive with his answers. The interview began to get bogged down as Salam dodged question after question. Yarbrough assured him that his cooperation would work in his interest; the more information he furnished the better for everyone concerned.

With that in mind, Mark Salam proudly revealed why he was recruited for this mission. It was because he had a working knowledge of the Kryton, a high-speed electronic timing switch used to detonate an impressive array of armaments, not the least of which could be nuclear in nature. Singh explained to his team that a Kryton is a small bulb-like affair on the order of an old television or radio tube. The Kryton switch can be ignited by an electrical impulse. A six-volt battery and a cell phone frequency are the likely components of the triggering system. Salam confirmed the assessment of the trigger device and was quick to point out that he learned the how-to in Singh's bomb-making elective. When pressed on the bomb itself, Mark Salam explained that he actually only saw one bomb, and that was when he demonstrated the detonation connecting procedure. This was done in Maria Angha's home shortly after the last cabal was smuggled into the country.

The nuclear device was pre-assembled before entering the U.S. It was a cylindrical apparatus about two feet long and six inches in diameter. Both ends were capped. The casing sleeve appeared to be an industrial plastic material Salam was not familiar with but looked like heavy PVC pipe. Protruding from one end were two isotopes surrounded by silicone calk. Salam's job was to demonstrate how to connect the Kryton to the cylinder isotopes utilizing the battery and the cell phone as the trigger mechanism. He did not, however, make the connection; that was to be done at the site. This was the leader's responsibility and the fail-safe procedure. All leaders were foreign-born Arabs who had to be smuggled into the country. Ralph Guerra had heard enough. He needed to play a bigger part in the questioning process, but he'd been relegated to second team for this interview, and found himself sitting next to teammate Army, directly



behind Yarbrough and Singh. His irritation got the best of him when he abruptly stood, his feet haplessly knocking the folding chair he was seated in backwards and crashing to the floor.

"How could a high-speed restricted nuclear trigger like a Kryton get in the hands of a terrorist network like Qaidat alJihad anyway?" That question was rhetorical; he knew the answer. "And for that matter, how could they put together a nuclear bomb in a two-foot piece of plumber's pipe in a batinfested cave in Afghanistan. We can't even do that...can we?" His frustration and lack of sleep were evident but he'd gotten the attention of everyone in the room. All heads turned to face his direction. Now a very self-conscious Guerra fidgeted for a moment, then foolishly asked, "Well, what...can we?" Bud Singh slowly rotated the rest of his body to catch up with his head, to better address Guerra's outburst. "We have known for a long time that the materials necessary to construct such a device have been readily available to anyone with enough money and initiative to locate them. The black market was flooded with unauthorized nuclear Kryton triggers as late as the 1980's when a California businessman named Richard Smith illegally exported over eight hundred into Israel for use in military armaments. Some six hundred more Krytons were missing from stateside inventories around the same time. As far as the bomb itself is concerned, it's well documented that the Soviet Union as far back as the 1960's experimented with the idea of small nuclear carry-on weapons, better known as suitcase bombs. We are convinced they were successful in the development of these weapons, and in fact, assembled over seven hundred of them during the cold war. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the KGB revealed that at least one hundred of these bombs were unaccounted for and believed to be in the hands of Chechen mob bosses with Islamic sympathies. It has not been a well-kept secret that Osama bin Laden has purchased at least one of these Soviet suitcase bombs, if not for the technology alone." Guerra was seated again and apologized for the impetuous behavior. He liked to call it his Latin tendencies when confronted about it, but Army preferred 'control freak'. She would concede that Guerra had a distinctive way of dealing with villains to gain information. That may explain why Norman Yarbrough was along.

They were both well acquainted with Singh's informative answer but impatient with such little time left. Army was beginning to wish that Guerra could spend a few minutes alone with Salam exercising his Latin tendencies. The interview with Mark Salam, alias Mushin Al Msalam (the investigators were still not sure which was his real name) ended for the time being. Salam would be detained in the central division police station, along with his father, pursuant of federal indictments and providing the investigating team the opportunity to question him at will.

Developing a profile on Elena Radayeva became the immediate task for the team. She was five-foot-six and weighed 130 pounds. Blond, blue eyed, and thirty-two years old. She had an Inca sunburst tattooed on the small of her back and liked to show it off by wearing midriff tank tops with low-rise jeans. She also sported a Crescent Star surrounded by barbed wire circling her left bicep. She had more tattoos not likely glimpsed by the casual observer. Elena was more a rebel looking for cause than a hard-core Islamic martyr. Being part of something, even if as diabolic as the Houston massacre, motivated her. Low self-esteem, lack of parental affection, a tarnished childhood, who knows - there was just no time for that psychological crap. The two agents agreed they'd send her to a shrink when they catch her. That is, if she still needed one after they were through with her.

Elena was the daughter of a revolutionary in the breakaway republic of Chechnya. She was born and raised in Grozny and lived there until her family had to flee during the 1994 Russian invasion. Most of her formative years were spent defending her father's cause, although she was too young to understand the political ramifications of what she was fighting for. She was not too young to be proficient with an AK-47. What Elena did learn in those early years is that a good cause is worth dying for. In 1996, her father was killed when a band of ragtag Chechen rebels retook the city of Grozny from the Russian occupation of '94. What little life she had was completely destroyed in that battle for Grozny, losing her mother to drugs and depression, and her father to a mortar shell. She found herself alone in the war torn city, without friends or family. Alcohol became her only trusted comrade. Alcohol and a small band of Chechen misfits who passed her around like a tattered soccer ball. It was on one of these forgettable nights that after a liter of Russkaya vodka and a fling in the hay with four or five dissenters, she passed out. When she awoke she found herself firmly bound in the hands of Russian mobsters dealing in the female slave trade. She could blame her Chechen drinking buddies who picked up a few extra roubles at her expense. Elena Radayeva would eventually be sold into a prostitution ring, smuggled to the United States, and ended up in New York City where her name would be changed to Ellen Rissan, a more acceptable American name the New York ilk could pronounce.

Ellen spent only a week with her new boss before shooting him through the throat with his own .38 and then running off with ten thousand dollars of his sleazily earned money. She swore off booze and moved to Boston where she got a job as a custodian at a federal building, took some English speaking courses and began to look for a cause of her own. She met Mark Salam, an MIT dropout in a small Boston Harbor dive where dropouts, ex-prostitutes, and every other kind of oddball and loner went to look for a cause. They stepped down from a dingy rat-infested Boston bar to Maria Angha's safe house just in time to blow up Houston, Texas, without an ounce of conscience or remorse, all for a cause Elena was only vaguely familiar with.

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## **Team Clout**

Dale Barker, the FBI's head man, had been given full authority in the Hector Fuentes investigation and had been kept up to date with a running account of the fast moving results by what had developed into a four person counterterrorism team consisting of Army, Guerra, Yarbrough, and Singh. Adam Mendez, the head of the NID, the President, and a few close advisers were being informed on their progress hourly. The Power of Attorney of the President of the United States had been transferred to the team, with Yarbrough accepting the responsibility as spokesman. Guerra didn't mind as long as Yarbrough stayed out of his way. All security resources had been made available to the Baton Rouge foursome to help expedite their investigation. Free reign was the term used by the team to describe their newfound weight. The first edict they declared was to keep the media under control in order to eliminate any more panic than what was already going on in the country.

The next major task was to get Los Angeles and Chicago evacuated without clogging all arteries to and from those major cities and without tipping off the terrorists that the agents were aware of the remaining target cities. These people were the most dangerous in the world, and if they knew the feds were as close as they were, could move their van to Dubois, Wyoming and blow it up if they had a mind to. A plan was hastily formulated to pass the responsibility on to the governors to deal with the mass departure of the cities as best they could in their respective states.

Most governors had initiated some kind exodus, although little cooperation between states had been established. It was suggested to them by the National Counterterrorism Center that they first establish refugee camps at least two hundred miles from any of twenty-five or thirty major cities and begin orderly evacuation as soon as possible. Secondly, they should shut down all cell phone transmitting towers within the metropolitan areas, muting the signals. This could be done acting in concert with the FCC and the cell phone providers.

It is impossible to know what part of the city might be struck. In Los Angeles, there were nearly four million residents huddled in five-hundred square miles within the city limits alone. Chicago, the third largest city in the United States, housed three million people. This did not include the suburban areas which contain additional millions. A ten kiloton nuclear bomb detonated anywhere in Orange County, California would kill millions.

The operation was unrealistic, if not naïve, but some effort had to be undertaken. The team concluded that this plan, though not watertight, was the best way with the time they had, to empty the two target cities without tipping off the terrorists that they were in close pursuit. The downside is that if they did get the phone traffic jammed and the people out, the vans were mobile and could be detonated anywhere manually. They both had designated suicide drivers as a backup.

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## **More Experts**

Footage of the Nagasaki atomic bomb blast was being broadcast with the station's team of experts comparing Houston to Nagasaki. The experts consisted of retired hasbeens with little current knowledge or relevant details about the latest disaster. It was the network's offer in this time slot to fill space while executives worked to put together a more comprehensive broadcast, as pertinent information became

available. It was Jenkins who interrupted this dismal assembly of impostors with breaking news. "We have just learned that the FBI has identified one of the Qaidat al-Jihad operatives."

A picture of a semi-attractive blond woman filled the screen. "She is Elena Radayeva, a former Chechen freedom fighter. Radayeva is five-foot-six-inches tall and thirty-two years of age. Distinguishing marks: a crescent star circled by barbed wire is tattooed on her left upper arm. She is thought to be traveling with this man..."

Elena's image was replaced by a recent FBI mug shot of Abdul Fayez Abdullah. Jenkins gave a short description of Abdullah, noting that he was Egyptian, a ranking member of the Qaidat al-Jihad terrorist faction, and that he was wanted in connection with the 1998 Embassy bombings in Tanzania and Kenya. The mug shot of a solemn Abdullah faded and an excited Stuart Jenkins appeared. "The FBI is asking everyone to be on the lookout for this pair. They are thought to be armed and very dangerous. Do not, and they emphasize do not, approach or try to apprehend these fugitives. The FBI is asking you to please call the police or local law enforcement agency in your area."

A short file segment on the 1998 Embassy bombings and what the network has on Abdullah followed the Jenkins break-in, and then back to the round table discussion, featuring the nuclear disaster "experts".

\* \* \*

## On The Run

The pictures of Radayeva and Abdullah were electronically transferred to every newspaper in the country. Most papers quickly printed a special edition with their pictures splashed across the front page along with recent descriptions. The trio broke up before the pictures surfaced but after the van had been parked at its final destination somewhere in Los Angeles. A motel manager in Prescott, Arizona thought he recognized Radayeva through the media release and called the police, who notified the FBI. The television exposure tightened the noose and made it next to impossible for Elena to travel safely with her two Arab companions.

Ralph and Army took the first flight available to Phoenix, where Yarbrough and Singh would join them later. The two agents landed at Phoenix Sky Harbor International around five thirty. They were met by the head of the Phoenix field office. They had arranged for a car and wasted no time getting started toward Prescott. After arriving at the south Prescott La Quinta Inn just after seven in the evening, they questioned the night manager.

According to his account, two people checked into the motel late Wednesday night, July 5th; a bearded Arab and a European woman with long blond hair. Both parties sported thick foreign accents that grabbed the attention of the manager from the get-go. Something else he found peculiar was that they asked for a room with a view of the front drive-in area. Most people who ask for special rooms want them on the courtside facing the pool.

The couple signed the registration sheet as "Hasan and Ellen Hajj". They were issued suite 22 facing the lobby's drive through. At about 12:30 PM today, the day clerk received a call from room 22 asking that a cab be summoned as quickly as possible. The voice on the other end was a woman's with a heavy accent. The clerk called for the cab but noticed that when it arrived, a clean-shaven man of Eastern origin got in carrying in a small traveling bag. The clerk thought that was strange since the woman had called for the taxi. Not long after the yellow cab left the motel, a tall slender woman with black hair cut in a Dorothy Hamill style was seen leaving the lobby carrying an overnight bag.

Before checking room 22, Guerra filed a progress report with Washington and provided them with new descriptions of Elena and Hasan Al-Ahad, the third member of the Los Angeles cell. Forensic teams from local authorities had already swept the motel room by the time Ralph and Army arrived on the scene.

They found little more than a few fingerprints but it was enough to substantiate that the two fugitives were there. Prescott has an airport, Ernest Love Field, but it's only serviced by one commercial airline. If the two were going to fly, Phoenix would be the nearest full service airport, but it was unlikely they would try to fly because of the stiff airport security, and more importantly, their California mission had not been completed. While Love Field was put on alert, the police checked the cab companies and car rental agencies in Prescott as part of their standard investigation practice. Yellow Cabs' register showed that at 12:47 that afternoon they picked up a fare at the La Quinta Inn and chauffeured him ten miles south on highway 89 to Kirkland Jct. where he was dropped off at a truck stop. At approximately 1:15 PM,

Enterprise, a car rental agency located three blocks east of La Quinta, rented a compact to an Ellen Hajj. A quick inquiry by the Prescott police at the Kirkland Jct. truck stop produced four witnesses who saw a dark complexioned man and white woman with black hair leave the truck stop in a small red car heading south toward Phoenix.

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## **The President's Address**

The reporter, an attractive second-team redhead, was filling the anchor chair while the regulars took a break. She will be prepping the nation on the latest condition of state while waiting for the President's statement.

"The country is now reeling into the fifth day of uncertainty following the Houston disaster and the outlaw Osama bin Laden's ultimatum. The President will address the nation shortly and is expected to answer some questions regarding the intentions of his administration relating to those demands. It is safe to say however, based on what we are witnessing in the aftermath of Houston, that this country could not withstand another explosion as deadly as the one in Texas. We are simply not prepared as a nation to handle another such devastating blow. The southeast quarter of the United States is completely shut down. All ports from Galveston to the Florida panhandle have been closed. The Texas gulf oil refineries are out of commission with no sign of startup anytime soon. It is conservatively estimated that the Texas refineries account for twenty to thirty percent of the US gasoline reserve. The Louisiana and Mississippi oil refineries are also temporarily out of business and there are no definitive answers for future production schedules. The entire southeast is mired in unprecedented misery. Fresh water pumping stations, responsible for water supply, are closed because of the contaminated reservoirs." Redundant video images of the troubled area traded places with the reporter as she spoke.

"Anarchy has taken over the streets in the cities of the southeast, looting, rape, and plunder are widespread. Law enforcement officials are claiming that half of their force has either quit or gone AWOL and those that remain are overworked and ineffective. Intercity gangs are responsible for most of the disorder and have taken over in some of the larger metropolitan areas. Prolonged electrical blackouts are the rule and there is no immediate help in sight. Millions of stranded motorists line the interstates trying to escape the devastation."

Footage from station helicopters now filled the TV screen providing a frightening glimpse of the interstate bottlenecks and gridlocks throughout the southeast quarter of the United States. "They have no place to go," continued the reporter, "with no destination and no gasoline to get there. Many people are sick or dying because of the shortages and lack of emergency response. FEMA (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) is trying to mobilize the rest of the country to provide goods and services to the stricken South, but the major arteries throughout the United States are clogged with traffic trying to escape the large metropolitan areas for fear theirs could be the next city on the Qaidat al-Jihad list. Trucking, the backbone of our nation's supply line, has come to a halt. People throughout the great expanse of this nation are involuntarily working against the State and Federal guidelines for effective evacuation procedure." Frustrated and annoyed with what she was viewing on her studio monitor, the anchor left the objective disposition of a good television journalist and began to stray into a more subjectively critical frame of mind. "People seem more concerned about their personal well being and the preservation of their families than those who were directly affected by the destruction and the anguish that followed. For crying out loud, why is the National Guard so obviously absent?" She sighed with frustration, then regained her composure. "Sea and river traffic have all but stopped. Cargo ships and tankers from around the world refuse to use the United States coastal ports for fear of being trapped or destroyed should another bomb explode. Hundreds of international vessels loaded with precious freight idle off the coast of the United States waiting to see how the President responds to the Qaidat al-Jihad demands. With the prospect of three more nuclear bombs expected to detonate at any time, the infrastructure of the nation is a quagmire of humanity clogging their own lifelines; people with purpose but no destination, an insufferable tribulation." The reporter looked satisfied with her presentation as the camera slowly zoomed in on her attractive portrait. "And now, the President of the United States."

The image of a drained President materialized on the screen. He was dressed casually and seated behind a basic military issue desk. He looked better behind the great H.M. Resolute that was part of the oval office.

The American flag stood at attention behind his right shoulder. "My fellow Americans, first I want to thank you for the steadfastness you have shown under these most unbearable circumstances. Let me reassure you that the federal government is doing everything it can to help you hold your life together, while fighting the greatest battle in this nation's history. We ask that you stay calm and stay inside as much as possible, as you know the flow of gasoline has been cut back because of production decline. We are doing what we can to increase the supply, but as you can imagine, the gasoline industry received a numbing blow with the cowardly acts of July 3rd. We are asking the American people to impose a self-rationing program, not only with energy resources but with food and water as well. We are a strong and courageous people and we will bounce back from this fiendish attack on our liberties, and be stronger for it.

"At this time, I have asked FEMA to establish twenty-two temporary camps to accommodate two hundred thousand people each for no more than a week. Let me emphasize these are only temporary stations. Please, if you have relatives or friends in less vulnerable places, I am asking them to help out in the spirit of cooperation this great country was founded upon. We are doing everything possible to locate and disarm the remaining bombs, the alleged remaining bombs I should say, and bring the perpetrators to justice. My fellow Americans, please, I can't emphasize this enough, please do not overreact. We can ill-afford a nation run amuck with fear and panic.

"The United States of America is poised to strike the enemy where he lives; delivering a blow he can never recover from. We, of course, want to pursue every opportunity to bring this crisis to a peaceful conclusion. That is why I have asked the United Nations to intervene on our behalf. We have requested the UN send a delegation to meet with the Qaidat al-Jihad representatives in an effort to work out a mutual settlement that would eliminate the deadly impasse that lies just ahead. It is my prayerful hope that a commission of world leaders will be able to meet with and convince the leaders of Qaidat alJihad to rethink their demands, sit down with us and work out our differences. My beloved friends, I am calling on you to stand tall together. This great nation of ours has been struck hard, but it is far from a knockout blow. We were shaken but not staggered. We will recover and be greater for it. Thank you and may God bless America."

The picture was back to a stunned reporter with a dismayed look distorting her appealing face. "Well...it appears there are no easy answers to this most troubling dilemma. The President did ask the nation not to panic and hinted that we will retaliate in force if a peaceful settlement cannot be arranged. He has asked the United Nations to broker the terms." The disgusted anchor gave way to more redundant disaster video.

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### **Clark's Office, Washington**

Ted Clark's office was still abuzz with activity, but today a slightly different assembly was participating. A small group of loyal confidants has gathered to discuss how this crisis would eventually affect the President and his administration. Washington D.C. had been given a reprieve by the NCC based on the information collected from the FBI investigation, therefore relaxing the evacuation policy. This calm-down had allowed a large contingent of government officials, as well as some administration elites, back into the city.

Joining Clark was the Vice President, along with the head of their respective political party, Howard Thurman, Rupert Langford, and Elizabeth Willshiar, the president's campaign manager and trusted advisor. The purpose of the meeting was to explore ways the administration could be made to look good in light of this explosive political condition and how the incident could be used to catapult the President into a second term.

Before they began to weigh their future political stratagem, it was determined that the public must be notified that only two cities remained on the hit list according to the latest intelligence obtained by the Bureau. Hopefully, easing the exodus from the nation's less vulnerable cities and allowing the infrastructure to cool off, and as a result reduce the panic that plagued the country. Two options were available; one, a leak could be made to the media relieving the government of any responsibility in case they were wrong, or two, make a brief statement taking full responsibility and looking very good in the process if they were right. After a short but compelling discussion, it was decided that a message from the White House by press secretary Jerry Burkett would be the best political move.

Burkett would make a short statement exonerating all U.S. cities with the exceptions of Chicago and Los Angeles. The President was informed and agreed with the plan from his provisional office in Colorado. A press conference was hastily arranged with Burkett as the mouthpiece representing the administration.

Clark and his guests got back to the original purpose of their meeting, how to best use the brutal attack on America to re-elect the President. Willshiar pointed out that all the displaced Houston residents would need new digs as soon as the dust cleared and the country was secure. This could generate a building boom in the southwest unparalleled in modern history, stimulating a prosperous national economy.

"That's true," said the Vice President. "War has sometimes historically proven to be a prodigious economic tonic. Let us be clear about one thing, this country cannot afford to have another bomb explode if we expect to recover at all."

The room was silent for a moment as the small interim government pondered the Vice President's words. It was the first time anyone had openly stated what they all privately thought; an acceptance of the Qaidat al-Jihad demands.

"Well, we had better make some decisions soon," said Cark. "Most of Congress is back in town by now and they are going to want to stick their nose in the middle as soon as they organize."

"I'm curious, Mr. Vice President, are you advocating that we negotiate with the terrorists, or even worse, meet their impossible demands? Wouldn't that go against every honorable idea this Republic stands for?" asked Thurman.

"I think it would be most astute to acknowledge their provocation, for the purpose of buying some much needed time and allowing some breathing room for the FBI to track down the killers."

"With all due respect Mr. Vice President, this incident has gone far beyond provocation, over a million citizens lost. It demands reprisal," said Langford.

"I don't disagree, Rupert, but we must proceed with maximum caution. To incite another continental detonation would be lunacy. We may have to give them what they want until we have the remaining bombs in our possession. Then we can send them straight to hell."

"Well, this is going to be the president's call," said Clark. "I wouldn't want to be in his shoes right now, but I'm sure he will make the right decision." Momentary silence again.

"We are here to formulate a strategy and get him re-elected for a second term. Not to make policy," reminded Willshiar.

"You're right of course, Elizabeth," said an embarrassed Langford.

"Agreed," said the Vice President. The rest of the meeting was spent formulating a re-election campaign.

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## **Phoenix Bound**

By the time Guerra swung the white cruiser toward Phoenix, it was late in the evening. The hunt for Elena and her companion, thought to be Hasan Al-Ahad, was just beginning to heat up. All airports, hotels, restaurants, and gas stations had been alerted. Pictures were circulated of the three fugitives and plastered across the local television screens. If they showed up anywhere in the greater Phoenix vicinity, they should be easily identified. The entire Arizona law enforcement community had been pressed into action.

Guerra was convinced that the Qaidat al-Jihad radicals had backed themselves into a corner with no hope for escape. He believed it was just a matter of time, albeit precious time, before their apprehension. One thing was certain - the whole world was running out of time. Guerra was tired; his head began to bob up and down as he drove. In an attempt to stay awake, he rolled the window down and turned the radio volume up. Army, who was half asleep and losing the wrestling match with the hump in the middle of the back seat, was startled wide awake when the blast of hot air smacked her in the face. The sudden blaring of the radio jarred her already frayed nerves. She was really hacked now. Guerra could be so inconsiderate at times. She was about ready to sit up and cuss him out when "By the Time I Get to Phoenix" exploded from the car radio speakers and Guerra struggled with a bad impression of Glenn Campbell at the top of his lungs. Pathetic, she thought, but ya gotta love him. She switched sides without saying a word, trying to get comfortable again.

Guerra made Glendale an hour later and pulled into the hotel at about 9:45 PM. They were both beat and looking forward to a bite and then bed. The two checked in and went to their separate rooms. Guerra made some phone calls, then met Army in the hotel coffee shop. The menu was limited. Army ordered tuna salad

and a Coke, Guerra a cheeseburger with onion rings and a milk. The two said little at first. Between the hunger and fatigue, they would rather eat and not think. Finally Army broke the silence.

"What time are Norman and Bud due to arrive?" she asked, tilting her Coke up to take a drink.

"Tomorrow morning sometime," Guerra said, doing the same with his milk.

"Do we have to meet them or anything?" Army asked.

"No, they'll call us when they get in," Guerra said without looking up from his cheeseburger.

Army finished most of her salad and found herself watching Guerra eat - thinking what a wonderful guy he really was. She'd never looked at him in this light before, so reflectively. She didn't like the feeling. It wasn't professional. She promised herself she would never become attached to a partner. It was too dangerous, too confusing, and too personal. "Thanks," she said, not being able to help herself.

"For what?" Guerra asked, stuffing another onion ring into his mouth.

"You know...back at the warehouse. Thanks for the kind words. Thanks for understanding." Army could feel herself getting in too far. She was allowing her feelings to take control of her better judgment. She was acting like a schoolgirl. She was tired.

"Forget it," Guerra said, looking up after swallowing the last bite of his cheeseburger. "It's all part of the job."

He might as well just pat me on top of the head, she thought.

"I've got to go call my wife," he said, leaving the table. "I'll see you down here at six sharp tomorrow morning."

"Yeah, right," she said under her breath. "It's all part of the job." She sat by herself for a moment, wondering, and then retired to her own room.

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## **Apache Junction, Day Six**

Army was shaken from a deep sleep by the bedside telephone. For a moment she was not sure where she was. "Hello?"

"Get up. They think they have Ahad cornered over at Apache Junction."

"Who?"

"Ahad, the bad guy. I'll see you in the lobby in ten minutes." The red eyes of the digital clock on the bed stand read 2:17 AM. Army rolled over and sat on the side of the bed, rubbing her face in the palms of her hands, trying to shake off the cobwebs and regain her bearings. She stumbled into the bathroom, cleansed her face with a cool washrag and ran a comb through her hair. She made her way back to the dresser beside the bed where her travel case was located and took off the Miami Dolphins t-shirt she slept in and threw on a pair of snug ankle-length black slacks and a white pirate blouse. She put the inch-high pumps on her tanned feet, checked the Beretta in her purse, and headed for the lobby. Halfway down the elevator, she got the feeling she'd forgotten something, but it passed. She pulled out a tube of Bobby Brown from her purse and applied the blackberry without a mirror.

By the time she arrived at the lobby, she looked like a million dollars. It's like Guerra tells her, "Army, you just don't need much help." She spotted Ralph in the lobby surrounded by a handful of uniformed police officers. She made her way toward the huddle. As she approached, all eyes focused on her. She felt better. Introductions were made as the company set out for the hotel garage.

"What's going on?" asked Army as they pulled out of the garage.

"They think they have Hasan Al-Ahad cornered in a used car lot over in Apache Junction, about twenty-five minutes from here. The police asked that we be there to help communicate with the bastard. I've made it clear to them that AlAhad must be taken alive. It is the only hope we have in locating the van."

The next twenty-five minutes was spent in silence, contemplating the operations outcome while following the police escort to Apache Junction. Upon arriving at the car lot, the two agents were introduced to the officer in charge who was at the entrance of the lot. Standing with the police Captain was the local FBI representative, a couple of city officials, the lot manager, and a handful of ranking police officers. The lot covered two acres and was full of late-model previously-owned automobiles. Sitting directly in the middle of the vast car lot, was a small four-room office building. The first thing that gained the attention of the agents was that all the lights adjacent to the lot had been shut off, including those of the office buildings. It was a clear moonlit night, so visibility was relegated to shadowy images. You could see the

entire complex from one end to the other but you couldn't make out the details. Army began to survey the scene while the other discussed their options. The police had the lot surrounded with two canine units at the ready if needed.

"Who turned the lights off?" she asked, giving no attention to the ongoing discussion between the men. There was no response.

"Who turned the lights out?" she tried again, this time louder.

"He did," the captain said, looking up at Army who was still looking over the car lot.

"He broke into the office, accidentally settin' off the alarm, must'a found the power switch and shut things down," offered an unidentified policeman.

"When the first officer responded at the scene, he took automatic fire and that's why we're all here. I reckon the guy was looking for the key box to steal the keys, to steal a car...ya know."

"Then you're not even sure this is Al-Ahad. For that matter, you're not even sure there is anyone in there right now?"

"That's right Miss," the captain said, trying to contain his irritation with the five-foot-two upstart.

"Armendorfer," Army said without looking at the Captain. "Miss Armendorfer."

"You want to come on over here and give us a hand, Army?" Guerra, hoped to soften his partner's touchy temperament, at least for the moment.

Army moved only a step closer as the Captain continued. "We have the perimeter of the car lot closed down with well armed police officers and we have a tactical unit with an armored vehicle standing by. Of course, we have the canine units, but we're reluctant to use the dogs because of his weapon. Anyways, he's not going nowhere. When he leaves this lot, it will either be feet first or cuffed."

"Ok Captain, let's don't get too rambunctious here. We need this man alive. If this is Ahad, all measures must be made to take him alive."

"That's why you're here, Mr. Guerra," The Captain said, pushing his hat to the back of his head. "You take him alive. If he gets past you, we'll take him any way we can get him."

Guerra frowned, took Army by the arm, and led her away from the group. "This guy is an idiot," he said, referring to the Captain. "What we are going to have to do is talk Al-Ahad out. This is your party now. Promise him anything, but get him to come out."

"If he's even in there," Army said skeptically. The two moved back to the waiting troop.

"What's it going to be?" the Captain asked.

"Do you have a bullhorn, Captain?"

"Shor do."

"Well, could you get it for us please?" Guerra asked, adding in his mind, You imbecile.

"Shor could."

The speaker was brought to the road entrance leading to the used car lot and the small group of law officers. Army gathered together her most comforting character and then addressed Al-Ahad over the bullhorn in Arabic. "Mr. Hasan Al-Ahad, my name is Cassandra Armendorfer. I am an attorney retained by the league of Islamic studies at Arizona State University, Tempe. I am a devout Muslim and I understand the fear and anxiety you must be feeling right now. Please listen very closely to me. I am here to help you. Please step out, lay your weapon on the ground, and you won't be harmed. The police simply want to ask you a few questions with regards to the whereabouts of Elena Radayeva."

No response. Army was standing in the middle of the access road that led to the car lot from the outer road. She continued to coax Ahad out with sweet talk and false promises, while Guerra flanked her on one side and the Captain on the other. Standing a few feet behind them were the rest of the gladiators. Directly in front of Army, and about one hundred feet away, the first row of used cars lay in wait like hunched felines ready to leap.

The lot was about the size of a football field squared and it was full of cars. The only illumination was provided by the streetlights outside the lot. The streetlights produced an eerie twilight effect. There had been no movement detected within the mass of metal chariots since the agents arrived thirty minutes ago. Occasionally a police car would move on the perimeter, or the outline of an officer could be discerned in the shadows of the lot boundaries, but no fugitive.

After fifteen or twenty minutes of continuous lying, Army was beginning to run out of things to lie about without a twoway conversation. She was beginning to seriously doubt that Al-Ahad, or anyone else, was somewhere in that mass of rejected fiberglass and sheet metal. Army turned to the Captain and was about to suggest he pick a couple of brave foot soldiers to run into the office and turn on the lights, but before she



could say anything, an engine ignited immediately in front of her and roared with the ferocity of an angry lion. At the same time, two headlight beams flashed on as the big cat leapt forward with the blood-curdling screech of its uniroyal tiger paws.

Army and Ralph were standing directly in the path of the raging beast. They were temporarily blinded by the glare of high beams. By the time Guerra regained control of his wits, the hurdling car was on top of them. He instinctively grabbed Army by the waist and threw her out of the path of the speeding automobile. The momentum carried him in the same direction, both landing hard on the street. Army hit on her knees first then her hands and finally skidded across the pavement, scraping a large chunk of skin from her forehead.

The fleeing car headed toward the entryway at high speed, but was intercepted and rammed by an Apache Junction police cruiser, disabling both cars. Ahad kicked his door open and jumped from the vehicle bringing his Israeli Uzi with him. The brave officer in the wrecked cruiser was instantly gunned down as he tried to free himself from the battered patrol car. Ahad then turned his fury on anything that moved, firing at random while walking in Army's direction. Army was in mortal danger as she lay dazed and helpless on the hard asphalt road. Sensing the impending peril to Army, Guerra managed to roll over and right himself on one knee while bringing his Beretta-45 to eye level. With calculated skill and no evidence of hesitation, he pumped two fatal rounds one inch apart into the face of the crazed Hasan Al-Ahad, lifting him off his feet and onto his back, killing him instantly.

Within minutes, the used car lot lights were switched on exposing the latest theatre of war. The night gave way to a flotilla of police might. At least twenty vehicles of every description could be seen stationed around the perimeters of the property. Numerous police officers began to move about the lot, searching each car and nook or cranny in the likelihood that Radayeva might have accompanied Al-Ahad. A team of crime scene investigators quarantined the location of the shooting to preserve the evidence. Al-Ahad was the second man Ralph had killed in the line of duty. It didn't get any easier, but Guerra was not affected like most men. It was not because he was coldhearted. It was because he was acutely aware of the responsibility of his actions and had cultivated a mental defense-mechanism that allowed his psyche to shed the guilt. He was spending this time after the shooting with the local authorities discussing the take-down of terrorist Hasan Al-Ahad and enduring the indignity of nonstop reminders that Ahad was to be taken alive. Army was spending her time in the back of an ambulance having her cuts and bruises looked after and considering the reality that Guerra has just saved her life.

The television media was out in full force, with a handful of trucks, mostly microwave, with halogen lighting systems and a host of TV journalists, photographers, and engineers, all representing the local Phoenix stations. The reporters were unrelenting in their effort to interview Ralph or Army, but to no avail. The agents weren't comfortable or interested in the exposure, and more appropriately, it wasn't bureau protocol. That responsibility was reserved for the media officer or field supervisor. It mattered little to the reporters. They followed the agents around with cameras running. Even in the back of the ambulance, Army found little privacy. Her pretty face battered with bumps and bruises, she and Guerra and their story would headline the news for the next twelve hours, creating unwilling heroes for a frightened community that needed reassurances.

The two rejoined an hour later after filing reports by phone to all relevant parties. They decided to head back to the hotel and try to wash away the late night bedlam in the shower, after which Guerra claimed he wanted breakfast. The sun was starting to climb in the east across the barren southwest desert as they drove back to Glendale and the hotel. The two agents agreed to meet in the restaurant, but first a hot shower and shave for both.

Army examined the scrape on her forehead in the mirror and remembered what she forgot to do before she left for Apache Junction last night - brush her teeth. She was tired, hurt, and now upset because she felt so vain. What she needed was a steady man who didn't care how she looked or smelled all the time. Or maybe she just needed to find a less stressful job. As she gazed at her reflection and brushed her teeth she thought, I'll call daddy as soon as this assignment is over, I'll transfer to the State Department. I'm tired of working twelve hours a day, getting beat up, and tired of woefully looking at Guerra all day. I need a life.

When Army finished primping, she put on the same blouse but changed her slacks, the same style as the black ones, only beige in color, with the knees still intact. She was wondering how Guerra would respond after he'd had a chance to think about what happened to him this morning. She took one more glance in the mirror and at the ugly white gauze bandage over her left eye. She wondered if it would turn black. She headed for the restaurant. Guerra was already half finished with his first cup of coffee when Army arrived.

"Cute as ever," he said, winking at her.

"So much for despair," she said under her breath, smiling back.

"How can you be so unaffected after what just happened?" She asked, sitting down, aggravated by his composure.

"Part of the job, Army, remember, just part of the job. Let's eat," he said, speaking too rapidly and trying to change the subject.

"Where's the waiter?" His voice was louder than it should be.

Army looked deep into his eyes and began to see the crack in the dike. It was all for show. He was hurting and it was obvious. Typical man, she thought. Full of bravado on the outside while crying on the inside. She felt better about herself now. It was somehow comforting to know that Guerra was affected but that didn't ease the pain she was feeling for him right now. He needs me to be strong, she reasoned. It's my turn to comfort him.

"Where is that waiter?" He asked again, louder.

"Right here, sir," replied a young man standing directly behind him. Guerra ordered bacon, eggs over easy, toast, and orange juice, without looking up.

"Sorry sir, no bacon or orange juice."

"Fine, make it ham or sausage, and any kind of juice."

"Sorry sir, no ham or sausage either. I can substitute cheese or tomatoes for breakfast meat if you like."

Guerra was tired, hungry, and now aggravated. "Make it cheese, and more coffee please," he said softly, trying to keep his temper under control.

"Ok, sir, that's cheese, eggs over easy, toast, and prune juice."

Guerra frowned and shook his head, still looking at the menu. "Forget the prune juice, bring the rest."

The waiter moved to Army's side. "You ma'am?"

"I'll take the prune juice and an order of toast," Army said. As the waiter left the table, Guerra lowered the menu and made eye contact with Army. They stared at each other for a moment and then explode into laughter.

They finished their breakfast without saying another word to each other. Guerra ordered a third cup of coffee while Army sipped on a Coke. It was now 8:10 A.M., the morning of July 8th. They were no closer to their objective, and the deadline for decision was fast approaching.

"What now?" Army asked, breaking the silence. "What do you mean, what now? We keep looking. Radayeva, and most likely Abdullah, are still somewhere in Phoenix. Ahad is dead and the L.A. wireless cell phone system is jammed. The only way that bomb can be detonated is manually and neither one of these people are going anywhere. Phoenix is sealed. They're not getting out." Guerra was abrasive, but Army understood.

"I hope you're right," she said. "But we don't know for sure whether they're still in Phoenix or not. What about Chicago? What's going on up there, and how long can they keep those towers jammed?"

"Damn it Army, quit being so pessimistic! We are doing the best we can. We keep looking. That's all we can do, just keep looking. Norman will be in Phoenix later this morning and he should be able to bring us up to date on what's happening in Chicago."

Army didn't want the conversation to go sour. She was feeling discombobulated. She had to fight the urge to go to Guerra, put her arms around him and hold him. It was her maternal instincts kicking in. At least she would like to think it was her maternal instincts, and not some other out-of-bounds affection like love. "Sorry Ralph, I don't mean to be pessimistic. I'm just putting all my cards on the table. That's all I know how to do."

Guerra's expression softened. He impulsively reached across the table with an open hand. "I'm sorry too, I didn't mean to raise my voice." He said sensitively, "We're both tired."

Army unwittingly placed her hand into Guerra's palm. Her heart raced for an instant.

"We have a meeting at the police station in twenty minutes," Guerra said, pulling his hand slowly away. "I need to go call my wife now." Army reluctantly let go and watched him leave.

The meeting at the Phoenix police HQ was represented by federal, state, and local authorities, and lasted only a few minutes, just long enough to reestablish objectives and prioritize their immediate response. It was decided that Elena Radayeva was still somewhere in the city. The whereabouts of Abdul Fayez Abdullah was another question. No one could put him in the city at this time. An educated guess made Phoenix the logical place to ring the van and Abdullah would probably be the dial up guy.

They would concentrate on Elena and hope she could lead them to Abdullah. Army and Ralph left the meeting and headed back to the hotel for a well-needed nap to wait on Yarbrough. Yarbrough's plane was on the ground at 9:30 AM. By 10:30 AM, he arrived at the Marriott hotel in Glendale by cab, eager to

discuss the early morning shootout with the Miami agents, and of course, pass along what he had learned while back in Washington. Norman Yarbrough was a high profile attorney in Washington's hob-knob crowd, but nevertheless, was just a boring lawyer, or as he would like to think, an exciting lawyer doing boring work. Whatever the case, he was a nice enough guy, likeable, and very proficient at what he normally did: push papers. This assignment was different in that he had never been associated with fieldwork or anything like this. He was embarrassed because he loved it so much. Of course, that was his own little secret. He would never disclose his true feelings to anyone. He was ashamed that it took an act of gruesome death to make him feel alive. He couldn't wait to get back into the fray. He would never allow Army or Ralph inside his head, but in a roundabout way he credited them for the opportunity to play policeman.

Yarbrough had much to tell his two new friends about the state of affairs the rest of the country was in and catch up on their adventure. He spent the last twenty-four hours in highlevel meetings at the Justice Department, briefing Dale Barker, Adam Mendez and Ted Clark on the Fuentes investigation catching steam in the southwest. Although Washington was now thought to be relatively safe because of the information recovered in Baton Rouge, Yarbrough still felt compelled to leave his wife and children in Virginia Beach where he was able to have a short visit.

Upon arriving at the hotel, Yarbrough checked into his room, unpacked, and then rang the two agents in their separate rooms, waking them both. A meeting in the dining room at 11:30 AM was arranged. Army felt like she had lived in the same three outfits, well two and a half now, for the last year. She had a notion to take an hour at a local department store to shop for a new outfit. Then Guerra would think her vain, and be one up. That wouldn't work. It would only upset the balance. No way, I'll make do with what I've got, she thought as she meticulously applied her makeup.

By the time Army reached the dining room, both men had already engaged in a conversation and ordered coffee. Yarbrough stood to greet Army as she approached the table. "You look beautiful as usual, Army," he said, pulling out a chair.

"Well thank you, Norman," Army said, looking at Guerra for a reaction. Guerra was looking at his own fingernails.

"Hi, Army," he said without looking up.

"Good to have you back with us, Norman," Army replied, pulling herself up to the table.

They quickly dispensed with the niceties and got down to business. Guerra methodically explained what happened that morning in Apache Junction. There was no embellishment necessary. Yarbrough was perched on the edge of the seat by the time Guerra completed his account. Army was visually shaken recounting the episode, while Guerra managed to walk through it, apparently unscathed for a second time. The agents went on to explain that they believed they had Elena Radayeva trapped somewhere within in the city limits of Phoenix. All evacuation efforts leaving the city had been temporarily halted to keep Radayeva from slipping through the cracks and the police were tightening the noose by the minute.

"Unless she's hiding in a vault somewhere for the rest of her life, we'll get her," Guerra said confidently.

"But will that be soon enough?" asked Yarbrough.

"The whereabouts of Abdullah is still unknown at this time," Guerra said, awkwardly changing the focus. "But we'll get that reject from hell too."

It was Yarbrough's turn at the wheel now. He was blunt and to the point, his face grimaced. Hiding nothing, he laid his feelings on the table. "The President's twenty-two-city evacuation plan is not working worth a nickel. Every major highway in this country is clogged and not moving an inch. People are dying for lack of the bare essentials; water, food, gasoline and medical treatment. If something isn't done in the next few days, the evacuation process will cause a greater loss of life than the bomb over Houston did." Yarbrough finished his thought, looking up over his right shoulder there was a waiter standing by to take his lunch order.

"Oh," he said, feeling rushed. "I haven't seen a menu yet."

"I'm sorry sir, there is no menu today. You have a choice of potato soup or spaghetti with red sauce, we have a good supply of crackers."

"Woo," Yarbrough said quietly to himself.

"I'll take the spaghetti," Guerra said, not surprised after having had breakfast in the same restaurant.

"What kind of beer do you have?"

"There is beer at the bar just next door, sir," the young waiter said, his voice cracking slightly.

"Well, can you bring me one please?"

"No sir. We have no beer in the dining room sir."

"You mean you can't bring me a glass of beer from the bar in the same hotel I'm eating lunch in?" Guerra asked, his voice an octave higher than usual.

"No sir."

"For crying out loud!" Guerra bellowed, looking up at the ceiling in frustration. "What in the...?"

"Try nationwide gridlock, Ralph," Army interrupted, disgusted with his antics and treatment of the young waiter. "Calm down. I'll get you a bottle of beer myself. What kind do you want?" she asked leaving the table.

"No, Army, you don't need to do that." Guerra was a little embarrassed by his own behavior.

"I'll have the soup and a Coke," Army said to the waiter as she left table for the bar just across the hall.

"Budweiser," Guerra's voice was barely audible.

"I'll be... You two act more like husband and wife than international terrorist busters," Yarbrough said, smiling, proud of his contemporary phrase.

The three crime fighters finished their lunch and then drove to the FBI's field office in Phoenix. On the way, Yarbrough explained that Chicago was a lawless ghost town governed by street gangs. He went on to tell the duo that the Department of Energy had dispatched two Nuclear Emergency Support Teams to Chicago and Los Angeles to search for the two remaining vans.

"The NEST people are much better prepared than law enforcement for this kind of investigation. Teams are made up of scientists trained to deal with the technical aspects of nuclear and radiological terrorism. They are armed with sophisticated gamma and neutron detectors that sniff out radiation emissions."

Guerra reminded Yarbrough that the bombs are most likely housed in lead-lined containers that are detection free, masking the radiation emission. That is according to Singh, anyway. Yarbrough moved ahead, unwavering by Guerra's negativism. He explained that a leak to the Chicago city government that their metro was targeted compelled the city fathers to vacate in no uncertain terms. Along with city hall, the police department was reduced to a skeleton crew, leaving the People's Nation street gang in charge. Prior to the city exodus, a net was established on all roads leading into the heart of Chicago. A search of every vehicle entering within eight miles of the center of the metro area was attempted. That had since fallen apart but the authority's suspicion was that the bomb-laden Satin Clean van was already parked in some unobtrusive garage or parking lot in downtown Chicago anyway. It was believed that at least one third of Chicago's impoverished residents were still trapped in the city either because they lacked the means to vacate, were invalid and unable, or just didn't want to leave. Conservative estimates would still place the death toll in a ten-kiloton nuclear detonation at two million helpless souls.

In both Chicago and Los Angeles, all cell phone towers within eight miles of their respective downtowns had been jammed indefinitely. The status of the three Chicago cell members was still unknown but they were believed to be in or around the Chicago area waiting for Bin Laden's signal. The absence of city government and relative lack of law enforcement reduced Chicago to a city ruled by anarchy. The three extremists could easily lose themselves in the streets of urban Chicago, being careful to steer clear of the People's Nation.

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### **FBI Field Office, Phoenix**

The Bureau's office was quiet that afternoon. There was not much to be encouraged about. Ahad was taken down this morning, but the shooting was over and the two most dangerous fugitives were still at large. Combined with the Chicago three, and who knows how many more could be involved, the prospect looked pretty bleak. In Washington, the NCC had concluded that a predetermined sign of some kind from Bin Laden will initiate the detonation of the remaining bombs. It could be something as mundane as the date, or a news event. It could be anything that would alert the rebels to execute the plan using their own discretion inside an allotted time period. They would not risk using direct communication, although to rule out satellite phones or computers would be careless. It had generally been believed within the ranks of the NCC that the Qaidat al-Jihad terrorist organizations communication network had been reduced to couriers. If that was true, then it was all the more important to nab Abdullah or Radayeva alive while they were still in Phoenix. The NCC believed that Abdullah was a bit of a loner and fancied himself heir apparent to Bin Laden's throne. He could try to pull something off without the grace of Bin Laden or Qaidat al-Jihad, if he thought it would enhance his name in the eyes of Islam.

Guerra had become obsessed with the idea of catching the two renegades, especially Radayeva. He was so possessed with the idea that he could no longer think rationally. His mind had been diminished to one constant thought, "catch'em, tie their genitals to a twelve-volt battery, and let it rip." He was pacing the floor now like a demented polar bear trapped in a two-bit zoo, looking up only to acknowledge a new face, politely smiling, and then back to the marching. He was driving Army nuts with his incessant marching.

"Stop it with the pacing...please!" She yelled, leaving what she was doing. They scowled at each other for a moment, then headed in separate directions. Yarbrough remained on the phone with Buddhavdev Singh, slowly shaking his head at the antics of his two colleagues in the office. Singh was scheduled to arrive in Phoenix late that evening and wanted to meet as early as possible.

He asked Yarbrough if he would arrange some transportation for the evening because he would be arriving at the hotel from the airport by shuttle bus. Yarbrough assured Singh that he would collect the two FBI agents and meet him at 6:00 A.M. in the hotel's only restaurant and that he would have a rental car waiting. Yarbrough warned Singh that if he wanted anything more than a Bloody Mary for breakfast, he had better bring it with him.

\* \* \*

## Settling Scores

The agents tried to avoid each other as much as possible while trapped in the small field office. There was nothing to do but wait for local authorities to run down the fugitives. Guerra questioned whether or not these cowboys were capable of running down anything, with the exception of a getaway tumbleweed...maybe.

Attitudes were gnarly after an hour into the wait. Yarbrough spent most of his time on the phone and engaging in small talk with Army while she finished up the paperwork required. Guerra continued to pace, occasionally smacking a file cabinet with the palm of his hand, making a loud rattling noise and startling everyone. It was right after one of these outbursts, and right before Army picked up a half-inch thick report on local sex offenders and threw it at him, when the phone rang. It was the local police. They had something that could be connected to the investigation.

The threesome arrived at a second-class shopping mall about forty minutes from the field office. The mall was alive with police who had taped off one of the two public restrooms at the center of the plaza. It was a gruesome scene that greeted the agents. A woman in her twenties was seated on a toilet slightly slumped forward with a ghastly expression frozen on her face. Her bra strap was pulled over and hooked onto the flush lever, holding her lifeless body upright. She was wearing only a bra, panties, and high heel shoes. From the lavatory area of the bathroom, all that could be seen with the stall door closed was a pair of attractive ankles housed in a pair of cheap high heels. Around her neck was a two-inch-thick layer of toilet paper drenched in blood. Some of the blood had escaped the primitive dressing and made it to the floor by way of her shoulder, down her limp arm, off the tip of her index finger and onto the dirty tile, giving away her fatal condition. The rest of her life ran down between her breasts, transversed her bellybutton, down between her thighs and into the stool, turning the water bright red. Upon closer inspection, it became evident the cause of death was a six-inch gash separating her trachea and exposing her spine. The small public bathroom smelled of blood and urine. The combination was nauseating. The grotesque scene and the smell of death caused Army to gag and swallow back her own vomit as she darted from the minuscule enclosure gasping for fresh air. Yarbrough was right behind her. The room was crowded with investigators scurrying around looking for evidence but being careful not to contaminate the scene. Observing the disorder from a corner of the bathroom, but oblivious to the swift departure of Army and Norman, was Guerra. He was focused on the flaccid body of the unidentified dead woman still attached to the commode by her own bra strap. There was something ominous here. He felt a personal connection of some kind to this girl but couldn't quite put his finger on it.

The taskforce agents were brought in because a woman fitting the description of Elana Radayeva was seen leaving the bathroom about the same time the yellow "Closed for Cleaning" sign was placed in front of the restroom entryway. The lady who found the body was the same who identified Radayeva from police photographs as the lady she saw leaving the bathroom. She claimed she waited ten minutes for someone to remove the cleaning sign. Finally deciding she couldn't wait any longer, she went in and that's when she found the body. When pressed to identify the person responsible for placing the sign in the doorway, she

was uncertain but thought it was the same lady in the picture. Although she was not absolutely sure because she was so mad and in such a hurry, and because she was about to wee her pants. One thing she was sure of, and will never forget, was the cold and calculated look that occupied the eyes of the tall, black-haired woman who left the restroom just before she found the poor retched dead girl slumped on the toilet seat.

Guerra anxiously shifted his wait back and forth from one foot to the next while he listened to the lady's bloodcurdling story. He asked himself, Why would Elana risk this? Why would she murder an innocent bystander? What could she possibly gain? The questions kept rolling around in his head as he stared at the lump of flesh still resting on the commode. There was no question that Radayeva was a psychopathic killer capable of doing this, but she was not that stupid. This couldn't be random. There's a reason for it, but what? Guerra stood, watching the lady's mouth move but heard only his own thoughts. It was at that moment that he made the vow. Sooner or later I'm going to meet that cold-blooded witch face to face. And, when I do, I think I may kill her. Guerra was stirred from his semi-cataleptic state by a tug on his jacket sleeve. It was Army. Without acknowledging his partner, Guerra walked through the crowd of lab techs indiscriminately pulling a rubber glove from the breast pocket of one of the female technicians. Pulling the small glove onto his big hand, he split out the index finger as he hiked over to the toilet cubicle. Reaching down, he took a handful of sandy blond hair and drew back the dead woman's head, exposing her face, taking a good look. He then dropped her head back, took off the glove, threw it on the floor and left.

Somebody yelled, "Hey, what's wrong with you? Are you trying to taint this whole investigation?"

"Kiss it," he said without turning around. A red-faced Army was right behind him as they exited the bathroom.

"What's that all about?" She asked, trying to keep up.

"Her face?" he said. His gate was twice that of Army's.

"What about it?" She asked, now running. Guerra stopped abruptly and turned to face Army. She was looking down, trying to keep up, and smashed into him, the top of her head just below his chin. "Oh... gezzz," she yelled. Her nose caught a button, causing a stinging bite. She looked up, rubbing her nose. Guerra tried to smile. He seemed vulnerable, almost innocent. She had seen this side of him only rarely. For a moment, there was no investigation, just two people connected, extremely fond of each other.

Guerra leaned down and gave her a peck on the nose and then an obvious smile. "Feel better?"

"Yeah, sure," she said, more embarrassed than sore. Their eyes met and for a moment time transcended, then reality returned. They laughed out loud. When they realized where they were, they found themselves as the main attraction in a large open space in the center of the dingy shopping center. There was yellow police tape creating a barrier between the crime scene and a growing crowd of onlookers, all of whom seemed to be gawking at them. Guerra took Army by the hand and led her to a less conspicuous place where they could talk. "The dead woman bears a striking resemblance to Elana," he said, regaining the obsessive intensity that Army had come to know.

"You mean, you think."

"No," Guerra interrupted. "It's not Elana...She just looks like Elana. This poor girl's only crime is that she looks like that two-bit whore, Radayeva." The fire was back in his eyes and Army didn't like the look.

"What are you thinking?" she asked. Just before a sudden uneasy feeling crept within her like someone was watching them.

"I think Radayeva stalked her then killed her to steal her identity. I think we will be looking for a blond again. I think we need to identify this dead lady as soon as possible, get her identity out to all the checkpoints leaving the city and onto the airways as soon as possible."

"But why would she kill her if all she wanted was her identity? Why not just steal it? I mean, this is pretty stupid drawing all this attention, isn't it? I mean how friggin stupid is she?"

"She's not stupid," Guerra said condescendingly while looking over Army's head, studying the area.

"She's a cunning devil with no regard for the sanctity of life. It's kill or be killed in her world. That's all this witch knows and she's good at it."

"So who made you the resident profiler?" Army asked cynically, feeling the sting of Guerra's aloofness.

"What makes you think you know so much about her? Who do you think you are, Doctor..." She drew a blank. Frankly she was a little disgusted with this obsession he had for Elana.

Guerra, sensing her frustration, looked down at her. Their eyes fixed again. Army didn't like what she saw - Guerra's were filled with a threatening vindictiveness. She thought of Lindsey Guerra and felt a kindred spirit toward her. It happened that way sometimes between partner and wife, a woman's intuition maybe. One thing was for sure; it was not Latin tendencies she was seeing in Guerra's eyes, it was something darker, more menacing.

"I know her," he said coldly.

A chill navigated its way across Army's shoulders up into her neck. She shrugged, hoping for relief. At the same time, something drew her attention to the large crowd of spectators assembled on the other side of the yellow tape.

"She's here. She's in the crowd," Army said, sensing Elana's presence, surprising herself and puzzled by her own clairvoyance. They both instinctively began to slowly scan the crowd. "There!" Army yelled, pointing to the back of the throng. "Over there," she said again, jumping and pointing. Guerra picked up the figure in the background moving away from them. He could only see her back but knew in an instant that he was looking at the back of Elana Radayeva.

"Stop that woman!" He yelled, pointing and running in the direction the woman was leaving. Army was one step behind. The fleeing figure began to walk faster and then sprang into a dead run. By the time the two agents worked their way through the crowd of onlookers, the denim-clad woman had disappeared.

"That was her, Ralph. That was Elana." The two slowed down to a walk and then stopped. "She's been watching us. I can't believe she's been watching us." Army got the creepy feeling again.

"We don't know that for sure." Guerra was not very convincing.

"Oh, that was her alright. I can feel it all over me," Army said, exaggerating a shiver. The two lingered for a minute, staring in the direction of the runaway killer.

"Good...she's still in Phoenix," Guerra said under his breath. He knew this new fixation he had with Radayeva was way over the line but he just didn't care. A sneer snuck across his face. It had become personal and that was all right with him. One of the first rules of law enforcement: don't take it personal, it clouds the thinking process. It was too late. Screw the rules. He was going to do this world a favor. He was going to take her out and the sooner the better.

"What did you say?" asked Army.

"Nothing, nothing important." They turned back toward the police line, making their way through the insensitive crowd of gawking thrill seekers.

Ebba Arndt was a twenty-four-year-old beauty from Heidelberg Germany and a recent graduate of the University of Mannheim. She lived at home while commuting the sixty miles from Heidelberg to Mannheim each day to attend classes. Ebba was her father's daughter and the youngest of three siblings. She was the family treasure, not only because she was the youngest, but also because she was the only one in the family to graduate from college. It was a family effort; mom, dad, and her two brothers supported her with love as well as the necessary finances. It took a great deal of endurance, and affable persuasion, to convince her parents to allow her to travel to the United States with friends to celebrate her graduation. Germans love to come to the US to vacation even though their government warns of the street violence associated with the metropolitan areas. The Arndts would have preferred the Mediterranean, Greece maybe, they had heard good things about Greece, but she chose America instead and her life was smothered like a cheap generic cigarette butt in the land of plenty. It was a classic example of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The only thing that Ebba and Elana had in common was a profile and that was a stretch. Ebba's features were soft, and innocent. She was young and full of life; like all twenty-somethings ought to be. Ebba was genuinely beautiful, unlike Elana whose natural beauty was left in the streets of Grozny two decades earlier. Stand them side by side and they looked like distant cousins, but in a hazy passport photo they could pass for sisters. Ebba had a slight East European accent. Elana's was thick. Ebba was smart and ambitious, Elana knew how to kill. Something had gone very wrong in the murder of Ebba Arndt. The plot was to steal her identification, clothes, and anything else that would allow Elana to escape Phoenix, but to leave her dead body in a public bathroom where it would be easily discovered before she could make a getaway was either extremely stupid or an inopportune mishap. In either case, the killing of Ebba Arndt seemed to have been in vain. At least that was the conclusion the police would come to. Guerra was not so sure. He told Army that he believed that it had become personal, that maybe Elana was now toying with them. He believed that the discovery of Arndt's body was no accident.

"Why else would Elana be in the crowd?"

"You tell me."

"Because she wanted to make us, to see us in person; because she and Ahad were lovers; because she wants to kill me now to avenge Ahad."

"You're crazy, Ralph! Know that? You're getting too crazy."

The two Feds rounded up Yarbrough and headed back to Glendale where they would meet up with Bud Singh. Yarbrough had made the arrangements while Ralph and Army chased Radayeva down the shopping center parking lot. He was upset he missed the chase. Like Guerra, Yarbrough was beginning to think

irrationally. He wouldn't have been able to keep up had he been there. Army was fed up with Guerra and Yarbrough, and the whole stinking world for that matter. "Leave the police work, the chasing, the killing...the vomiting, to us, Norman. You take care of the legal stuff. You're a lawyer, Norman...A friggin lawyer."

"Test-teeee!" Yarbrough said, turning his attention to the passing landscape. The remainder of the ride passed in silence.

\* \* \*

## **Cardinal Mistake**

It was 8:00 o'clock and the sun was just beginning to set as the white cruiser pulled into the Marriott parking lot. Guerra parked within easy walking distance of the hotel bar entrance. One thing they had agreed on - they were not going to eat another meal in this hotel restaurant, shortage or no shortage. After drinks and updates with Ralph and Army, Yarbrough and Singh would participate in a late night phone conference with Ted Clark, Adam Mendez, and Dale Barker from Washington. The conference was scheduled for ten PM Phoenix time, midnight in the capital. Yarbrough and Singh would use the FBI field office. The President was expected to join them from Colorado, along with Justice Department officials embedded with the NEST teams in Chicago and Los Angeles. Yarbrough would attempt to bring the President and his men up to date on what has happened today in the Arizona investigation.

The Cardinal bar was more than half full when the three amigos found Singh working on his second Manhattan. He had secured a corner booth for the team's meeting. They noted the number of patrons in the bar as they were seated. "What's wrong with these people? Don't they know what's going on? Does tragedy equal celebration?" Army asked with some guiltridden disdain. Nobody answered.

Yarbrough ordered a vodka gimlet, easy on the roses. Guerra got a Corona with a slice of lime. Army settled for a Cherry Coke. Singh was greeted like a long lost friend; hugs, back slapping, kisses. That was the way it was now. They were locked together by an indefinable force; connected at the hip, one for all and all for one. Their association seemed in a perverted way to be more important than the investigation, even family, maybe even life itself. They were worn-out, disheartened, but not defeated. There was a bond, a mutual respect, that couldn't be shaken. They were one mind one spirit.

They discussed the day's events in detail, careful not to leave anything out. Their report was crucial to the President's decision. There was one day left on the Qaidat al-Jihad demands. The President would either sell out the Jews or obliterate Islam.

"Well, one thing is pretty clear. We are one step closer to that sadistic witch than we were yesterday," Guerra said, taking another slug of beer. His Radayeva obsession was becoming obnoxious to the others.

"Can we look at the bigger picture here, Ralph?" Army said, looking at Yarbrough for support.

"Army's right, we need to focus on what we've learned today that could benefit us tomorrow. The President is depending on the intelligence we supply, in part to help determine the critical judgments that must be made in the next twenty-four hours." The four combatants suddenly turned sober at the earnest effort of Yarbrough's declaration. The effects of the weighty statement lasted only for a moment. Guerra took the last swig of his Corona and waved at the waiter to bring him a second.

"Let's get that twisted she-devil." Time conflicted with reality, their rock-stern expressions frozen for an instant. And then, as if cued by an orchestra conductor, they broke into laughter simultaneously. Another round was ordered by all, with the exception of Army. She continued to nurse her Cherry Coke.

Elana Radayeva was still in Phoenix. Abdul Fayez Abdullah was thought to be in the area, but the two rebels seemed to be working independent of each other. Speculation was that they could be divided. It was not a promising development. The hunt must now go in two different directions. The third member of the cell had been killed in a dramatic early morning shootout at an Apache Junction used car lot. At least one of the killers was brazen, murdering an innocent schoolgirl in a botched attempt to escape the Phoenix police net. There was no progress in finding the location of the vans or the nuclear bombs they allegedly carried.

"In short it's a bit of a dead end," Yarbrough said, dejected after reviewing the day's events.

"How about another round?" Guerra offered.

"Two gimlets are about my limit." Yarbrough was feeling a little tipsy already.

"How about you, Bud?"

"No thanks."



"What about you Army, another Cherry Coke?"

"A gimlet, easy on the roses."

"Ok then, Army," There was a hint of sarcasm.

"We had better think about leaving for the office," said Yarbrough looking in Singh's direction.

"I think you're right, Norm, it's getting late." It was the first time in their group that anyone had referred to Yarbrough as Norm. It had been a title reserved for family. The luxury of a close friend had eluded him most of his life. He was moved by the gesture, however mundane. Maybe it was the situation, the sense of helplessness, or maybe the gimlets. Norman Yarbrough never felt so close to anyone as he did these three people right now.

"Thanks, Bud," he said, a little embarrassed.

"For what? Thank Ralph. He got the last round." Singh didn't get it. It was just as well.

Army got it. She smiled and placed her hand on the jacketed forearm Yarbrough had resting on the tabletop. "That's a beautiful ring, Norm," she said, observing the ruby ring on his finger. Norm winked at her in gratitude.

"A gift from my wife," he said proudly. The two men left the booth as Guerra's third Corona and Army's first gimlet showed up. They walked halfway across the room before they realized they had no transportation.

Yarbrough returned to the table. "I forgot. We're on foot."

Guerra dug for the keys and tossed them to Yarbrough. "Take the cruiser."

"Are you sure you won't need it?" Norm asked. "What about dinner?"

"We may drink dinner," Guerra said.

"There's a Denny's across the street. When we finish these drinks, we'll walk over and get a sandwich," Army said, emphasizing these drinks.

The agents watched with cogitation as Yarbrough and Singh left the lounge on their way to a phone conference that could change the course of history.

"Good luck," Guerra whispered, reaching for the pretzel bowl.

"What?" Army heard him but wasn't sure what he meant.

"They have about as much chance as a feather does in a whirlwind to stop the escalation of this insanity." Guerra tossed a pretzel into his mouth.

"That's what I thought you meant." Army took a sip of her gimlet, puckered, then shivered. "Ick."

Suddenly there was a flash that filled the lounge with a white orange hue followed by a violent explosion demolishing the window plates at the entrance of the bar. The normally sedate room was showered with flying glass and debris. Lights flickered. People were knocked to the floor by the force of the blast. Tiny glass slivers penetrated their skin. Some were killed instantly by airborne wreckage propelled at deadly velocities. Army and Ralph were knocked to the floor by the concussion but protected by the location of their booth. They found themselves under the bolted down table in each other's arms, both suffering from minor glass cuts. Wailing could be heard in every direction. Cries for help pierced the smokeladen atmosphere. The agents instinctively jumped to their feet, shaking the cobwebs on the way up. They surveyed the room in an instant. The blank look on the faces of those still standing was gut wrenching, but they'd seen it before. It was becoming commonplace. Guerra knew what happened. He headed for the Cardinal parking lot, pushing people aside as he went.

Army hesitated to go outside. She needed to prolong the inevitable. She needed to muster the strength. Her eyes teared as she slowly made her way through the disoriented crowd of helpless bystanders, aiding who she could. She tried to think rationally but her brain was in overdrive; thoughts were scrambled, they didn't fit with each other, they were out of sequence. By the time she reached the blown-out entryway, the parking lot was full of people milling around senselessly. There was the faint sound of sirens in the background. She searched the debris-strewn parking lot for her partner. Guerra was standing next to what was left of the white Chevrolet he borrowed three days ago from the FBI field office. It no longer resembled a car. It was a heap of twisted sheet metal resting on a disfigured frame, still smoldering, flames spiraling out from within the charred skeleton and then disappearing as fast as they appeared.

"Not again," she pleaded softly. "Please, not again."

By the time she arrived at Guerra's side she was quietly sobbing. The distress of the moment had made her oblivious to the grotesque remains of an arm with a ruby ring still attached to the finger of a mangled hand lying at her feet.

"My God! Oh my God," she cried, smothering her face in the palms of her hands.

Guerra, made aware of Army's presence, turned toward her at the same time he caught sight of the macabre vestige that was Norman's left arm. He quickly embraced her, hoping to obstruct her view of the ghastly sight but it was too late. She violently pushed herself away, gagged, and then vomited. The hotel parking lot was full of emergency vehicles by the time Army was able to take a sip of soda and hold it down. Three cars were still burning. Each had its own fire truck. Black and white police cruisers were parked randomly throughout the lot. They sat where they arrived. A yellow Hazmat truck sat in the middle of the wreckage, onlookers questioned its purpose. Someone reasoned, "the city owns it, so let's use it." Red, blue, and white lights flashed with limitless energy. Headlights illuminated the area where the carnage took place just minutes ago. Men in yellow Hazmat suits stumbled around the wreckage. The scene resembled a low budget sci-fi movie. A yellow police line encircled the crime scene. There were smaller areas on the outskirts of the parking lot that had yellow tape barriers as well. Small row trees had been extricated from the grass islands that lined the Cardinal parking lot.

It was a sight Army has seen too many times before. She was standing next to a fire rescue truck, outside the police line, working on a 7-UP somebody gave her. She watched the proceedings in an altered state of mind. It was as though she had left her body. She hovered above the arena like an observer and not a participant. It was a defense mechanism, a mind game. Act like it's not real, and maybe it's not. Act like an observer, and maybe you are. She was quickly brought back to reality when she realized a group of men were standing in front of her. She recognized Guerra. The rest were talking heads.

"How you feeling?" Guerra asked.

"Can we get you anything ma'am?" A meaty hand followed the question and rested on Army's diminutive shoulder. The hand was attached to a head that eerily resembled SpongeBob.

"Yeah, you can get your friggin' hand off my shoulder." Guerra was relieved to see she was back...but he said nothing.

"Sorry Miss, I meant no indiscretion."

Yeah right, Army thought. "It's Armendorfer, Cassandra Armendorfer, just call me Cassandra."

A name reserved for her enemies, Guerra thought to himself and smiled with relief.

"What are you smiling about Guerra? What's so funny?"

"Army, this is detective Larman with the Phoenix PD. He's in charge of this investigation. He believes the bomb was triggered within a hundred yards of the explosion, an electrical device of some sort...like a cell phone." Army's eyes left Guerra and focused on a small isolated site circled in yellow tape beyond the blast zone. In her mind's eye she could see a bright, smiling Buddhadev Singh, physics expert, friend, and confidant. The picture in her head abruptly changed to a darker image. She wondered what part of the collegiate bomb crafting instructor lied in that small yellow marked circle.

"Radayeva," she said instinctively.

"Most likely Fayez Abdullah. He's the bomb maker, but you can bet she's with him," Guerra said.

Larman looked grimly at Guerra. "Most likely planted the explosives under the car when you were in the Cardinal and then waited for someone to get in...then blamo."

Guerra ignored the insensitive comment. He took Army by the arm and lead her to a safe distance away from the local cops. "That bomb was meant for me," he said, holding her in front of him. Army could feel a slight quaver in his hands. It scared her. She had never known Guerra to be afraid of anything.

"Quit it," she said.

"I'm not kidding, Army. I know it and you know it." The two stood motionless, examining each other's expressions for what seemed an eternity. Guerra broke the silence. "She's here, somewhere close. She's watching us right now." His eyes were still fastened on Army. She shuddered, still held at the shoulders by her obsessive partner. She began to look beyond Guerra now, out into the night, past the security of the lighted parking lot, past the small yellow rings. His grip was excessive, but she felt safe - more than that, she felt close to him. "Elana's out there somewhere in the shadows and I'm going to get her this time."

"What about Abdullah?" Army said, trying to slow things down. She saw it in his face. There was no rationale. It was pure vindictiveness. It was not about the war or terror anymore, not about Houston or recovery of the remaining bombs. It was all about Elana Radayeva.

"He's with her," Guerra said, letting go of Army and looking out into the night himself.

"Let's leave it to the police. They'll catch them sooner or later. We've got a bigger job to do," Army pleaded.

"These moles couldn't catch a cold." Guerra turned and started for the hotel.

"Where are you going now?"

"To call my wife, wash my hands, and then I'm going to make sure that slut knows I'm still alive. I'll see you back here in twenty minutes."

"I'll call my daddy," Army said softly as she watched Guerra leave.

Guerra called his wife, told her he loved her, and assured her there was nothing to worry about. They're about to break the case, he told her, and he would see her in a few days. Army decided her father was probably too busy to talk and decided to call him later.

The crime scene was still very active with emergency response units when Army and Ralph returned twenty minutes later as they agreed to. Army has changed her blouse, washed her face, combed the glass and dust out of her hair, and applied a fresh layer of Bobby Brown to her lips.

"What are we doing now besides getting in the way?" she asked when they met at the yellow police line in front of what was left of the Cardinal bar.

"We are going to strut around here for as long as it takes. I want to be sure Elana sees me. I want her to know that she didn't get me; that I'm still alive and I'm waiting."

"You mean you're baiting her, don't you? This is not our job, Ralph. This is not the way the Bureau does business. This is a foolish mistake."

"There's a safe house in Phoenix," Guerra said matter-of-factly, avoiding eye contact. "It's the only explanation that gives those two the mobilization they enjoy. This is my call, Army; catch Elana, find the van, it's that simple. If you don't want to be a part of it, I understand. But I'm not going to let her go underground if I can help it."

For the first time since joining the FBI, Army felt helpless but her sense of duty and loyalty to Guerra clouded her judgment. Although she wasn't sure what he was up to, she was willing to stick with him at any cost. The agents remained in the parking lot late into the night while Phoenix's finest cleaned up what was left of the deadly explosion. Guerra was certain they were being watched. He purposely walked in unobstructed areas, exposing himself to the darkness.

Army checked her watch 2:00 AM. She was exhausted and couldn't do it any longer. She needed a couple of Trazodones and then at least four hours of uninterrupted sack time, so did Guerra. She made him an offer. "I've got to go to bed. I can't think anymore, Ralph. My mind is blank." Guerra's eyebrows raised. She was encouraged. It was the first time he acted normal since the car bombing earlier that night even though she was the brunt of his new lucidity. "Let's go to bed Ralph...please."

"Go ahead. I couldn't sleep if I wanted to. You go on, Army, I'll see you in the morning."

"No way! I'm not leaving you alone down here. How about trying a couple of my nerve pills? They'll take the edge off." She was taking a chance her offer wouldn't insult his masculinity. It did.

"I'm not taking any of your tranquilizers, Army. I'm not going to do that."

"They're not tranquilizers, you simpleton. They help a little with the anxiety, that's all." She left Guerra standing in the shadows of a hook and ladder, contemplating a response.

"Ok, I'll take one," he said as she started to leave.

"Two," she said without stopping or turning around.

It was 2:15 in the morning when Guerra crawled between the sheets. He knew the time because he had developed a tiresome habit of checking his watch every ten minutes since he began the hunt for the bombers back in Miami. The lights outside the Hotel furnished a faint glow to his room. He tried draping a blanket across the window but that didn't work, and now there was an annoying red reflection that circled his ceiling from one of the emergency vehicles still at work in the parking lot. He caught himself counting circles before he gave in and took the two anxiety pills Army gave him. Satisfied they wouldn't work he cupped his eyes with his forearm and thought he would never sleep again. It was the last thing he remembered before the phone woke him thirty minutes later.

"Yeah," he said, expecting a familiar voice to reply. There was no response.

"Army, is that you?" he asked, rubbing his face with his free hand trying to lose the heavy-headed feeling. There was breathing, but no verbal response. "Who is this?" he demanded, sitting up.

"E-lana." The voice was slow, thick, and seductive.

"I talk to you...alone." A chill rocketed through Guerra's body. It felt like his nervous system had gone into fast-forward.

"What do you want?"

"I wait for you...622 Indian School Road...come alone." The phone went dead.

"Hello...wait a minute...hello."

Guerra slowly placed the phone back on the receiver while pulling the covers up over his goose bumped body with the other hand. He tried to put together what had just happened. Before getting out of bed, he had

the presence of mind to jot down the address on the memory pad next to the phone. But there was no pen. "622 Indian Road...622 Indian Road...622 Indian Road." Jumping out of bed he started tossing things around looking for something to write with. "622 Indian Road...622 Indian Road...where's the pen?" He yelled. "Where is the frigging pen?" He yelled again at the top of his lungs, throwing things around. He was furious and insensitive to the time and place. He started with the bed stand drawers, throwing everything out starting with the Gideon Bible. By the time the phone rang again Guerra was beside himself boiling with frustration and rage. He grabbed the phone thinking it was Elana.

"Yeah...Elana."

"Mr. Guerra, this is the desk." There was a pause. "Is everything all right sir?" the clerk asked.

"Everything is just fine," he said belligerently realizing he had been making too much noise. "Yes, of course. I'm sorry if I've alarmed anyone. This has been a difficult night for everybody. Please forgive me...now tell me where the friggin' pen to the memo pad is?"

"Yes sir...thank you sir. The pen is located at the top of the note pad holder." Guerra was looking directly at the memory pad. It was a plastic base that held a deck of loose four-by-six note sheets. At the top of the pad holder was a three-inch plastic cowboy figure standing on one boot waving his Stetson in the air.

"The cowboy?" Guerra said, deflated.

"Yes sir." Guerra hung up and quickly wrote down the address using the cowboy ballpoint...622 Indian Road. By the time he put on his pants, washed his face, and checked his .45 it was 3:15 AM. Guerra was used to wearing light dress jackets in his official capacity as an FBI field agent. It was considered appropriate dress for normal Bureau activity and it covered his shoulder holster. During his leisure time, and those periods when working undercover, he carried a smaller .38 in an ankle holster. He didn't have it with him on this trip but the PX4 Storm fit nicely in the small of his back, hidden by a casual Hawaiian print shirttail. A full clip in the gun and an extra clip in his pocket would give him all the firepower he needed.

Upon reaching the hotel lobby, Guerra went straight for the desk but had to ring the bell to get someone up front. While waiting for the clerk to arrive, he jotted down a note to Army using a note pad and cowboy pen similar to the one in his room: Army, had to leave early. Something came up. Didn't want to wake you. I'll see you later this morning.

-Me

The night clerk arrived just in time to watch Guerra finish the note. "Yes, sir."

"Give this note to Miss Armendorfer as soon as she wakes up. But don't wake her up, understand."

"Yes, sir."

"Room 312," Guerra said while he scribbled something else on a different sheet: 622 Indian Road.

"If I'm not back by noon, see that she gets this one."

"Yes sir...that's Indian School Road."

"What?"

"Indian School."

"Ok, fine, Indian School. See that she gets it please."

"Yes sir...I'll give it to the morning desk with instructions." Guerra marveled at the clerk's stoic efficiency.

"Would you call me a cab please?"

The cab arrived five minutes later. The driver was Mexican.

"622 Indian School Road," Guerra said. "Do you know that area?"

"Yes señor."

"Vamonos," Guerra said, leaning forward from the back seat to better hear the driver.

"I'm with the Federal Bureau of Investigation," he said, revealing his identification card. "I may need your help. Are you all right with that?"

"Yes señor." The driver made uneasy eye contact with Guerra in the rearview mirror.

"Tell me all you can about this address. What is it? What does the surrounding area look like? Are there streetlights? Is it retail, residential or industrial? That sort of thing."

"Momento, señor," the driver interrupted, holding a hand up as though surrendering and then laughing nervously.

"622 is intersection. Not much light, señor...Maybe one street light, maybe two...Some old apartments, small businesses...Not much señor."

"Any alleys, parking lots, open spaces, anything like that?" The cab driver shrugged his shoulders indecisively, once again making eye contact with Guerra in the mirror. Guerra sat back in his seat. He could

feel the cold steel of his Beretta forced against his bare back. A shiver traveled his spine but he was glad it was there. The cab traveled another block in silence before turning on to a four-lane boulevard in an older part of the city.

"I want you to let me out a block away from 622 and wait for me. Can you do that?"

"Si señor."

The neighborhood was divided into blocks with stoplights at every three or four intersections containing major thoroughfares that ran north and south.

The driver had become increasingly edgy, frequently glancing back at Guerra by way of the rearview mirror. It made him wonder if the guy was going to go bonkers on him, maybe drive by the address unconsciously, taking away the element of surprise, or leave when he dropped him off.

"Take it easy," Guerra said in Spanish, hoping to calm him. "I don't want to drive past the address and be seen. Do you understand?"

"No problem señor." The cab began to slow down. Guerra caught a number on one of the building. 924, three blocks from his destination. He was starting to get edgy now himself.

922, 918...

"Pull over right here...right here," he said, pointing to the curb. Guerra needed to survey things, get his bearings, find his backbone. He was not a guy who normally entertained fear but uncertainty could be problematic. The advantage was in what he was after. He intended to gain the advantage. That meant taking his time, creating a backdoor, and being prepared to move from plan A to plan B without thinking about it. What is plan A? He asked himself. The cab had rolled to the curb. The driver's eyes were fixed on Guerra, awaiting further instructions.

"Wait here for a minute but don't turn the lights out," Guerra said, leaving the cab.

Looking up the avenue first, and then down, he tried to get a feel for his surroundings. It was an older part of town. Some of the buildings were in second-generation renovation. The construction was contemporary designed facelifts, new entryways, that sort of thing. He checked the time on his cell phone, 4:10, a little more than an hour before sunrise. The streetlights were some help providing a faint but defective view of the area. The lights were staggered on each side of the street, giving the boulevard ample countenance, while the sidewalks remained shadowy and hidden. The light reflected off the pavement onto the second floor windows of the murky structures, casting a ghostly effect on the street below. The buildings seemed taunting, animate, menacing guardians of the night, watching his every move, protecting their turf, hiding their secrets. Two streetlights, one on the northeast and one on the southwest corners, illuminated each intersection. Each intersection had a battery of stoplights. The yellow light remained constant until daybreak.

Guerra was three blocks east of his appointment with Elana, the most dangerous women in the world. It invigorated him. The adrenaline was surging nonstop now. He had never felt so alive. His mind was racing. Slow it down, Ralph. Slow it down. Think straight. Formulate a strategy...plan A. Trees lined this part of the street. Guerra found one near the cab and waited for a car to slowly cruise by before he relieved himself and considered his assessment. This is where he could use Army. He trusted her judgment. She was probably still in bed...good. He could slip up on the intersection, he reasoned, using the shadows to conceal his movement or he could drive up, get out, and let Elana find him. After all, she might want to give up, tell us where Abdullah is, and take us to the van. Yeah...and I've got a couple million dollars and I don't need this job. He decided he would stay alive longer by finding her first. What about Plan B? Call the police, set up a net and let them handle the dirty work...screw plan B. The cab was underway again, heading west at a leisurely pace. The driver began to glance anxiously in the rearview mirror again, waiting for instructions. It annoyed Guerra.

"Amigo, por favor, por favor."

The cabby picked up a little speed, trying to keep his eyes forward, but involuntarily peeked at Guerra from time to time. They passed through one intersection then slowly approached a second. Guerra was now resting his arms on the front seat. The driver pulled through the second intersection and stopped at the curb on the west side. He pointed a stubby finger at the windshield.

"622," he said. Guerra could see the faint outline of the next intersection a long block away.

They exchanged glances for the last time, then Guerra departed the cab, giving the driver a ten-dollar tip.

"I stay, senior?"

Guerra changed his mind. There was no reason for the taxi to wait. "No, amigo...gracias."

The cabby yelled "good luck" in Spanish as he made a Uturn and headed back the way he came. Guerra watched the cab leave until the taillights disappeared into the darkness. On his own now, he pulled the

equalizer from his waistband and checked the clip. It was full. He then flipped the safety off with his thumb, turning his wrist from side to side, experiencing the weight of the gun. In his left hand he held the cellular phone.

The distance between Guerra and the intersection was about three hundred yards. Most of the properties in this grid were landscaped. He would work his way up the sidewalk using the shrubs and doorways as much as possible to cover his advance.

Although Guerra had never been a member of the armed forces, he participated in an Army Ranger training program designed for counterterrorism agents to be used in circumstance like the one he found himself in now. One of the deceptions he learned from the Rangers was to make himself invisible by transforming his body into an inanimate object using the shadows to silhouette familiar forms like trees and bushes. He put the instruction to good practice now, pausing frequently to study the area. He was now three buildings from 622. The cabby was right. The address was located on the northeast corner of the intersection and appeared to be some kind of eating establishment with sidewalk access. There were four or five iron tables located around the entrance bolted to the pavement. The streetlight sat directly in front of the restaurant, casting a glow on the entire corner. A large red canopy protected the door of the eatery. Guerra worked his way past one more building. The window read Spencer & McCally Attorneys at Law. Above the office were low-income apartments. The buildings were all the same, retail or service, at street level with apartments above.

Guerra settled in next to a large Yucca plant contemplating what to do next. It was the same question that plagued him from the start: Do I try to locate her before she finds me or do I just openly walk out into the light and hope she's in a talking mood? Neither option felt right at the moment. Guerra pulled at his Kevlar vest to straighten it, wondering if it would stop whatever firepower Elana had.

Just then a rat scurried across the sidewalk followed closely by a black and white cat that had jumped from the top of a plastic trash container, startling Guerra, recoiling him into a standard firing position. At the same time, a set of headlights approached from the opposite direction. He watched the car pass into nothingness without lowering his firearm, hoping the driver didn't see him and call the police. After getting his breath back, he straightened and began to move toward the corner one bush at a time, finally reaching the outer edge of the streetlight reflection. He glued himself to the side of the building which still provided some shadow. He inched his way past the first plate window being careful to stay below the painted curtain. The brick foundation raised about three feet from the sidewalk to the window. The whitish blue curtain was painted two feet above the foundation. Guerra fought the urge to peek over the top of the curtain. The Kevlar vest didn't protect his head. He stayed as close as possible to the brick foundation until he reached the front of the café. Guerra was hoping there would be no traffic now until he could secure the intersection. He was completely exposed from the street side. It would be difficult to explain to a cruising cop, or anyone else, what he was up to.

There was a light on the opposite corner casting its reflection out across the middle of the junction where it met the glow of the light from Guerra's corner. There was no sign of life, no rats, no cats, no Elana. There was a two-foot-wide brick support separating the curtained window from the double plate-glass entry door at the corner of the building housing Rosie's Restaurante. Guerra uncurled using the support as a shield. He kicked his legs to free the tension and then stepped around the brick buttress, his .45 leading the way. The northwest side of the building was a duplicate of the southeast side he had just navigated. No Elana! He took a breath. Still using the brick pillar as a shield, he peered through the doors into the interior of Rosie's eating establishment. Random lights acted as security. There were shadows, but no Elana.

Guerra tried the door, locked. He relaxed for a minute, changing gun hands, and working the tautness out of his right hand. Carefully he examined the four corners of the intersection from his vantage in front of Rosie's, no sign of Radayeva or Abdullah. There were four automobiles parked within view, two across the street headed east, one that he passed on the way to Rosie's, and one on the other side of the intersection facing west, all empty. Relaxing, he let his pistol glide to his side and checked his phone. It was 4:48 AM, about thirty minutes till sunrise and traffic picks up. Guerra was relieved. He considered calling Army. It was too early. He rested his back against the wall, being careful not to relax too much. His emotions began to play games with each other. An overwhelming desire to cry flooded his head. Ralph Guerra is not a crier, but he hadn't slept in twenty-four hours and he was happy to be alive. He thought about Lindsey and the kids, and then Army, then his friends who had died...and then Elana. No way would he cry, not even by himself. It was contrary to everything he'd been taught - men don't cry. Men control their emotions. He intended to keep this little episode a secret. He was not telling Army how he felt, that was for sure - especially not her.

Guerra flipped open his phone. He'd call a cab and get out of here before anyone can find out he's made a fool out of himself. Lifting the cellular to his ear, looking due west on Indian School Road, he noticed the car at the curb heading the same direction now had its lights on. Instantaneously he reacted, placing himself in a defensive posture, firearm pronated. His mind went into fast-forward again. Had that car been there all a long? Yes. Was anyone in it? No. He crouched against a large metal mail deposit box on the corner next to the curb, using it as a shield. He squinted for a better look...no one in it now either. The taillights began to blink. Could be an alarm...not likely...no noise.

Guerra waited a few minutes to see if anyone got out. Ridiculous, no one with murder on her mind is going to be that vulnerable. After a deep breath, he sprinted to the back of the Camry, working his way around to the passenger side being careful to stay below the windows. He reached to open the door. It was locked. He jumped to his feet, .45 cocked and ready. The car was empty! Making his way to the driver's side, he tried the door and it opened. A quick survey of the inside found it messy but nothing unusual, except the key was in the ignition. Guerra closed the car door without latching it, slowly giving the area a 360. That's when he noticed the note taped to the inside of the driver side window. After checking the area a second time, he slid into the driver's seat and read the note by the interior light...

drive west to tuthill road turn right and drive to olive...drive to white tank mountain park entrance turn left on white tank mountain road drive to willow canyon road turn left and drive until the road stops...come alone...we talk.

There was a map roughly sketched below the note. Guerra noticed the beginning of sunrise in the rearview mirror and estimated an hour before full sun. The odds of being ambushed in the night were a whole lot better than in the daylight. He'd made it this far, why quit now? Tuthill Road was a good twenty miles west of Rosie's. Guerra was in no hurry now. Daylight was his friend and worth waiting for. Drive-in traffic was starting to pick up. The stoplights along Indian School Road had gone from caution to full sequence, anticipating the morning rush. Guerra was starting to feel the effects of the sleepless night as the Toyota moved smoothly down the tree-bordered boulevard. He yawned, stretched, and shook his head in an attempt to force the sleepiness out and clear his mind for the deadly encounter with Elana.

There had to be two people involved in this hide and seek melodrama being played out in Phoenix this morning. Guerra was not sure how the car lights came on. If Elana was waiting at White Tank, then Abdullah or someone else was operating the security remote to the Camry, which meant they had to be in the general vicinity of Rosie's when the Camry lights went on. Guerra fumbled for the cellular he put in his pants pocket, which was now locked in by his seat belt. After a long battle, he managed to wrench the phone loose. He flipped it open and talked directly into the speaker.

"911...911."

"Police, go ahead."

"My name is Ralph Guerra. I'm an agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. I have reason to believe that one or both of the of the terrorists responsible in part for the Houston explosion, and thought to be in the Phoenix area, could be in the general location of Rosie's Restaurante...622 Indian School Road." Pause.

"Sir, what is the purpose of your call...is there an emergency?" Guerra couldn't believe it.

"You bet your sweet dimple, miss...you need an APB at 622 Indian School Road right now. The terrorist Abdul Fayez Abdullah, and possibly Elana Radayeva, are thought to be in that general area...do you understand?" Pause.

"Sir, can you hold while I connect you to my supervisor?" Guerra took a deep breath and then sighed. He furnished to the supervisor the same information and then asked that the information be passed onto detective Larman.

Tuthill Rd. was a new four-lane highway skirting the west side of Phoenix to accommodate the suburban sprawl. Turning right on Tuthill, it suddenly occurred to Guerra that he could be driving a bomb. His first reaction was to brake and bail. He quickly overcame that urge and instead floored it. The Camry lurched into passing gear, pinning Guerra to the seat. Seventy...eighty...ninety. If he goes, he's going in a burst of glory. Guerra shot down Tuthill, reaching speeds of one hundred miles an hour before he rationalized that a crash at this speed would kill him as dead as any bomb and if the car were rigged he would be dead by now.

\* \* \*

## Reckoning, Day Seven

White Tank Mountain Regional Park was the largest recreational park in the county with more than thirty thousand acres of rugged mountainous terrain. The area was protected on the west side by the majestic White Tank Mountain Range. The park floor was a series of canyons and ridges created by centuries of heavy flash flooding. The influence of the water torrent coming off the mountains had carved a series of depressions resembling tanks in the white granite on the desert's surface, giving the mountain range its name. Because of its unique rugged features, the park was closely monitored by the county. The parks department issued limited overnight passes for visitor tracking purposes but was open during the daylight hours for all to enjoy. Guerra entered the south entrance of the park from Olive Street where it became White Tank Mountain road. Once inside the park, the road transformed from concrete to asphalt and became a single lane.

Guerra's senses went on high alert the minute he entered the park. The prospects of an ambush at every turn or from behind every boulder had created an unbearable muscle tension between his shoulders. In his mind's eye he could visualize Elana and Abdullah rushing out from a dry creek bed, automatic rifles blazing. His legs began to throb now. Where's the advantage? He desperately needed an advantage. The Storm lay within reach in the passenger seat beside him, but he needed surprise on his side, he needed control. There's some dust ahead! Guerra freed himself from the seatbelt in case he had to bolt. A closer look revealed a green and white Explorer heading in his direction. He slowed to a crawl placing the .45 in his lap. The Explorer ambled on until Guerra could scarcely make out a wide-brim hat that seemed to take up the entire front seat. The ranger slowly pulled up next to him, with a smile the size of his hat.

"Yes sir, need some help?"

Guerra was tempted to ask if he could assemble the 101st

Airborne. "Yes I could use some help. I'm looking for Willow Creek Road."

"Well, that's easy - just stay on White Tank here, oh, about five or six miles. On down you'll come to Willow Creek, you can only go left."

"Thanks...ah...by the way, is Willow Creek a dead end?" The park ranger leisurely scanned the Camry with a suspicious eye. Still smiling, his attention settled back on Guerra.

"White Tank makes a circle around the park. Willow Creek cuts it in half."

What does that mean? Guerra wondered. "Willow Creek runs through the middle of the park then."

"That's right. The far side of Willow Creek ends up on the far side of White Tank. This is your first time to visit our park I take it."

"Yes, it is. Thanks. Let me see if I understand now. If I take White Tank all the way around, I will end up on the far end of Willow Creek."

"That's right." The ranger paused, shedding the smile. "What's your business in the park today sir?"

"I'm scouting a spot for my son's Cub Scout troop...for a day hike. Mrs. Armendorfer, the cub mother, had to work today. I had the day off. First Methodist Troop 308." Lame!

"I see," the ranger said, smiling again. "Here's a park map." He passed a brochure through the widow. "It's marked well."

"Thanks." Guerra slowly pulled away, keeping an eye on the green and white Ford through the rear view mirror and wondered if the ranger bought the crap about the Scouts...he didn't think so. The brochure was not much more than a full-color two-page flyer with campgrounds, bathroom locations, hiking and biking trails, a pair of small lakes, all in color-coordinated keys for easy reference, and most importantly what Guerra was looking for - a sketch of the paved roads. The flyer confirmed the ranger's description. A large irregular oval labeled White Tank Road and stretching through the middle of the oval was another road, Willow Creek. Checking the flyer with park amenities, Guerra was able to get a feel for where he was at in relation to where he was going. There was a sign ahead! "Willow Creek Rd 1/2 mile." Passing the Willow Creek Road exit, he now had his bearings. The funky flyer could be a lifesaver...thanks, smoky. The strategy, meager as it may be, was to take White Tank all the way around to the far side, try to locate the area where the two roads connect without being seen, maybe gaining the advantage. One thing was for sure; he was not driving straight down Willow Creek.

According to the map, there was a day camp on the northwest corner of the White Tank oval. It appeared to be five or six miles from the intersection of White Tank. And Willow was on the west side of the park. Guerra would park a mile or so from Willow Creek and proceed on foot to the junction, hoping- no, praying - there would be cover. There was no one else in the park, at least no obvious visitors. Why should



there be? Wasn't Houston, Texas just destroyed? Hadn't the whole country gone into shutdown? Cub Scout outing. How stupid. No wonder the ranger was suspicious. Who cares? I'm whacking that psychotic assassin regardless of what the rest of the world does. My wife. I've got to call Lindsey. Guerra fumbled with his cell. It was in his shirt pocket this time. Seven thirty, nine thirty at home. He spoke into the mobile phone. "Lindsey Guerra." The phone stared back for a moment and then one ring...two rings.

"Hello."

"Hello, beautiful. How are you?"

"Oh, I'm fine...Scared...When are you coming home? I miss you so much."

"It won't be long, babe. We are starting to tie this thing up now."

"You say that every time, Ralph...I miss you so much...the kids miss you...Please come home soon." A long pause was followed by a sigh.

"I miss you too baby. Give the kids a kiss for me...I'll call tomorrow...I love you, Lindsey."

"Your mother called..."

Ralph cut her off, hoping she didn't realize it was intentional. His emotions were shot. He had to get back on track. He'd call tomorrow and spend as much time as she wanted, after this job was done. Right now he needed a clear head. He couldn't think about his wife and kids, his mother, or fishing in the bay at dusk. Right now he had to concentrate on killing Elana Radayeva, the Chechnya-born murderer.

Driving through the park was tricky, lots of ups and downs, sharp turns. The road followed the terrain when possible. The idea was to maintain as pristine a condition as humanly achievable without establishing an unfriendly environment. The speed limit was twenty-five miles per hour, sometimes falling to fifteen when negotiating the more difficult geographic terrain.

The day camp was just ahead. A glance at the car's clock revealed the time at 9:45 AM. The camp consisted of an open lodge, which was a slab of concrete with a roof. There were six picnic tables lined side by side on the concrete under the roof. Off to the east of the craft lodge was a large circle formed with rocks. In the middle of the circle was a fire pit. The remnants of charred logs were still detectable. A handful of steel barbeque grills with no ostensible pattern graced the area. Another log building along with the bathrooms were immediately visible from the road...a good place for a Cub Scout meeting. One day he would bring his family back to this park...it was a neat place. He drove by without stopping. Just south of the camp was a green sign...Willow Creek Road, 6 Miles. Guerra checked the speedometer for a reading. He needed to know when he was a mile from the junction. He would leave the car and make his way by foot using the natural landscape as cover. That was the plan; his element of surprise, there was no plan B. He wondered if this was all a big wild goose chase. Was there only one bomb? Have we all been snookered? No...she'll be there. She's there somewhere, and if there's no interference she'll come out blazing. "Well, come on, then."

Guerra was confident in his training and his Kevlar vest. One on one...advantage to Guerra.

Two miles to Willow Creek Road, he slowed to a crawl, scrutinizing the layout, looking for any form of help. The road started a minor incline. It was not much but it could be enough to cover his approach. He would stop on this side of the hill; work his way to a small ravine twenty feet left of the road. If it worked out, he would have an open view of the WillowWhite Tank junction. He'd done this sort of thing many times in the past while hunting deer in the Florida glades. Finding a wide spot on the shoulder, Guerra brought his steed to a stop, lowered the widow, retrieved the Storm from the seat beside him and checked the clip...full. He felt for the extra clip in his trouser pocket...it was there. But before he could exit the Camry there was a vibration first, and then Bandolero began to chime from his shirt pocket. It startled him; he thought he might have wet himself! It was Army! Gently laying his .45 back on the passenger seat, he answered the call.

"Where are you...what are you doing?" There was concern in her voice.

"I had to run an errand this morning. I'll be back in a couple of hours."

"What kind of errand?"

"I'll tell you all about it when I get back."

"That's bull, Ralph! What are you up to? You're breaking every rule in the book."

The last thing he wanted was to spend time in an argument with Army; losing his concentration and maybe his edge. He was about to cut her off when the driver's side-view mirror filled with denim. He instinctively looked to the rear-view mirror. The trunk hood was up! My God! She's been in the trunk the whole time!

His heart was racing a hundred miles an hour. His gums went numb. He reached for the pistol in the passenger's seat when through the far side mirror he noticed the ranger's green Explorer rambling up behind them. As his hand went for the gun, he felt a cool pressure against his neck.

"Dan't moof." The voice was familiar. Guerra couldn't see her face. The mirror was full blue.

"Let him go. He's innocent. He's done no harm to anyone," Guerra pleaded.

The ranger pulled up directly beside them on the street side, still wearing that goofy smile and oversized hat. "What's up?" he asked, rolling down his window.

But before he could say another word, with cat-like efficiency, Elana Radayeva raised her handgun from below the cover of the driver's door, directing its trajectory over the top of the Camry, firing one deadly shot, sending the unfortunate ranger into Neverland, then swiftly brought the pistol back to the nape of Ralph's neck before he could take a second breath. Blood splattered across to the Camry, partially coating the passenger side seat through the lowered window. Guerra's body tightened with apprehension. The phone was still in his left hand and begging for answers.

"Ralph...Ralph, what's going on? What's happened? Who's there? Ralph, answer me!"

The hot barrel of Elana's pistol was back on his neck. He slowly flipped the cellular closed.

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## **An Hour with God**

The set of the popular television evangelist was sedate. Like the world at large, they waited the President's decision to meet or reject the Qaidat al-Jihad warning. It was the seventh and final day of the ultimatum. What the President decided today would either save this country from further destruction by selling out his friends or move the world into a possible nuclear holocaust. All the bluster that the United States dished out about not bargaining with terrorist organizations somehow didn't fit the condition anymore. The US had used every channel available to find a way to reach the Qaidat alJihad faction but to no avail.

The Reverend Rollins was stationed, as usual, resting his not so demure backside on the studio set's grand furnishings. The stage manager pointed to him as the tiny cue light on the camera turned red.

"Well, praise the Lord and a blessed day to you and yours from all of us here at An Hour with God. Our guest today is Dr. Huge Hansen, President of Albany Bible Seminary, along with Pastor Holiday who will be joining us once again on this final day of decision. Dr. Hansen, it's so nice to have you with us at this important hour. Can you tell us a little about Albany and its mission?"

Huge Hansen was a little known college president from the Midwest. Full of faith, wisdom, and a proclivity for meekness, he was held in the highest esteem by the few who recognized his work. "Thank you, Reverend Rollins, it's kind of you to invite me. Albany is a small independent Bible school devoted to the proposition that God's Word is eternal law and that there is success and redemption in it."

"Yes, amen," said a fervent Rollins.

Before he could continue his line of inquiry, the more politically motivated Holiday took over. "Dr. Hansen, I have read several of your treatises. I am able to understand why your peers hold you in such high regard."

"Thank you."

"As you know sir, the United States has been the guardian of Zion since her independence in 1948. Today, that responsibility teeters on a decision that could bring to an end any future assistance, a resolution that would likely impede her very existence. Dr. Hansen, would you be so kind as to share your thoughts on this dark day of uncertainty?"

"Surely." Huge Hansen was a man of few words, gauging his thoughts with quiet resolve. He pondered the request for a moment, and then responded. "This is a very dark day in the annals of human record, that cannot be denied. Is it more devastating than Noah's flood or Moses forty-year trek through the desert, or even Hitler's transgression? I think not. No...in all of this, God by His own hand delivered His people. He is able to do it again and again if need be, without the help of mortals. I am confident He knows the conclusion to this latest dilemma and trusts his judgment in the outcome." Holiday seemed confounded by Dr. Hansen's lack of activism. He glanced at his notes on a concealed table next to the chair.

"Dr. Hansen, as a colleague of many outstanding Christian thinkers who cling to the proposition that the restoration of Israel is the key piece of the last day puzzle, I find your response disheartening, verging on indifference."

"I'm very sorry if my comments in any way have been unsettling. My intention is merely to publicize that God is the architect of his own plan. He is not an elected politician with an agenda, but in fact the sovereign governor of the universe and can change the course of history in an instant should He choose to. We can do little more than trust Him."

Holiday pushed for a more definitive position from Dr. Hansen. "As you may know sir, my organization, Christian Alliance for a Secure Israel, advocates the preservation of Zion at any cost. Our constituency is of the mindset that God has used America as the flagship for this undertaking. Is there any reason why we should change that position?"

Hansen refused to be seduced into a political or religious argument he couldn't win. "In times past, God has, in His infinite wisdom, used a variety of resources to achieve His objectives. He once used a donkey to deliver a message. He may very well use this country again for divine purpose."

Rollins tired of Holiday's harassing and wrestled back control. "Excuse me, Pastor, if you don't mind I would like to ask Dr. Hansen a question that is on the mind of many believers today." There was a pause and a long sigh for dramatic effect. "Dr. Hansen, many of our viewers believe that America is on the path to bankruptcy and this is a judgment God has sent because of the moral and spiritual degeneracy we have sponsored as a nation. Would you care to comment on that please?" An introspective Hansen considered the question for an instant and then confidently moved ahead.

"Judgment is a condition we as humans live with every day of our lives. The Bible is clear and final on the subject. The ground is level regarding this quandary. To suggest that God is playing Chess with his creation is ludicrous. Men live by their own decisions and will die by their own decisions. World conflict is a result of too many wrong decisions. God is painfully aware of humankind's state of misery and is saddened by our lack of understanding. Judgment has long been rendered and is well defined, sir. Sow corruption, reap corruption. Sow war, reap war."

The antagonistic Holiday thought he could put a composed Hansen on the ropes. "But, Dr. Hansen, how does sewing and reaping apply when your God-given rights are violated? Aren't you obligated to defend yourself, as well as those you love?"

"Yes, certainly. My first instinct is to strike back with all the strength that I can gather. It is my nature. But the statute of reciprocity requires one act of violence to follow the next. There is no earthly elixir, either political or religious, to slow the cascading dissension of man's condition."

"Dr. Hansen, frankly you sound like a defeated soul."

"On the contrary, Pastor Holiday. The problems we encounter daily are not always politically resolvable. I am a person with much anticipation and a keenness for life. I have learned to leave my concerns on God's doorstep. Faith, sir, transcends all political jockeying."

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## **Conciliation**

Back in more familiar surroundings, the President of the United States was seated comfortably behind the HMS Resolute in the Oval Office. He made a few last minute changes in preparation for his address to the world. His face was ashen and tired, the stress of the past week had aged the once youthful looking statesman. He was wearing a suit and tie for the first time in the last seven days. The trusted and solemn men of his allegiance had gathered a safe distance behind the cameras and technicians assembled for the broadcast. Standing behind them, the first lady and her adult children had found a place in the cramped office. The President was about to make the most important announcement of his political life; very possibly the most important message any president before him had ever made. The speech would be broadcast concurrently across the globe. Heads of state, kings and potentates hung on the edge in anticipation of the President's decision. Last minute activity at the President's side indicated airtime was at hand. Three...Two...One.

"Good evening. Eight days ago the unthinkable happened. America was attacked by a foreign terrorist organization representing a hostile arm of militant Islam, and a nuclear device was discharged in Houston, Texas, killing thousands; the final toll likely reaching into the millions. It was a black day in our history,

not only for the United States of America but for every freedom loving person across this planet. As if that act of inhumanity was not enough, I was given an ultimatum requiring me to discontinue all American assistance to our friends in the near and Middle East, both Muslim and Jew alike. My fellow Americans, to abandon that part of the world at this hour is a ponderous consideration. Not only would it include arms and troops, but also food, medicine, investment and trade. These kinds of reductions, and the elimination of Western influence, will only create a larger disparity between our peoples and send the region back in time a hundred years.

"Should I choose to ignore these threats, six more nuclear bombs are in place around the world, ready to be detonated. I take this threat very seriously, as the terrorists have demonstrated their capability with deadly assurance. Seven days ago when I received these demands, I immediately assembled a military strike force so powerful as to rearrange the terrorist geographic stronghold. That multifaceted defense force is standing off the coast of Pakistan in attack attitude as I speak." The President took a second to nervously wipe the sweat from his brow and reconsider his words. "Standing down momentarily," he said finally, in an effort to lessen the bravado. "As you might imagine, the last week has been the most distressing of my life. I have considered the plight of this nation and the world in light of the dangers that prevail and the consequences of my decision. The obligations we have made, the support we have promised, the hand we have extended to the good and loyal friend we have made in that part of the world, is a responsibility too grave to discount." The President paused again, wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

"The course and obligation of this great nation is to lead the world with honor and integrity, guaranteeing a sense of hope and opportunity for all. That liability is at stake like never before. I have made every effort to contact the Qaidat al Jihad leadership to try and arrange a peaceful conclusion, but to no avail. Although the policy of this country has always been not to negotiate with terrorist organizations, our options are diminished. I have spent countless hours this past week in agonizing consultation with the European community and our allies around the world. I am sorry to report there is no support for military action. The Europeans have already begun a voluntary withdrawal of the area in fear of retaliation on their home front. My dear friends and countrymen, the world has turned a deaf ear to our plight. There is no will to fight. Once again, America is expected to carry the full responsibility in the fight against the enemies of freedom." Yet another pause for reflection and the persistent struggle against the endless sweat.

"Friends, we have done everything humanly possible in the time we've been given to locate the remaining bombs and I can promise you the search will continue around the clock with all available resources, both federal and in the private sector." More sweat. "This violent act of aggression will not go unchallenged on my watch. At my disposal is enough firepower to blow these unconscionable devils back to hell." A pause for water. There was a noticeable twitch now at the corner of the President's left eye. His face had paled since he began the speech. The stress of the last week and the monumental decision he had made was painfully evident in his face. His lower lip quivered.

"My first and foremost responsibility as President of the United States is to the brave and selfless citizens of this great country I have sworn to protect. That has always been the first and only consideration in this difficult process. Twenty minutes before this broadcast I placed a call to Yaron Sharett, Prime Minister of Israel, informing him that I had no other choice but to agree to the demand of the Qaidat al-Jihad ultimatum. I have ordered all assistance in that part of the world to cease at once, and proposed a six-month timetable to withdraw all American presence and interest in the region. May God bless the American people."

## **SIX MONTHS LATER**

### **Persian Gulf**

Three days following the President's capitulation to the Qaidat al-Jihad mandate, all observable diplomatic relations with fifteen nation states that constitute the Arabian Peninsula and make up the greater part of the Middle Eastern region were disengaged, including Israel. In each country, with the exception of Israel, the United States Embassy was burned to the ground with the departure of the last state department employee. The demolition came at the hands of wild Islamic gangs carrying posters of Osama bin Laden that recognized him as the resurrected Muhammad. The scorched ruins of the Embassy buildings had been left untouched, representing a sign from Allah as a complete and total victory over the retreating infidel

crusader. Most American citizens living in the region had left, fearing for their lives. Angry, out of control extremists roamed the streets seeking those of white European ancestry to kill as a pleasing gesture to Allah and His servant the resurrected Muhammad, while police remained openly absent, abandoning their sworn responsibility to protect their communities. International business dealings and private enterprise had to be conducted undercover using bogus Arab titles or in remote regions in order to protect billion-dollar interests from being confiscated by newly formed renegade governments controlled by religious, power-hungry, self-appointed imams.

The moderate Muslim world remained anemic in influence to the more rebellious militant minority. The Prophet himself handed down the final word of rule to the remote village of Dir in the northwest frontier of Pakistan. Independence from a US military presence was achieved in five months, leaving only a few loose strings to tie before total withdrawal could be expected. US Central Command, located in Qatar on the Persian Gulf, had the only vestige of military presence left in the Qaidat al-Jihad annexation. The departure of the American armed forces included three hundred thousand ground troops along with their equipment and support personnel. Military bases throughout the region had been hastily abandoned, leaving behind enough equipment to arm the terrorist network for the next five years. The rapid exit of the Americans made easy the takeover, allowing local militias to move in and settle down. Air bases remained in India and Turkey with both countries hopelessly connected to the financial umbilical cord of the United States, but threats of Qaidat al-Jihad reprisals had forced those nations to push for an American exit. All moderate Arab governments who had depended on the West for financial security were being pressured to cut their connections. Leaving the oil line from the Arabian Gulf to the United States drastically altered. The bulk of crude from the Middle East now found its way to China, while the US depleted its small reserves and scrambled to make deals with other oil producing nations who were taking the opportunity to twist the dagger with unrealistic price increases.

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## **Iran**

Russian forces had ostensibly been invited to stay in Iran until the threat of hostilities diminished. The Russians had graciously accepted and granted a request by the Iranians to provide a team of nuclear energy experts to establish a nationwide fissiparous power grid. And, as a by-product, they would offer Plutonium enrichment technology for defensive purposes only. The agreement placed the Russians in control of the program for an indeterminate amount of time; a gesture designed to ease international concern. With the nuclear specialists came twenty thousand goodwill volunteers on leave from the Russian military, all of whom were Muslims. The Ministry of Communication, a department of the legislative branch of the Russian Federation, had offered to mediate a conference between the state of Israel and Hamas, Iran's surrogate government, and the majority party of the Palestinian Authority. They would offer the Israelis a deal that would allow both parties to live side by side, but would give Palestine equal authority in policy and would require Israel to disarm and give up Jerusalem as their capital.

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## **Afghanistan**

The Taliban, a religious gang of Islamic extremists, toppled Afghanistan's pro-Western democracy two days after the last American Ranger unit left Kabul. The Qaidat al-Jihad and Bin Laden's mujahadeen fighters supported them in the takeover. The soft Western-backed government in Pakistan was girding up for an internal battle against the fastest growing army in the world, the dreaded Mujahadeen. It was a battle they couldn't win and one that would provide Osama bin Laden, according to Muslims the resurrected Muhammad, a free hand to open up his billion dollar opium kingdom without intervention.

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## **Jerusalem**

Israel has long been recognized as the most formidable military in the Middle East. Their reputation for buying American technology and then improving on it was a sore subject at the Pentagon. The suggestion had embarrassed the US military establishment for a long time. Although the Jews had never lost a war to the Arabs since gaining their independence in 1948, they would require all the innovation they could conceive this time around. In the 1973 Yom Kippur war, the United States supplied the Israeli army with five billion dollars worth of military equipment prior to the outbreak of that war and then had to airlift an additional one billion dollars of munitions during the war to give the IDF (Israeli Defense Force) an opportunity to win. That funding was no longer available through the US and had the Jewish state scurrying for help from private Jewish foundations as well as wealthy Jewish organizations from around the world. The price tag of the Yom Kippur war today, conservatively estimated, would be five times that amount. Combined Arab armies, numbering two million combatants, stood between this tiny nation and its continued existence with Egypt, Syria, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Israel would field an army of just over 140,000 soldiers. Six weeks after the American concession, the Arab buildup began.

The Arab armies were camped on all four land borders of the Jewish state. Egypt on the west, Syria, Iran, and Saudi Arabia on the north and east. Israel had been careful not to take an offensive posture in the hopes that a third party could be found with enough influence and power to somehow negotiate a deal that would guarantee their survival. They could no longer depend on the United States for that protection. Russia had pressed for the opportunity to be that very broker, only the cost might be higher than the Jews were willing to pay and war could break out at any minute. Both armies stood face to face within a mile of each other, armed to the teeth.

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## United States

After the President's address on July 10th, people began to slowly filter back into their cities and towns across the nation. Police forces, with the help of the National Guard and regular army, wrestled their turf back from street gangs and deadbeats in the cities where the evacuation was most complete. Damage to the infrastructure by way of the failed evacuation program coupled with the destruction of Houston was still being assessed, but conservative estimates put the cost at between twenty and forty billion dollars. The loss of life suffered at the Texas metropolis, and the government's feeble attempt to save the lives of the rest of its citizenry, had yet to be determined but a safe guess by an unnamed official in the Department of Health and Human Services places the slaughter at two million human souls. For all practical purposes, the borders of the United States had been selectively closed with the exception of commercial trade ships that were undergoing the toughest security ever projected on foreign traffic. The course of action stood until homeland security could assure the American people that they were safe once again within their own borders. The embargo had placed a supreme burden on the economy, setting the country back in time sixty years. The remaining three bombs that were alleged to be somewhere in the continental United States had not been recovered but the Federal Bureau of Investigation continued to follow leads and believed that it was only a matter of time before the bombs were found and the extremists brought to justice. Houston remained a contaminated wasteland. What was left of that great city stood charred against the Texas landscape like a shrine to a naive generation who believed that safety and well-being were inherent.

## POSTSCRIPT:

**Stuart Jenkins**, the incomparable voice of network broadcasting, was back at his familiar spot on evening news, dishing out the mundane particulars of daily life in the shadow of the most aggressively covered news event in television history. Jenkins would go on record as saying that in spite of the ghastly consequences, the people were kept informed as the news became available and that his reporting was the instrumental link of many that saved thousands of American lives and, though the tragedy was incomprehensible, the network once again proved its value with minute to minute live coverage. He would

also say in a weaker moment that if the federal government had been as diligent as the network the country might have avoided the whole tragic misfortune.

**Hector Fuentes**, the dumpy informant and smuggler from Cuba, was promised twenty-five million dollars and a new identity in the federal protection program for his cooperation in the investigation of the Independence Day tragedy. In reality, Fuentes spent three and a half months in an overcrowded Miami jail before being deported back to Cuba to face his fellow conspirators. The fate of Hector Fuentes is unknown today.

**Cedric Rollins**, of the Christian television program "An Hour with God", was viewed by the largest audiences in its long, distinctive history as a result of being one of the few alternatives to news during the crises. His guest host for the week and founder of The Christian Alliance for a Secure Israel, **Pastor Ronnie Holiday**, called the President and his men cowards and traitors in a scathing indictment before leaving the program on the final day of his fifteen minutes of fame. Reverend Rollins is capitalizing on his newfound fame and planning a crusade to raise funds for the purpose of casting the net even further, hopefully sending "An Hour with God" into overseas markets.

**Maria Angha**, the terrorist safe house proprietor and sometime University Professor, was also promised twenty-five million dollars and a new life for her cooperation in the investigation. As of this date, Maria Angha is still incarcerated in a federal protection facility awaiting trial for her participation in the deadly incident. She is expected to receive concurrent life sentences for her involvement.

**Mark Salam**, aspiring terrorist, is also awaiting trial at an undisclosed location. He is expected to spend the rest of his life behind bars for his part in the Houston affair.

**Akim Salam**, Mark's father and radical Islamic sympathizer, has been exported back to his native Syria where he has had difficulty adjusting to the life there. Akim's American assets were frozen and he was not allowed to take his fortune with him. His submissive wife timorously followed.

**Abdul Fyez Abdullah**, the highest-ranking member of the terrorist team, was suspected of being in Phoenix, Arizona at the time of the President's concession to Qaidat al-Jihad, and in the company of Elana Radaeva, but no visual confirmation was ever made. Abdullah Fyez Abdullah is listed by the FBI as the second most dangerous man in the world behind Osama bin Laden.

A Phoenix citizen, using police photographs, has identified **Elana Radaeva** as the last patron to leave the shopping center bathroom where the sadistic murder of Ebba Arndt had just occurred, placing Radaeva in the southwest city at the time of the President's speech. She has not been heard from again but is believed to still be at large in the United States.

**Cassandra (Army) Armendorfer** took a three-month leave of absence from the Justice Department's counterterrorism task force after running out of leads in her pursuit of Elana Radaeva and went home to visit her father.

#### **DECEASED:**

The body of **Raphael Guerra** was found on the back side of White Tank Mountain State Park on July 10th with a bullet hole behind his left ear. He was posthumously awarded the nation's highest domestic honor, The Medal of Valor, for his ultimate sacrifice in the terrorist investigation. His late colleagues, Norman Yarbrough, Baddadev Singh, and Benny Stewart, a Baton Rouge police officer, were honored as well for their selfless contributions.

## **PART TWO**

### **Capital Building, The Following January**

It was a cold, uncomfortable evening in Washington as the President stepped up to the podium, the coldest anyone could remember. The fact is it was only the second chilliest on record, slightly trailing the frigid 1962 winter. Many were blaming the atomic explosion in Texas for the atmospheric conditions that

resulted in the unusual chill, although the scientific community was not ready to commit to such a notion. The Saturday morning pundits were more than ready to point a finger at the President for the uncomfortable circumstances, still blaming him for the lack of national security surrounding Houston. That wasn't the only thing the nation was angry with the President about. Where had all the money gone that Washington had relegated to the damaged southeast? And what happened to the billions of dollars gobbled up by the federal bureaucracy in their feeble attempt to restore the rest of the country's losses during the poorly designed evacuation process? He had a lot of explaining to do and this would be his first opportunity to set the record straight on the misguided funds as well as all the other questions that needed answering. It was going to be a speech designed to motivate a people still consumed with despair; one that would grip the heart of a nation. It was a speech intended to showcase his strength; one that would inspire the voter and ensure a second term in November. He would need to regain their confidence tonight. All the post-Houston polls indicated the President's popularity had dropped a whopping thirty-five percent.

The nation's lack of confidence was not so much a result of how he handled the domestic quagmire but more a consensus on how he appeared spineless in his effort to handle the threats of the Qaidat al-Jihad spokesman. It had been a year ago when the President last stood in this podium and addressed the same body of legislators, painting a rosy picture of the country's progress and the great international cohesiveness his administration had chiseled out of a world filled with instability. Tonight's speech would be different. There was little to cheer about on this raw glacial night in the nation's capital. "It's amazing," he thought as he peered into the faces of his adjudicators, "how things can change in the span of a year."

For the next 45 minutes, the President expounded on his already well-documented six-part plan for recovery. It was nothing new or unpredictable. After all, you can't change the course of history with a speech but it's all in the perception. Could he convince the people that he is still able to be an effective leader, one with a backbone? That would be the greatest obstacle to overcome in this election year. Television was good at distorting perception. He simply needed to persuade the people that along with a bi-partisan congress, and the tenacious American will, together they could pull it off. The first thing the nation needed to do was rebuild the infrastructure destroyed by panic and deficient government planning. That would mean putting people back to work through federally sponsored work programs, enlisting the private sector as the primary contractors. The same concept would then be used to help clean up the states affected by the toxic fallout. This major rebuilding agenda lead by the Department of Interior, in co-operation with state and local governments, could rekindle the economy, the second element of the six-part proposal. Goods and services would begin to flow as a result of the building initiative and fulfill part three of the six-part plan.

The President was encouraged by the many standing ovations he received as his speech picked up steam with details of each of the first three proposals. He then meticulously laid down the fourth, fifth, and sixth part of his plan, all about new world attitudes, strengthening home security, conciliation toward militant Islam, cutting defense spending and going with a smaller, more technically-oriented armed service. The enthusiastic acceptance in the great hall of world influence he had received earlier seemed now to be strained. He paused for a moment looking to his side of the aisle for support and finding some comfort in the befuddled but loyal faces of his friendly constituency. Had he misjudged the mood of the nation? Were they more inclined to be militantly aggressive after the July tragedy, more globally minded after all? Doubt now began to interfere with the solidity of his speech. He had to refer to his notes more often. Normally he had his speeches memorized and seldom needed to yield to the outline. He could feel the sweat beads forming on his forehead.

At that moment he decided to do the unthinkable, leave his prepared speech and speak from his heart. He paused to collect his thoughts. "My fellow Americans, even though this world has become increasingly diverse, we need not fear the future. It is evident we can no longer police the attitudes of world cultures. What we can do, and should do, is defend ourselves against the purveyors of evil like Americans have done for the last two hundred and fifty years." There is a spattering of nervous applause. "We will continue to work as world peace brokers. That is the responsibility of any great nation, but not at any cost." There is more uneasy applause.

"We have an obligation to restore this country back to the even-handed greatness we once enjoyed. From there, we can again become leaders of world peace and coexistence." There was a sense of uneasiness now in the front row coming from the President's own party advisers and speechwriters who realized that he has left his notes. Their apprehension was noticeable and somehow it emboldened the Commander in Chief. He continued with a new sagacity of purpose.



"We will find the remaining bombs. And we will secure our boundaries. And we will extricate any and all terrorists from our borders. And we will regain that which we have lost." The tone begins to build again as the President's exuberance is more the similitude of Kunte Rockne the great Notre Dame football coach than a distinguished Presidential candidate.

"We will reach for the moon, avenge the wrong, and nothing will be impossible for us if we stay the course, together one nation under God. He alone shall judge the people and decide disputes among the nations, and America will lead His mighty army one last time, and then He will teach us His way, and we will beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks and our children shall learn of war no more." Suddenly the great room exploded with applause as both sides of the aisle stood. "We shall persevere. We shall not abandon our friends. And we shall remain the greatest nation on earth. Peace with honor shall be our ideal. And we will prevail."

The house exploded again. The chant started in the back of the auditorium picking up steam as it raced towards the front. "PEACE WITH HONOR! PEACE WITH HONOR! PEACE WITH HONOR!" ...reaching a crescendo with thunderous applause.

The President savored the moment as the noise of cheers and applause reverberated throughout the gathered throng. He raised his hands in a gesture designed to quiet the excited assembly. Standing, hands raised, he relished in the victory. "I leave you with these great words of Franklin Roosevelt. 'If civilization is to survive, we must cultivate the science of human relationships - the ability of all peoples, of all kinds, to live together, in the same world at peace.' Thank you and my God bless America."

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## Miami

The sun beat down against the pretty bronzed figure that lay sprawled across the plastic chaise lounge. Her shapely leg dangled from the side of the recliner, barely reaching the water. Occasionally she would dip her toe into the crystal clear water and then gracefully bend her leg back so that the cool liquid could trickle over her ankle and down her calf, providing some cooling relief from the UV rays. The pool was an infinity design, which gave the appearance of a perpetual overflow. The chaise had been placed on the edge, giving the impression that the lounge and its eye-catching occupant were floating on the surface of the water. She laid on her stomach, the bikini top unsnapped to ensure a no-line tan. On a small table just out of reach rested a glass of lemonade consisting of one lemon wedge and a packet of Splenda. Next to the lemonade was a boom box blasting Michael Bubale's rendition of "Try a Little Tenderness". This had been the whole of Army's life for the last three months and she was getting used to it. That bothered her just a little; doing nothing had its appeal.

Miami was the only place in the country that was warm and she was taking full advantage of it. The pool was shared with a group of mature snowbirds from New York who had adjoining winter condos. Seldom did she see any of them except on rare occasions when some of the old fuddy-duddys would sneak away from their wives for the express purpose of ogling her. She lay on the chaise lounge, foot dangling, contemplating what she was going to do the rest of the day when the cell phone next to the boom box competed for her attention. Prudently she reached for the ends of her bikini top and carefully fastened them together before sitting up. When she was sure her attire was secure, she stood to her feet, water ankle deep, and headed for the phone. The one retired capitalist sharing the pool that morning with Army nearly choked when his mouth gaped open dislodging his upper denture as she began her fluid stroll to the deck side table.

"Armendorfer," she said, pressing the small receiver to her ear while staring back at the old chap adjusting his teeth.

"Army...Peter Leonard."

"Oh, hi Pete." Army hadn't heard from Leonard since she took her hiatus three months ago.

"Are you ready to come back to work?" he asked in a matter of fact way. The brevity of Leonard's question took Army by surprise. She had lost track of time and had even considered retiring at weaker moments. She wasn't prepared to give such an ultimate answer in such a short moment.

"Well, ah...well, I'm...don't I have some more time left?" she stuttered.

"Look, there was a confirmed sighting of Radayeva in Sarajevo yesterday. They think maybe we ought to get on it while the getting is good." There was a momentary pause at both ends while Army considered the compulsory offer.

"Are you sure? Who's they?"

"We're positive, Army. They want you in Washington day after tomorrow. They have someone they want you to meet."

"What are you getting me into, Pete?"

"Not my call, Army. This comes from Barker himself. He wants you to partner with a new agent...some kind of international cooperative thing." There was a longer pause.

"Wait just a minute, Peter I'm not..." Leonard broke in, "I'll see you in Washington in two days."

"Leonard, you..." Army yelled into the dead receiver while unconsciously glaring at the old man still seated at poolside. Believing the aggression was directed at him, the bewildered old fossil quickly took refuge behind his Wall Street Journal and adjusted his uppers for a second time. Army reluctantly headed back toward her condo to pack for the trip to Washington, still furious at Leonard for hanging up on her.

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### **Army's Unfinished Business**

The struggle to find enough warm clothes to fill a suitcase was her next challenge. Realizing that she would need to purchase a new winter wardrobe when she arrived in the nation's capital made her angry all over again. After a few phone calls, one to the city to stop utilities, one to the post office, the airlines, and then one last call to her dad, almost completed the list of things to do before a final check through the condo. After a quick trip around her digs, she was ready to leave the comfort of the warm sanctuary for places unknown. There was, however, one last bit of business she needed to take care of before heading north. Throwing the lonely duffel bag into the passenger's seat and pointing her black Viper convertible south, she took off in a puff of smoke and a loud screech. The Cuban neighborhood in south Miami was a close knit and very protective community. They rarely saw the likes of Cassandra Armendorfer and her Viper cruising their placid avenues. The last time Army had been in Little Havana was the day Ralph had brought her down to meet his family.

This was going to be awkward. Army realized that she and Lindsey Guerra had just one thing in common and only Army was aware of it. Lindsey was very sweet and unassuming, although mindful of the fact that Army was attractive and that the partners in the business of counter-terrorism were very close, but she had complete faith in Ralph's devotion toward her. Army loved her for that. They hadn't seen each other since the funeral, and then only for a short time to exchange condolences.

The black convertible came to a stop in an upper middle class section of the Cuban community. The home was warm and suggested a touch of class. Two small children playing in the front yard stopped to cautiously observe the petite visitor as she made her way up the long walk to the front door. Army wasn't sure what she was going to say to Lindsey, she could only hope that the right words would come at the right time. Maybe that's why she hadn't come before. Maybe she was afraid Lindsey wouldn't understand the heart wrenching guilt she felt. By the time Army had reached the porch entryway, she wanted to disappear but the front door opened before she could knock or run. It was as though Lindsey had been waiting for her. The two women looked at each other without speaking.

Army couldn't help but notice how simple and yet how beautiful Lindsey Guerra was. She tried to speak but the words wouldn't come. Lindsey intuitively stepped toward Army softly touching her on the lips. They embraced and then they cried, holding tightly to one another.

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### **Two Days Later**

The Hoover building was teeming with activity, offering more the appearance of a busy department store than headquarters of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Army kicked the slush off her new snow boots and entered the elite sanctum named after the bureau's most illustrious agent J. Edgar himself. She stopped at the oversized picture of Hoover that hung in the lobby. After a short deliberation she whispered, "You Neanderthal," and then boarded the elevator to Barker's office. She wasn't sure why she still felt such hostility. She wasn't sure why she had come to Washington, for that matter she wasn't sure why she didn't quit the agency six months ago. All she knew was that she wanted to kick every supervisor right where it

hurt. It was a short trip in the Otis to the floor that housed Barker's office. Army was accompanied on the elevator by a familiar face, although she couldn't quite connect the dots.

"Jason Spencer," said the grinning mug. "We worked together in Beaumont a few years ago."

"Oh yeah...where?" Army was paying more attention to the floor panel lights than her genial elevator companion.

"Beaumont, Texas. We worked on that C.R. gig together...remember?"

"C.R. gig," she repeated, puzzled.

"Yeah, you remember, that big Columbian counterfeiting ring."

Oh my gosh...she remembered...not that creep...and then she screamed on the inside. At that point the elevator doors opened. "Well, nice to see you again," she said, trying to recall his name.

"Jason...Jason Spencer."

"Yeah, Jason. Well, have a nice day."

"Are you going my way?" Spencer asked, following her out of the elevator. Army turned and gave her unwelcome escort a steely glare.

"Look Jason, I'm just not in the mood to recap old times. I have a meeting to attend but it was nice seeing you again."

"Sure, fine." Spencer sensed the aggravation in her voice.

Army entered the Director's office, followed at length by Jason Spencer. Determined to ignore him, she addressed the young lady seated at the reception desk. "Cassandra Armendorfer to see Director Barker please."

"Have a seat, Miss Armendorfer. He'll be with you in a few minutes." Army avoided eye contact with Spencer while snubbing the stuffed lounge chairs for an upright. "Hello, Mr. Spencer," said the perky receptionist. Spencer, who was now standing in front of her at the desk but looking in Army's direction, failed to respond. "Yes sir, Mr. Spencer." She was louder this time, provoking his attention.

"Oh...sorry, Carly, may I go in?"

"Yes Mr. Spencer, Dr. Barker is expecting you." Army shot out of her chair like she had been hit in gluteus with 220 volts.

"Excuse me, Miss, but I believe I was here first."

"Yes ma'am, I'm very sorry but it shouldn't be too long now." Army was fuming by the time she got the call to see Barker. It was all that she could do to stay civil as the meeting ensued and it didn't make it any easier when she realized that Spencer was going to be a part of it.

For the next forty-five minutes, Dale Barker briefed Army on her prospective assignment. She was given a copy of the mission file to follow while he went through each step in detail. The folder was labeled Top Secret, and titled "Day of Vindication". Part of the scheme was to find and interrogate Abdul Fayes Abdullah and Elana Radayeva, the two notorious killers spawned from the extremist-cell farm of Maria Angha. This was where Army's piece of the puzzle fit snugly into the first half of the file. The second half of the file was conspicuously missing from her copy.

The Feds' top man explained that Abdul and Radayeva had escaped the Phoenix police net and made it into Mexico. The news was no surprise to Army, although she didn't express her cynicism to Barker. He went on to explain how Mexico had swallowed up the fugitives and the Mexican government was not aggressively cooperating in their apprehension. The big break came when a woman matching Elana Radayeva's description was arrested in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina five days ago and was being held by the local authorities. The obvious key to fulfilling the mission was the location of the three stateside bombs and the fastest method to achieve that goal was to capture and interrogate either Abdul or Radayeva. Army's responsibility was Radayeva.

Barker informed her that she would be working in secret with a foreign government who had intelligence vital to the dossier. The diminutive sleuth had been chosen for the assignment because of her counterterrorism background and more importantly her previous experience with Radayeva. The opportunity to pursue Elana was intriguing, but the fact that she was missing the last part of the agenda made her nervous. Locating and dismantling of the bombs, it seemed to Army, was success enough. When she asked Barker about it, he passed it off as not being important to her duty. That didn't satisfy her but there would be a better time later on to dissent. What bothered her more than the partial file was the likelihood of partnering with Jason Spencer. That was a painful prospect she wasn't ready to accept.

While she was waiting in the reception room for Barker and Spencer to finish their get together, she had a chance to recollect Beaumont, Texas and her first encounter with Spencer. It wasn't pleasant and the last thing she wanted to do was to tie up with him again. While she was mulling over the idea, Barker jolted her

back to reality, explaining she was to meet her new partner that evening at L'Arbuci, a stylish Washington restaurant, where they would discuss the joint venture over dinner and he would be able to fill in some of the blanks. Army was so relieved that Spencer was not her new partner that she accepted the idea without further inquiry. Spencer would, however, act as her Washington connection. The new assignment came with top-secret clearance and an unlimited expense account.

Barker was emphatic; there would be no obstacle too big to overcome. The success and completion of the entire mission was dependent on the information Army and her new partner could obtain. She wondered if the entire mission included the second half of the file.

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## **L'Arbuci, Encounter**

The cab pulled through the turnaround in front of the very swank L'Arbuci, a French restaurant known mostly for the atmosphere. Spencer had made the arrangements so Army was a little skeptical, although she had been to L'Arbuci once before on a similar assignment. It was the night she met Ralph. She was instructed to ask the maître d' for table six and the rest of the evening would take care of itself. As she followed the old waiter across the dimly lit room, her stomach began to churn at the prospect of meeting her new associate. The old man with the thick French accent was too fat for Army to see around. She could only hope for the best as they slowly strolled across the crowded eatery. He stopped abruptly and stepped aside to reveal an empty table. Army was seated at the lavishly adorned station where she ordered a glass of the house Chardonnay and settled in for the wait. The dining room was not small, but very romantic. The French were good at this sort of thing. It was not unusual for the Washington intelligence community to use the restaurant for just such an encounter.

Army casually scanned the room as only she could. It was her training and it was hard to separate work from pleasure when on the clock. The diners were carefully dressed in evening apparel; blazer and tie for the gents, dress or pantsuit for the ladies. The black St. John's was the only cool weather evening dress she owned. The knitted number exposed every bump and curve on Army's supple scaffolding and she looked gorgeous in it. The bureau's finest began a slow and calculated three-sixty while sipping on the goblet of sparkly. The restaurant bistro stood directly beyond Army's table. It was separated from the dining room by a line of French crafted spindles positioned in one-foot intervals. The bar was darker than the main room, which made it difficult to distinguish physical features from where she was seated, but her attention kept gravitating back to that area. What was it about the bar? And then she saw him, a mysterious figure looking straight at her. He was so beautiful she forgot to swallow, choking on her Chardonnay, but she was careful not to cough, saving her the embarrassment. When their eyes met he smiled and started in her direction. The Israeli agent was sixfoot, dark, and very handsome. The collar of his white shirt was opened to the second button. His polyester sports coat and wrinkle free gabardine slacks didn't match, but it didn't matter. He oozed testosterone.

"Miss Armendofer," he spoke perfect English.

"Yes...please call me Army, everyone else does." She felt stupid for saying that.

"May I sit down...Army?"

"Of course. How long have you been scoping me from the bar?" she asked, irritated that he had won the first round.

"My name is Eitan Greenberg," he said, paying little attention to her scoping remark. "I represent the Israeli security network. We have been asked by your government to cooperate in a very important search. You have been selected to accompany me."

Army choked on her wine again, this time coughing. "Wait a minute," she said, clearing her throat. "I'm not accompanying anyone. This is a joint effort, kiddo."

"Yes. Of course," said Greenberg. "I meant no disrespect." It was made clear to both agents in their individual briefings that the mission was top secret and that there could be no evidence of collaboration between the two governments.

"Mossad?" asked Army.

"Metsada," answered Greenberg. "Special operations branch of the Mossad."

Army was familiar with the wing. "This is not an assassination exercise, Mr. Greenberg," she said, almost choking again. The Metsada was notorious for whacking undesirables.

"At this time, elimination is certainly not part of my orders, Miss Armendorfer. I have been instructed to find and interrogate Elana Radayeva. This in cooperation with the FBI, and I presume that means you," Greenberg said matter-of-factly while searching the menu. Army was already fed up with the condescending attitude of her new partner and they had barely spent ten minutes together.

"Look, Ethan..."

"That's Eitan," he said smugly without looking up from menu.

"Ethan, cooperation is the key word here." She emphasized cooperation while pulling down the menu, forcing him to look at her. "What do you say we start all over again?"

"Ok...my name is Eee-tan." Army realized her mistake and smiled. Eitan grinned and resumed his search. The ice was broken and the two spent the rest of the evening getting acquainted, although Eitan was less of a talker than Army.

Eitan Greenberg was born in Tiberias on the Galilee to Boston messianic parents who immigrated to Israel in the sixties. Unlike like most Jewish immigrants, the Greenberg's came to the holy land not because of persecution but to spread the Christian gospel. Finding that to be a most unpopular task, they became discouraged and moved to Tel Aviv where his father took a job as an English teacher. After retiring, the family moved to Jerusalem where they started work on a special project; Eitan didn't elaborate. After graduating from high school, he was recruited by the ID Air Force fulfilling his compulsory military obligation as a fighter pilot, receiving commissions and a college degree. Upon serving two years beyond his service agreement, he was favored by the Mossad and ended up in the very clandestine Metsada branch where he became highly respected by the small covert society for his fearless devotion.

Besides his impressive resume and striking good looks, there was something more about Eitan that Army liked but couldn't quite put her finger on. As the evening wore on and the Chardonnay began its liberating effect, Army learned that Eitan was an interrogation specialist with the Metsada. He assured her that given an hour with the sadistic Chechen she would tell all she knew. "This guy doesn't know Radayeva," she thought as she watched him put away his lamb chops. By the time the night was over, Army had learned something about her new partner's surface but little about his interior. And what was more troubling was the realization that he had made little inquiry about her role in the scheme of things. A flight to Sarajevo was arranged with the Air Force on a C-130 Hercules transport aircraft and scheduled to leave Andrews at two-thirty that night. They would travel as Mr. and Mrs. Armendorfer in an effort to conceal their identities.

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## **The President's Alliance**

An octagon table highlighted the seldom-used conference room where the five loyalists gathered to conduct a meeting of the highest confidentiality. On the table before each member of the private alliance lay a copy of the classified file "Day of Vindication". Ted Clark's objective was to bring the circle up to date on the progress of the plan. In attendance besides Clark were Langford, Mendez, Barker, and Admiral Buzz Atchison, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Clark informed those present that their shared cooperation with the Israelis had produced some positive results and the first part of the administration's proposal was being actively pursued. The men thumbed through their folders at individual pace while Clark updated the evolution of the policy. These five officials, along with the Vice-President, the Secretary of Defense and the Commander and Chief himself, were the authors of the top-secret scheme. But because of the very risky prospect of a disclosure only eight copies detailing the full intention existed, and they were kept in a vault in the oval office to be used exclusively at White House staff meetings.

So it was at this given opportunity that each member took advantage of his exposure to the file. Studying the contents also enabled him to silently question his own misgivings about being part of such a conspiracy. Clark informed the fearsome five-some that the Israelis were holding their own although the blockade was beginning to take a toll and that there was talk at the highest government levels about the possibility of disbanding the nation rather than face the consequences of all-out war without military support of the west. Germany had stepped up to the plate and taken the lead in proposing a European Israel. They were currently in discussions with Switzerland and Austria about sharing the responsibility in the annexation of land for the cause. Germany's act of benevolence was not one kindled by guilt so much as that of

selfpreservation. One of the six remaining Qaidat al-Jihad bombs was believed to be somewhere in the Fatherland.

The Jews remained isolated by a line of military demarcation. The only way in or out of the Holy Land was by air, but their worldwide intelligence network was still in order, working closely with the free world to locate the missing bombs. Clark passed the baton to Barker who updated the committee on the progress of the FBI and their pursuit of the two international criminals who have all the answers to the hard questions. He explained that the United States and Israel were working jointly, using their best people to apprehend Elana Radayeva, the fearless soldier, and her commander Abdul Favez Abdullah. They are very close to Radayeva, who had been positively identified and detained in Eastern Europe, and expected some conclusive feedback very soon. Both fugitives fled the United States after the Houston bombing into Mexico, leaving a trail of death and destruction in their wake. Abdul was believed to still be in Mexico and was sought there by a multilateral anti-terrorist unit. The remainder of the group discussion focused on how best to disengage hostilities in the Middle East without provoking both parties in the fragile standoff. There was some tough talk on what could happen if Israel was attacked prematurely and what the consequences for America could be should such an attack take place before all their assets were in place. After the proverbial what-ifs and some nervous foot shuffling, the folders were turned in and the meeting adjourned.

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### **Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina**

If Washington was a refrigerator, Sarajevo was the freezer. The trip over the cold Atlantic was no fun either. Army could scarcely get Eitan to say anything, which made the ten-hour journey seem like twenty. The more time she spent with the reclusive agent, the quieter he became. He would discuss the case but only in generalities. To Army, it was a passionate responsibility because of her personal experience with Elana. To Eitan, it was another assignment and that made her dubious. Actually, it bothered her. She always felt secure with Ralph; knowing he had her back. At this early stage of her relationship with Eitan, she wasn't sure he could be depended on. The only encouraging part of the long ride was when he asked her if they could compare notes after they were settled in Sarajevo. Apparently he was as curious about the file, or lack of it, as she was.

Army's apprehension about her encounter with Radayeva was founded on the chilling fact that she had murdered the only man Army had ever loved, but that was only part of the anguish. It wasn't every day that you stood eye to eye with one of the most brutal cold-hearted killers on record. Elana didn't have a cause like her Islamic associate. She killed for the thrill of it. That was the sum value of her life. She was the poster child for everything that was wrong and wicked in this world. Army was all too familiar with this odious character from afar, but now she would face the reality of her nightmares and that's what she was so uneasy about.

After registering into a Sarajevo hotel as the Armendorfers, Army went about separating the suite into his and her compartments, and although Eitan didn't seem interested in her feminine charms, she was going to take the initiative to establish boundaries. The purpose of hooking up as husband and wife was to protect the secret collaboration established by the two governments. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but now it felt a little too close. Army suggested something to eat and a nap before their encounter with Elana, but Greenberg decided meeting the she-devil was priority. The Israeli fixed himself a Scotch and water from the liquor stash found in the suite's small refrigerator and phoned the local authorities holding Elana. Army, on the other hand, decided that washing her hair was the second most desirable thing she wanted to do, somewhere right behind taking a nap. She found herself standing in front of an oversized basin, staring through bloodshot eyes at herself in a mirror the width of Coney Island. It felt like every dust mite on the musty transport had relocated in her hair. She adjusted the shower and then removed her clothing, letting it fall where she stood. The hot soothing water provided the therapeutic comfort she longed for. While she shampooed, she wondered what she was doing in Sarajevo when she was so happy in Miami. Satisfied she had fully rinsed the peach conditioner out of her black locks she cracked the opaque shower door and reached for an oversize towel that hung on the rack next to the shower.

Suddenly realizing she was not alone, she dropped the towel and instinctively assumed a defensive position with cat-like reflexes in an effort to protect herself from the intruder. Eitan, who was standing at

the entrance of the bathroom, took a step back and raised his hands as if to surrender while smiling at the veracity of Army's uninhabited disposition.

"I'm sorry, very sorry," he said. "The door was half open and I didn't realize you were not dressed. Please, forgive me." Army relaxed, reached down picked up the bath towel and wrapped it around her.

"I'm dressed," she said, fuming at the audacity of this alien interloper. "Your bathroom is on the other side of the suite just in case you didn't know."

It was at that moment that Eitan realized what he had been paired with. This was no ordinary girl. She had what it took, and it didn't hurt that she was easy to look at too. It was going to be hard to separate the two, he thought.

"Please, Miss. Armendorfer. I can assure you this was an honest mistake. I have some very bad news I thought you would want to know right away...Radayeva escaped."

"What?! How do you let the world's most dangerous fugitive get away? Who are these idiots? Get out of my bathroom!" she screamed while wrestling with the slipping towel.

After slamming the bathroom door in Greenberg's face and seeing her partially nude reflection in the mammoth mirror, she broke-down. She wasn't sure whether it was Elana's escape that made her cry or the humiliation that her altogether had been exposed to her new partner.

Ten minutes later they were on their way to the Serbian State Police headquarters to investigate the screw up. Eitan tried to explain to Army the getaway as best he understood it according to the phone conversation he had with the DB (Serbian State Police).

It seemed Bosnia-Herzegovina had three separate intelligence agencies that were established after the civil war in the early nineties - the Serbs, the Croats, and the Muslims. Apparently nobody knows who runs what, but it's the DB that the US recognizes, and according to the Serbs Elana was turned over to the SNS (National Security Service), a Croatian outfit closely aligned with the now illegal AID (Information and Documentation), a Muslim organization. Eitan assumed she was first arrested by city police in Sarajevo who couldn't wait to get her off their hands, so they turned her over to the SNS.

Army's eyes stayed fixed on the passing landscape, occasionally catching a glimpse of Eitan's reflection in her icy passenger side window. She tried to imagine the incompetence it took to permit Radayeva to walk and what effect her fortuitous striptease had on Eitan. After a brief conference with SNS officials, the duo learned the circumstances behind the convenient ineptitude. The Croats released a Ruslana Petrova twelve hours earlier using mistaken identity as the reason. According to the SNS, all of Petrova's papers were in order so they had no other choice but to let her go. The arrest photo revealed a redheaded Elana.

It was a double disaster for the twosome; the agents were forced to reveal their cover as happily married newlyweds to the Croats and did so without having Radayeva in custody. If the hint that the Jews and Americans were working together became widely acknowledged the whole mission would be compromised.

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## **Jerusalem, Israel**

In a conference room not unlike the one used by the patriots in Washington, a small but powerful group of Israeli policy makers were gathered to consider the unthinkable; the prospective extinction of the tiny country they so dearly loved and were connected to by antiquity. Presiding over the meeting was Prime Minister Yaron Sharett. He was joined by the Minister of Defense, the Secretary of the Military, Israel's National Security adviser and Mossad Chief Gavriel Zachariah.

It wouldn't be the first time someone had tried to exterminate the Jews. From the pharaohs to Hitler, history was marked with acts of violence and genocide against the tiny enclave of humanity. This body of loyalists was determined not to let it happen again. With an estimated two hundred nuclear warheads and the capability to deliver, Israel was the third most dangerous nuclear power on earth. The sheer weight of their destructive power had deterred their adversary for the time being. Today's business was designed to identify available options and then determine what direction to take. A first strike with a definitive target had always been an alternative for Israel if their existence was at stake, but in the war against terror, targets were harder to define. A nuclear launch against a civilian population had never been acceptable, however, in order to eliminate the threat and ensure survival, the option has been tagged for discussion.

They would address the German initiative but the likelihood of a European Israel was next to none. Giving up the land was giving up their identity and that was just not going to happen. Europe would demand a total dismantling of the Israeli armed forces. The new state would then be placed under the protection of NATO. The anti-Semitic mindset of world opinion had created a no-trust mentality among Jewish leaders. To disarm was to commit suicide.

The leaders agreed they would continue to publicly consider displacement in an effort to buy time while they secretly waited on the American agenda. It was, in fact, the only option open. The table was turned over to Gavriel Zachariah, the crusty head of Mossad, the Israeli equivalent to the United States Central Intelligence Agency. Gavriel would provide as much Intel as he could given the limited amount of information the United States had provided him with. He would like to tell them to shove it.

The Americans had squelched every Jewish military advance in every war of survival since 1948, leaving the enemy alive to build and fight another day. Zachariah's opinion of the American purse string was not flattering but he realized that America had kept his beloved country afloat. He explained to the committee that they were working closely with the US on a plan to recover and disarm the bombs. He felt like this was a realistic objective, but the Americans had been mum on what would happen after that hurdle was reached. He didn't spare his sentiments to his colleagues on how he felt about being only partially informed. He continued to brief the group on his bureau effort, explaining there was a team of agents hot on the trail of Abdul Fayez Abdullah. While most of the world's sleuths were still looking in Mexico, his boys were ninety percent certain they had him cornered in Shiraz, Iran and were working on a way to get him out and back to Tel Aviv where he could be properly interrogated.

Gavriel Zachariah was old school when it came to intelligence gathering. He believed that people on the ground, informants, faction infiltration, grassroots undercover work, was always better than all the spy satellites in the universe. As a young soldier in 1948, he was trained in the fledgling intelligence division of the new Israeli Defense Force formed after the British mandated the Holy Land be divided into two states, Arab and Jew. The idea didn't take with the Palestinian Arabs so they resisted with the help of their neighbors Egypt, Syria, and Iraq. The Jews were forced to defend their new state at all costs and so the brutal Israeli interrogation process was born and remains the most lethal information source of the Mossad even though it's categorically denied on the world stage.

He was sure that if they could question Abdullah they have the resources to glean everything he knew. Zachariah agreed to keep the Americans informed, or at least partially informed, on their progress.

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## **The Oval Office**

The President has asked his trusted friend Ted Clark to see him before the day's end. Two cocktail glasses and a fifth of Scotch waited patiently on the corner of the HM Resolute. It was the same kind of day it had been for weeks in the nation's capital, gloomy and overcast. The President expected Clark to bring him up to date on the Vindication file and he would count on his old friend to help him work through some of the uncertainties. Theirs was a long relationship, dating back to the University of Virginia where they were roommates during their undergraduate studies. The President was always the high profile guy. He had the charisma and the intrinsic quality of a leader, while Ted Clark was resigned to play the lesser roll. The two were joined at the hip in college and remained the same in political life.

It was late in the afternoon by the time Clark entered the oval office to find his friend pouring the Scotch. The two men traded hellos and then took their respective seats; the President behind the great desk, Clark in front. As long as Ted Clark had known his boss, he had been able to decipher his mood at a glance. Today the President was troubled and uneasy. They perspicaciously studied each other before taking a drink. The President took a second sip and then left the desk in favor of the large oval window directly behind it. He stared out into the gray gloom while he tried to work out his thoughts.

"Did you ever notice that a cockroach runs when you turn on the lights?" he asked, breaking the silence. Clark knew the President had to go somewhere with this question. He knew that there was a much larger issue behind the analogy.

"No, I can't say that I have paid much attention," he said, taking another sip of his Scotch.

"It's true," continued the President, turning back around to face his comrade. "The lowly cockroach knows the difference between dark and light. He knows that when the lights come on he's vulnerable. The



nasty little malefactor has awareness. As long as he stays in the shadows, he's safe. But as soon as the lights come on, he's exposed and squashed."

"I've stepped on a few," said Clark, still not sure where the President was going. He poured them both a second drink and waited for the chief to finish his thought.

The President sat back down at the desk and took a big gulp of the whiskey. "I feel like a cockroach," he said, setting the glass down on the desk. "It's a despicable thing we are going to do, Ted. I'm not sure I can go through with it."

Now Clark became uncomfortable and shifted his own weight, slightly moving the chair. "It must be done, Mr. President, for the sake of the generations that follow. We have no other choice. We simply cannot let Houston die in vain."

The President finished his second drink and watched his inhibitions gradually disappear into the bottom of the glass. "I have hid in the shadows of a lie. I have told the American people that I am the president of peace. I have assured them of a benevolent future. I am no better than a cockroach..."

Clark hurriedly broke in to head off the depressive pattern his friend had taken. "Mr. President, light and right are the same thing. You will be exonerated soon after the mission is accomplished and all the facts made known, very much like the man from Independence, Missouri, Harry Truman."

"Not so, my good friend, I fear this is a perilous path we take, one in which the consequences could prove fatal to America." A third drink was poured and consumed in silence. Reaching for the bottle of Scotch to pour a fourth drink, the President was stopped by an uplifted hand.

"No more for me, thanks." The Commander hesitated and then poured himself half a shot. He rolled it around the glass and then tossed it down without a flinch.

"Alright, tell me what you have."

Clark explained that Radayeva had slipped through the cracks in Sarajevo, but had no place to go, and that the FBI expected to run her down in due order. He detailed his boss on the recent meetings held with their people, and with the Israelis, assuring him that everything was in place to complete the operation.

The Israelis claimed they had Abdullah in their sights and thought it only a matter of time before he would eagerly give up the pertinent information necessary to accomplish the task. He reassured the President that the Jews were not privy to the full dossier but the mission could not be accomplished without their cooperation in spite of their prolific arrogance.

By now the Scotch had done its job, landing directly in the center of the President's melancholy. He heard very little of Clark's update. His mind continued to replay the doubts. He took a stab at a question he thought was relative to the briefing hoping it would appear that he was paying attention.

"So, how close are we to recovering the three bombs?"

"The three bombs?" Clark said, repeating the question. He was distracted because he had just been through all of that.

"Yes, the three bombs, how close are we to them?" Clark knew that any further explanation would go unheralded but he also knew that his old friend needed a reassuring ear.

"The FBI now believes that there are only two remaining bombs. They think the third bomb, the one programmed for New York, was either bogus or not functional. At any rate, they are concentrating on the two missing vans. They are confident that either Abdullah or Radayeva can lead us to those locations."

The President appeared to be listening while staring into the empty glass that sat in front of him. Ted Clark knew something about the President that few others did. His friend was bi-polar and turned to the drink when the depression became demoralizing. It was at times like this that he felt closest to his country's leader, and it was at times like this that the President appreciated Ted Clark the most.

"Are you a believer?" the President asked his old friend, his gaze still fixed on the empty glass.

"A believer?" repeated Clark. He knew his boss was an avid Bible reader.

"Yes, you know. Do you believe there's a greater cause, a supreme being, an answer to the mayhem?" The President was now staring directly at his advisor. Clark considered the question with a certain amount of introspection.

"I suppose I do. What role He would play in this matter, I'm just not sure."

The President's eyes dropped back down to the glass he now held. He rolled the glass around as though there was still something in it. "Significant, I think," he said finally. Clark thought he knew where the President was going. "Many throughout history have sacrificed everything for the right cause. Is it so wrong to ask a few more to do the same this one last time?"

Clark filled the glasses with the remaining Scotch and then held it high in a salute to his commander. The President acknowledged, and did the same to his trusted deputy. It would be a long night in the Oval Office.

\* \* \*

## **An Evening In Sarajevo**

Army had heard nothing from Spencer in two days. Initially she was told to sit tight and wait until further notice. That was right after she broke the news to the bureau that Elana had escaped, and right before Eitan apologized a second time for his indiscretion in the powder room. The Serbs assured the two agents that Radayeva could not dodge them for very long and that they would pick her up presently.

Army moved around her section of the hotel suite with some freedom, making sure she was fully clothed at all times and trying to remain as professional as possible under the cramped circumstances. What she liked most about working with Ralph was that she was always comfortable with him. She didn't have to worry about these kinds of things. Maybe it was because they had worked together for so long, or maybe it was for some other reason. Whatever, she was tired of eating out of a box and having little if any conversation with her present roommate. She decided that men are the same everywhere and if she didn't initiate some kind of truce it would never get done. Anyway, he was probably still embarrassed about the shower incident.

Eitan, on the other hand, spent most of his down time in front of his laptop or on the phone. He wasn't ignoring Army or being intentionally rude he was just intensely focused on the job he was given. This was a matter of his national life or death. There was little time to be concerned about relationships, either personal or professional. At the computer is where Army found him when she entered the small but lavish dining area of the hotel suite.

"What do you say we go out for something to eat?" she asked, startling him. Eitan twitched, looked up for an instant, and then his attention was drawn back to the laptop.

"Give me one more minute please." he said.

Army casually worked her way around behind her Israeli counterpart to get a better view of the screen. The panel on the computer was crammed with entries. It looked like Eitan was working on some kind of word study. There were two columns; one was headed by the term "Vindication", the other column was in Hebrew. Below each heading was a list of words and their meanings. Below the two columns were what appeared to be bible passages. Army bent down for a closer look, resting her hand on his shoulder.

"What's this?" she asked.

"Nothing important," he said, shutting down the computer. "What did you have in mind?"

"Eating," Army answered, just short of sarcasm. Her attention was still on the laptop screen trying to take a mind picture of its content before it went blank.

"Where would you like to go?" Eitan asked, turning his head toward Army only to realize that his lips were an inch from her cheek. It had been a long while since he was this close to a woman, but he knew the smell. The smell of a beautiful woman was universal.

The downside of working in the Israeli intelligence community was that you never had time to do anything but work. He had little experience with the supple gender, at least the kind of experience that one could build a relationship on. He was not as standoffish as he seemed, more self-conscious than aloof, especially when it came to women. Meanwhile Army's attention remained on the laptop's fading panel.

"What was that all about?" she asked again while still focused on the blank screen. It was a vulnerable moment for Eitan. If she would turn her face toward him their lips would meet by accident. She didn't. She straightened up, removing her hand from his shoulder. As suddenly as he was distracted, he was back in character, privately demeaning himself for the momentary lapse of judgment.

"I know a nice place by the river. We can go there."

"Great, I'll be ready in thirty minutes," said Army, leaving Eitan and the neutral zone for her section of the suite.

Army had been cold from the minute she left Florida, and Sarajevo was literally the tip of the iceberg. She was always careful about how she looked. It was more a professional consideration than vanity, but she liked looking like a lady just the same. She determined early on that she would not accept the stereotyped image of the masculine raw-boned policewoman. Her intention was to come across like a pro while

remaining feminine regardless of the circumstances, but tonight's chill would call for compromise. A pair of snug fashion jeans and a turtleneck would get the job done, and if she needed to exercise raw-bone force the 9mm Beretta she carried in the pocket of her parka would be a sufficient measure of muscle.

Eitan changed from a well-used sweat suit to his patent mismatched sport coat and wrinkle free gabardines, a black crewneck sweater underneath for warmth with half of the white shirt collar trapped under the fuzz-ball-laden pullover. A dark beret that partially covered his coiled locks rested just above his ears. Greenberg's raw-bone of choice was a Jericho 941 Desert Eagle that he kept strapped to his side.

The snow had been accumulating for most of the day. Eight to ten inches had fallen already with more forecasted. There was something about a fresh snowstorm that shaped a buoyant attitude. The city teemed with exuberance as the taxi made its way along the south bank of the Miljacka. The cheerfulness was contagious. Army felt more alive than she had in weeks and she even thought she might have detected some sentiment of hope on Eitan's normally solemn face. The cab stayed on course until it arrived at the Inat Koca Restoran, a charming city restaurant overlooking the brooding Miljacka River. Eitan had contributed some small talk on their short trip to the restaurant, but mostly he listened to Army carry on about how the snow had changed an already beautiful city into a wonderland.

Army took a backseat to no one when it came to police work but her experience was limited to stateside home security. She was an expert on Islamic culture but it was mostly derived from textbooks. Eitan, on the other hand, was an experienced globetrotter who easily adjusted to different traditions. Sarajevo was a western city with sympathetic ties to radical Islamic factions and his work with Metsada had brought him there many times. The soldiers of liberty were seated by a window with a spectacular view overlooking a walkover that crossed the river just in front of the trendy restaurant. Large concourse lights cast their soft hue against the new fallen snow illuminating the old bridge where people crossed the river, played, and in general painted a surreal picture of a bygone era. Army could hardly contain the excitement she felt in that moment. It was as though she had known Eitan most of her life. It was as though she could trust him like she trusted Ralph, talk to him about almost anything, be intimate. She knew it was just the night, the snow. It felt wonderful and she didn't want to let go of the feeling, at least for a while longer. She turned from the idyllic wonderland to catch Eitan staring at her from across the table. The reflection of the snow from the streetlights made his eyes glisten and he was laughing out loud, an emotion Army was not accustomed to coming from her new partner.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"You. You're like a child visiting the North Pole for the first time. It's very appealing." Army wondered if there was a tender side trying to escape the vague exterior of her Jewish equivalent. She decided it was safe to probe a little.

"What about you Eitan? What makes you tick?" she asked. His expression changed from warm and fuzzy to defensive. She knew she had entered hallowed ground.

"You want to know something about me personally?"

"Yeah, that's pretty much it," Army shot back, feeling a little on the defensive herself. "I'd like to know something about the person my life may depend on. I'm not really crazy about working with a cardboard cutout, if you know what I mean."

It was Eitan's turn to gaze pensively at the snowy wonderland on the other side of the window for a moment. Army hoped she hadn't pushed to far; the evening had such a wonderful start and now it looked like Eitan had withdrawn back into his shell. She studied the conflict in his face as he gazed at the activities on the outside. It was a rugged but benevolent face. He was undeniably a contradiction, but then so was Ralph. She wondered if she had made a mistake by prying and wished she could start all over again when Eitan turned back toward her, smiling.

"Why not," he said. "My life has one purpose, the preservation of Israel. Nothing else is important." Their eyes met and they studied each other for an instant.

"What about you personally?" she asked.

"Don't you have selfish aspirations, marriage, children, picket fence, that sort of thing?" Army didn't fully understand the degree of commitment Eitan lived by. Her father was wealthy. She had anything she wanted...everything but undying commitment. She was a patriot, good at her job, but she would give it up in a minute if the right guy came along.

"Yes, of course, but that sort of thing can wait until the job is done," said Eitan.

"I don't want to raise children in a world where fear is a way of life and terror rules. We are in a must-win war, Army, where the survival of humankind lies in the balance. There is a devilish spirit sweeping the globe whose sole purpose is the extermination of the Jews. His army will not sleep until the job is done or

he is defeated. The Houston carnage is absolute evidence that this demon will use the deadliest force available to him." Eitan focused on his water glass for a moment and then slowly took a drink, considering whether or not to make the next statement, and then went ahead. "I believe your government is working on such a plan, but I'm afraid it's the wrong way to accomplish a lasting victory against these powers of evil."

"Are you talking about the Vindication File?" asked a fascinated Army. "Is that what you were working on today?"

"I would like for you to meet my father, Army. Could you arrange it?" Eitan replied without answering her question.

Army was caught off guard. "Well, eh...sure...if Leonard will give me the time." She wasn't certain what she had agreed to but it was impossible to deny him when he seemed so vulnerable. The two stared at each other with bewildered appreciation as the waiter arrived with their order, a bottle of Pinot Noir, and two plates of Cevapi, the specialty of the house. After finishing their Cevapi, they worked on the rest of the burgundy while staring out the window at the beauty that was Sarajevo.

The serenity was interrupted by Eitan's cell phone. It was the Serbian state police. They had Elana Radayeva back in custody.

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## DB Headquarters

It was about 9:30 PM by the time the two investigators found their way back to the Serbian State Police headquarters. The building was a restored high-rise leftover from the siege of Sarajevo during the Bosnia-Herzegovina civil war. In 1994, Croat sharpshooters were using the burned out edifice to kill anything that moved on the streets below. It was now a very busy five-story office building well suited for the job it had been given. Elana was being held on the fourth floor in a isolated waiting room pending the arrival of her interrogators. The security was overkill. The Serbs were determined not to be embarrassed again. Army and Eitan were met by a Major Smailovic and escorted to the room Elana was being held in.

What started out as a beautiful evening had turned into the recurring nightmare Army had suffered through for the last six months. Facing the person who murdered your soul mate would be a psychological challenge for anyone, but for Army it was more than that. She had blamed herself for what happened to Ralph. If she would have been there covering his back it might have gone down differently. But not only that, she secretly resented Ralph's obsession with the witch. A single 9mm hollow nose between the eyes would be gratification enough, but that was not going to happen, and Army knew she had to get her act together before she confronted her. The elevator was under repair so the party had to climb the four flights of stairs to reach the waiting room. The lengthy walk up was all right with Army. It gave her a chance to prepare for the encounter. Eitan, on the other hand, was an elite world-class operative in top physical condition. It was his trademark and he was proud of it. When you won your fighter wings in the ID Air Force the entire graduating class of new officers were expected to run to the top of mount Masada. The ancient stronghold located on the western shore of the Dead Sea is where a handful of heroic Jewish patriots held off the entire Roman army's Tenth Legion to the last man. He hadn't lost a step since he first ran up that mountain over fifteen years ago.

It was established ahead of time that Eitan would be given full authority in the questioning of Radayeva. Interrogation was his specialty. This is why he was brought into the mix. Army and the Serbian police officer would accompany him through the first phase of the examination. Should Elana not cooperate during the conventional interview, another room on the fifth floor had been prepared and phase two would go into effect. Eitan had requested the second room be equipped with a large sink or bowl with running water, a six-foot hose with a power nozzle, and a roll of duct tape. If the second stage had to be undertaken, only Eitan and Elana would occupy the room.

Army had some questions of her own she wanted to ask Radayeva. Why did you kill Ebba Arndt, what did she ever do to you? And why did you have to shoot Ralph? Why did you blow up a million people, you psychotic drudge? By the time they had reached the fourth floor, Army was besieged with the anguish and hate she had repressed over the last six months. She sensed her hand tightly caressing the cold steel pistol that was snugly tucked away in the pocket of her coat. She could feel her finger sliding the safety forward but could do nothing to stop it. Her mind and body were in grave conflict, tearing at her very soul with

equal force. Two heavily armed police officers stood sentry at the door and two more were inside the waiting room with Elana.

Major Smilovic entered first, followed by Eitan, and then Army, her hand firmly planted on the grip of the Barreta in her pocket. As the two men parted in front of her, Army became aware of Elana seated at a small table in the back of the room. Their eyes met and for a moment time and space fused. She was not the cunning architect of death Army had expected to find. What sat before her at a scuffed oak table in a primitive waiting room in Sarajevo Bosnia-Herzegovina was merely the shell of a woman, shackled and shivering. Army drew a deep breath and relaxed the trigger finger on her concealed pistol. She expected to feel different about Elana, bitter and hateful, but she didn't. She felt sorry for her. As she slowly approached the table, being careful not to lose eye contact, her mind began to replay the morbid memories of that awful week in July. Thoughts came in rapid succession - the warehouse, Ebba Arndt's slumped body, Bud Singh, Norman Yarbrough's ring finger, Ralph. She was confused now. How could she feel sorry for a ruthless pathological killer? They had warned her about such things when she went through the academy. They called it Social Cognition. All she knew was that the Chechen monster Elana Radayeva was now reduced to a pathetic disheveled lump of humanity.

The two women were from different worlds, one privileged, one destitute, one educated, the other illiterate. But in some ways they were a lot alike, unforgiving and determined. It was their likeness that Army despised most about Elana. It was fear that kept Elana's eyes fastened to Army's. She didn't have the capacity to regret or reason or express any normal emotion. Instinct comprised the sum total of her primitive nature. Army took a seat at the table opposite Elana and searched for the right words that would crack the silence, but none came. The two women simply stared at each other until Eitan broke in from behind Army. "Are you Elana Radayeva?"

"My name is Ruslana Petrova," Elana answered with her thick accent, looking up at Eitan and away from Army. Eitan had made his way to the table, gently nudging Army. The two exchanged places, positioning Eitan eye to eye with Elana. He could now see the eternal emptiness. There was no soul at the back of her hollow eyes. He had seen the look many times before; no hope, no future, no reason to live.

"Miss Radayeva, we can make this easy or complicated - the decision is yours. I can tell you this, we will have the information we seek one way or the other."

Army knew now what it was about Eitan that she liked. She had heard this kind of in-your-face interview before. She smiled, inadvertently grabbing the Chechen's attention. Elana's countenance warped with distortion as though being possessed by some kind of mythological beast, and then she abruptly spit in Eitan's face. The Israeli agent said nothing while pulling a neatly folded hanky from the back of his gabardines and calmly wiped the spit from his cheek. He nodded at the Major. The Major then nodded at the two guards who were standing by. Immediately they seized Elana by the arms, lifted her to her feet and escorted her out of the room. Chains fastened at her ankles and wrists caused her to shuffle when she walked, giving her the appearance of a stumbling vagabond. By the time they reached the fifth floor the two security guards had been dismissed.

Burned out light bulbs and faulty fixtures cast a shadowy pretense in the hallway. The corridor was narrow, running the length of the building. At each end was a window that dropped from the ceiling to the floor. A wrought-iron guardrail protected the bottom part of the glass panel. Elana's eyes stayed glued to her feet while she hobbled up the steps leading to the top floor. No one said a word on the way up, but the clanking of the chain shackles on her ankles spoke volumes throughout the slow methodical climb. In her own simple way of thinking she had determined that she would not leave the fifth floor the same way that she arrived. It was not because of her fierce loyalty to the cause. It was because she just didn't care anymore. Screw these people, screw Islam and screw this world. She stopped at the window and peered out into the darkness. Her eyes filled as she saw her wasted life pass before her in the night. It was a strange emotion she hadn't felt since a time long ago. The snow was coming harder now. The orange glow of the streetlights in the driving blizzard was scarcely discernible. Gently she lifted her cuffed hands and wiped the tear from under her eye.

"This way," barked the Major holding his hand in the direction of the new interrogation room.

Army and Eitan, who had paused with Elana, turned to follow the officer. The party was moving slowly but certainly when suddenly Elana turned and bolted between the two agents toward the window. By the time Army realized what was happening, Elana had circumvented the guardrail, bursting headfirst through the glass pane on her way down to the winter wonderland below. Army frantically ran down the five flights of stairs but was unable to reach the heap of hopeless despair in time. Elana lay crumpled in the deep snow, a result of her short journey. It was Army's turn to reflect on things important. Her eyes filled. She quickly

wiped away the anguish before the others arrived. She wasn't sure if her sentiment was caused by social cognition or genuine compassion for a wayward human being.

\* \* \*

## **Shiraz, Iran**

The Zagros Mountains are the backdrop of this enchanting city known for its romantic Persian culture. Recently, it had become an Islamic hotbed of hatred, sponsoring conventions that called for the invasion of Israel at any cost. An overcast night had provided cover for the two Black Hawk MH- 60's helicopters that secretly worked their way along foothills just above Shiraz in search of the signal light that would offer a safe haven until their equally stealthy departure. The choppers carried six Israeli Rangers on a must-succeed mission with global ramifications. The elite six were children of Iranian Jews who immigrated to Israel from Shiraz in 1979 to escape Ayatollah Khomeini's reign of terror during the Iranian Revolution.

One hundred and forty miles southeast of Shiraz, a S-13 Navy commando unit had been deployed to follow the Mand River to a location just south of the city in case a southern escape route was necessary. Standing off the coast near the mouth of the Mand in Gulf waters were two missile boats temporarily equipped with chopper pads. The exercise was expected to take less than six hours under the cover of night. Abdul Fayes Abdullah would speak at a youth rally in Shiraz, the city of poetry and roses, that evening. The message will be, "take back your true Islamic heritage from the old-line conservative Muslim leadership." Thanks to a small enclave of Iranian Jews still loyal to their ancestral past, Israeli intelligence had identified the mountain compound of a young radical Qaidat al-Jihad financier believed to be hosting Abdullah. His money came from the family fortune made in black gold during the boom years of the eighties and nineties.

The brave Iranian relatives of the six young commandos provided the vital information needed to find Abdul and complete the Ranger operation. The Abdullah rally was scheduled to take place at the Islamic Azad University of Shiraz. Because he was so highly revered by Muslim youth and being safely tucked away in Iran, Abdul believed he was beyond the reach of international justice. He believed Allah had given him a new direction. His roll now in life was to recruit a fresh generation of revolutionaries ready to carry on the progress of Osama bin Laden, the resurrected Muhammad. Because of his fearless devotion to the cause and the deficient regard for his own safety, he began to foolishly venture out into public more frequently with less caution.

A successful operation would put Abdullah in the hands of the Israelis before the night ended. The plan was to snatch the fugitive on a stretch of isolated road between Shiraz and the safety of his mountain refuge following the rally. A transport truck would be positioned across the highway in what appeared to be a jackknifed accident blocking passage. When the two automobiles in Abdul's entourage were forced to stop and investigate the wreck, a shoulder launched SA-18 Grouse missile would eliminate the escort car. The three bodyguards in Abdul's vehicle including his young host would be shot dead before they could exit their BMW.

If the exercise went according to design, the truck would then transport the Rangers along with their prisoner back to the Hawks where they will convene with the waiting missile boats, refuel, and then head for home with there prize cargo, Abdul Faye Abdullah, the mastermind of the Houston disaster.

\* \* \*

## **Tel Aviv**

The flight to Tel Aviv was arduous. Army had spent most of the previous day sleeping, eating sugarcoated corn flakes and tossing down Trazodone. Her body clock was screwed up. It couldn't decipher day from night, and on top of that she started her period. The untimely death of Elana had made the whole Sarajevo experience a colossal waste of time, and now she was on her way to Israel to meet the Greenbergs. There was a certain amount of apprehension at the prospect of such an encounter, mainly because she didn't understand why Eitan wanted her to meet his father, and secondly she had yet to file a Sarajevo report with the bureau's resident caveman, Jason Spencer. The reality was that she had received clearance to accompany the Israeli agent to Tel Aviv before the Radayeva account was finished was a bit of a puzzle but

she reasoned it was because of the quickly developing circumstances there. Eitan on the other hand was uncharacteristically perky. As he put it, "I'm ready to depart this wasteland of human ineptness for greener pastures."

He had been weary of the DB's lack of security from the time they had arrived and placed the blame for Elana's loss squarely in their corner. He believed the Sarajevo bungle was a paralyzing setback to the mission until the blow was softened when he received word that Abdullah was safely in the hands of the Metsada and that his services would be required in Tel Aviv as soon as he could arrange a flight out. Greenberg was confident that there would be no slip ups on the part of Metsada and that the opportunity to question Qaidat's bad boy was just a matter of time. It took six hours to make the flight to Tel Aviv. The bad news was that they had to drive to Belgrade to get a same day flight. By the time they were airborne, Army was miserable, her head ached, she had the cramps, and Eitan was far too upbeat to suit her tender condition.

Finally in the air, she rested her head on the diminutive airline pillow while covertly studying her companion through one slightly squinted eye. His rugged good looks were almost reason to forgive his bad manners. He was personally very clean and shaved almost every other day. The few clothes that he had were laundered frequently but never pressed. It was like the crumpled look was fashionable. He was thoughtful enough when it occurred to him to be that way but it seldom occurred to him. The man from Tel Aviv was still a work in progress but Army found herself preoccupied with the idea. Still feigning sleep she watched as he launched into his sub sandwich, devouring it with malicious intent and then slyly laying claim to the sandwich on her tray.

"Forget it," she said, sitting up. "I might need that before this trip is over."

"How are you feeling?" he asked, smiling sheepishly while putting the sub back.

"I'm all right, a little tired. I'll just feel a lot better when all this is over." What Army really yearned for was to be back in Miami at poolside carelessly passing the time away with all her old capitalist friends. Her distress went deeper than she wanted to admit and Eitan knew it. He gently took her hand in a modest gesture of appreciation. He wanted to tell her something very personal. His jocular disposition changed to a guarded assurance. Army straightened with anticipation. Her partner was about to confide in her for the first time since they had met. She sensed a genuine attempt at trust.

"I am concerned about my parents if we fail to resolve this standoff," he said. "My country will not settle for a so-called relocation. We will defend our right to this land as long as there is a man woman or child left standing. We have a God given right to be here. These fanatics don't realize they could unleash a world war that no one can recover from." Army nodded in agreement. She was captured more by the confidence he seemed to place in her than the content of the words he spoke. She tried to piece together what he just said so she could respond in some coherent manner.

"Why don't they just move back to Boston?" she said at last. Eitan's face tightened slightly. He continued to grip her hand gently while staring bewildered into her eyes. She flushed and knew she had said something stupid.

The face-off was only temporary. He smiled big. "Why don't you save that question for them?"

Ben Gurion International had become a hopeless quagmire of disgruntled travelers since the Arab blockade began. The only way in or out of the country was by air. Some Israelis were looking to escape what could be the final showdown after four thousand years of hatred fostered between Abraham's siblings. And then there were those who were determined to make a fight of it and they came in from all over the world. Mostly they were zealous misguided Christians who planned to be in the Holy Land when Jesus returned to stop the carnage. Couple this injudicious traffic with scores of dignitaries and do-gooders, and then add the tightest airport security on the globe, and you have a difficult if not impossible state of affairs. The safety measures at Ben Gurion started on the tarmac where passengers were greeted and questioned by armed security agents. You then went through multiple phases of scrutiny throughout the airport lasting a minimum of two hours coming in and going out.

Both Army and Eitan's luggage consisted of one midsize carry on apiece. Their hardware was shipped separately in a small case through the baggage hold. Eitan's eyes began a careful search of the tarmac area as soon as he left the airliner on his way down the causeway. He continued to nervously canvas the area while Army fidgeted with the luggage and waited their turn to be questioned with the rest of the passengers on the sun-warmed concrete next to the airplane.

"There!" he said, pointing with his eyes. Army followed his gaze. Off to the left about a hundred paces and moving very fast in their direction were two crumple-dressed men that looked a lot like Eitan from that distance. The two mysterious figures had a short conversation with airport security and then motioned to

Eitan. In no time, the three Israelis and Army were through the airport and on their way to the offices of Intelligence and Special Operations in Tel Aviv, better known as Mossad, a moniker meaning "The Institute". The three men spoke Hebrew as they raced through the streets of the city with no apparent threat of reprisal. Unaware that Army was schooled in the Semitic languages, the Israelis thought they were speaking privately but she was able to pick up some of the animated conversation. Eitan was seated in the front seat next to the driver. The two were doing most of the talking. The other Israeli seated next to Army in the back seat grinned at her a lot. After a brief study of her admirer she quickly concluded that any resemblance to Eitan was only in their sense of fashion.

Part of the conversation Army was able to make out was that the Egyptian prisoner Abdul Fayes was being held in a secret location somewhere in the city, but the interrogation process would wait until tomorrow. The driver told Eitan that Abdullah had been difficult following his arrest and was not cooperating. He went on to explain how the extraction took place without a hitch. It was an operation the entire Israeli intelligence community was excited about. The tone in his voice went up an octave as he discussed the capture and the exploits of the Special Ops team that pulled it off.

There wasn't much time for celebrating. Concern that a major retaliation of some kind, spearheaded by a rogue state or leader, was in the back of everyone's mind. The sooner they could attain the location of the remaining Qaidat al-Jihad bombs, get the Intel to the Americans so they could complete the second phase of their plan, the sooner the world could relax and try to build bridges that had been fractured. What gripped Army the most about the conversation she was eavesdropping on was the blind confidence the Israeli government seemed to put in the American plan which had not been revealed to them or for that matter to anyone except a small band of elite within the White House. The secret plot was quasi-legal because the Houston attack was considered an act of war, giving the President absolute military authority. Eitan's reaction to this naivete was a glance at Army as if to ask the question, "What are they thinking?"

When they arrived at The Institute a short time later, Army was placed on display taken from office to office, meeting everyone from the custodian to Gavriel Zachariah, head of the bureau. Any resemblance between the stuffy formal environment of the FBI and the relaxed nature of the Israeli intelligence network was purely coincidental. The tousled look was a way of life in the ranks. After being the main attraction for an hour, Army tired of the attention and began to look for a rescue. Eitan showed up in the nick of time after an intense accounting to his superiors on the loss of Radayeva and the successful acquisition of Abdullah. It was agreed and arranged that Greenberg would begin to question Abdullah the next morning at three a.m. The Egyptian has been sleep deprived for the last twenty-four hours and should prove to be soft for the interview. Eitan clasped Army by the arm gently escorting her out of the building to a waiting car that had been arranged for the two to use while in Tel Aviv. They drove to the hotel that Army would be staying in that evening.

"Thanks for the rescue," she said as they made their way through the unusually quiet streets of the city.

Eitan smiled. "They don't see many like you in their work. You're a bit of an aberration."

"I'm flattered," she said cynically. She was used to it.

Eitan pulled up to the hotel that faced the broad turquoise waters of the Mediterranean. She was amazed to see old men walking waist deep in the chilly waters while children ran and played on the white sand beach. She shivered and sipped her parka. "It's beautiful," she said as Eitan pulled her bag from the back seat and dropped it to the sidewalk.

"This is where you're staying to night. It has a decent restaurant. Just don't eat the shellfish."

"That's it? You're just leaving me here without further explanation."

"It's all arranged," he said as he drove off. "Just be ready at 2 a.m. tomorrow morning."

"What?! I thought I was meeting your parents," she screamed as he sped away.

The building was a shabby holding facility in the southern sector of Tel Aviv. The Mossad, as well as other law enforcement organizations, used the location at times for the dirty business of persuasive interrogation, as The Institute liked to call it. It was easily secured. It had all the necessary equipment and most importantly was not legally associated with any one group or agency. From the outside, it looked like all the rest of the bricked two story buildings that lined the industrial park, with one noticeable exception - there were no windows on the second floor. The inside was clean but conjured images that might better relate to the Dark Ages. Steel doors with small observation windows that manually opened and shut lined the corridor and there were enough armed guards to defend New Jersey. A distinctive odor lingered on the ground level and grew more pungent as you climbed to the second floor, a smell on the order of a dirty locker room but not so innocent.



"What's that smell?" Army asked as they reached the top of the stairs. Ignoring the query, Eitan continued his march with single-minded objectivity to room seven. Army tried again. "My God what is that smell?"

Arriving at the steel door numbered seven, Eitan slowly slid the window panel to one side and peered in. After a short time, he closed the window and looked down at Army. "Death...what you smell is death." She gasped and then intuitively cupped her mouth and nose with her hands. "He's in there. Do you want to talk to him before I do?" Army could see the struggle in his eyes. He might be good at persuasive interrogation but he didn't like it and he didn't try to hide his feelings.

She gathered her composure and nodded yes. The room was square and well lit. A salon sink occupied one corner. The basin had a neck rest and sported a faucet that towered at least two feet above the porcelain tub. There were other pieces of unidentifiable apparatuses located around the room. Army could only venture a guess as to their purpose but one thing seemed evident - water was the selected choice of persuasion in this room. The prisoner paced back and forth across the far wall while heavy metal music blasted from hidden speakers. The music was undetectable from the outside but inside room seven it was deafening. Abdul stopped pacing when Army entered. Suddenly the room was quiet. The two measured each other for a moment, Abdul smiled and bowed in a conciliatory gesture.

"How do you do, Miss Armendorfer? We meet at last," he said in acceptable English.

"Won't you join me for the concert?" Army acknowledged his ceasefire as she cased the room for someplace to sit.

For the next twenty minutes, she stood and questioned the elusive killer about his role in the Houston affair, his connection with Qaidat al-Jihad, and his relationship to Elana. She found him to be the antithesis of Radayeva. He was educated, articulate, even charming. The interview was revealing, but proved of little value. After every question he would go into a long tirade about the bastard state of Israel, its occupation of Palestinian land, and betrayal of the Arab by America. Army soon tired of the scuffle and excused herself. She left the room to the clamor of the rock band Sludge.

With no more success than name, rank, and serial number, she was glad the location of the toxic hardware was Greenberg's responsibility, but after spending the last half hour with Abdul she questioned whether or not any further interrogation would be effective. She wondered if it would merely lead to a dead end. Her tie to Abdul over the last six months was not as personal as it had been with Elana. She frankly didn't mind if he walked out of room seven or not. After a brief consultation with Army and the rest of the team, Eitan along with an associate, a short heavy-set man, closed the foreboding steel door behind them and locked the window. Army quickly found her way to the outside, turning her face to the wind, endeavoring to cleanse the smell from her nostrils. After a while, she realized it wasn't the odor that stuck to her it was the cause of the odor she couldn't rid herself of.

The next day, sun was trying to make its way to the surface, casting a yellow-gold luster across the eastern horizon. Army rested her tired back against the secluded red brick building half a world away from what she understood and watched the light overcome the darkness in a place notorious for the two extremes. Her time with the bureau began to race across the back of her mind with unwelcome thoughts as she waited on the outcome of room seven. Her work in law enforcement had made her privy to the downside of life, that age-old conflict of good against evil, men that could inflict suffering on another without blinking an eye. She wondered where she fit into the equation. She wondered if Eitan and his friends were the good guys. She wondered if life made any sense at all.

"It's all over," came a voice from behind her. She turned to see Eitan standing in the doorway. His face was drawn. She waited for more explanation. It didn't come.

"What did you find out? Did we get what we needed?" Eitan nodded yes and lit a cigarette.

"What about Abdullah? What..." Eitan took her hand and began to lead her toward the car before she could finish.

"Let's get a cup of coffee. I'll tell you all about it then."

They drove to a diner somewhere in the heart of the city and ordered coffee and a Coke. The drive there was introspectively silent. Eitan languidly stirred his coffee considering how he would explain to Army the results of the interview. Army sipped on her drink, waiting.

"We learned that three bombs remain in the United States." Army put her drink down and gave Greenberg her full attention. He took his first sip of coffee. "We attained the addresses and the cell phone numbers of the two vans. One truck is in Los Angeles, the other Chicago. Abdul didn't know where the third device was. He thought it could still be somewhere in Baton Rouge. He didn't learn until after he had left Louisiana that the third van had broken down." Eitan took a second sip of coffee.

Army prodded. "What about worldwide? What about the others? What about those bombs?"  
"Didn't know anything about that. It wasn't his responsibility."  
"That doesn't leave us much better off than when we started, does it?" she asked.  
Eitan finished his coffee in two gulps and motioned to the waitress for a second cup. "We've got some names." He knew what was coming next.  
"And Abdul...what about Abdul?" she asked.  
Eitan stared into the black confines of his cup for a moment and then took a sip. "He got his wish."  
"What wish?" she asked on impulse...she knew.  
She waited for a longer explanation but none came. They discussed the rest of the matter in detail and then left for the offices of The Institute to file a report.

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## **Doha-Qatar**

Al-Jazeera, the voice of the Middle East, had again been selected to deliver a message of urgent consequence from a Qaidat al-Jihad representative. This time, however, the international viewing audience was a fraction of the dramatic assemblage six months earlier. A post Houston indifference had relaxed the world since that fateful day in July; with original Qaidat al-Jihad demands being satisfied by the Americans and peace and safety the featured result. Only the soon-anticipated relocation of Israel was left to complete the requisite. The text of this latest message had not been previewed so the content is speculative. There is no worldwide interest in programming a fanatical exposition on the state of Islamic affairs. The Americans, however, have been warned by the Jews that Abdul Fayeze Abdullah was snatched from under the nose of his fascist guardian and was being held for questioning. The President's men were glued to the television. They were acutely aware of the possibility of a serious mandate, or worse, the threat of reprisal.

A grubby white banner with "Praise be to Allah" in Arabic was the backdrop for this latest video. Camera angle and kaffiyeh, the traditional tribal scarf, had been used to alter the messenger's identity. The idea was to create the perception that he was either Osama bin Laden in the flesh or the mouthpiece of the resurrected Muhammad. It was amateurishly produced but effective enough. The mysterious figure spoke in a level tone. He first thanked the Americans and then Allah for the wonderful progress they had made working together for a common society. He proudly stated the Islamic community was eager to collectively share their wealth and divine understanding with free nations everywhere in a bold and determined effort to create a world without strife, united under Allah, the one true God.

"And now I must address a very alarming incident that threatens to destroy all the progress we have made. Not long ago, a brother of extraordinary courage and steadfast commitment to Allah was ruthlessly kidnapped in his sleep and carried off to Israel by invading dogs to be held for ransom. This intolerable act of violence cannot be allowed to go unpunished. Therefore, I am demanding that the United States broker the release of Abdul Fayeze Abdullah from the incarceration of the illegal state of Israel immediately. Pay careful attention for this is my promise and the long arm of Allah will be the executioner. If the prisoner is not released within an acceptable time period, I will have no choice but to destroy another American city. It is the will of Allah to defend his gallant soldier. Praise be to Allah. We have worked very closely with all parties to close this regretful page in history and now this unforgivable act of violence threatens to destroy all that we have worked so hard to establish. Peace throughout the earth is the Muslim ambition. The safe return of our beloved warrior will ensure that the process of reconciliation will continue between our two great societies. The eve of the Sabbath will mark the final hour. If Abdul has not been released a second bomb will be detonated." The television signal faded to snow and then returned to the newsroom where Khalil al Masri, the respected face of Al-Jazeera news, was standing by.

"An unidentified Qaidat al-Jihad spokesman had once again warned the United States that if they do not produce the kidnapped Abdul Fayeze Abdullah before twelve o'clock Thursday night, the eve of the Muslim Day of Assembly, they will explode a second nuclear bomb on a city in the United States. Abdullah, one of Qaidat's ranking members and the reputed draftsman of Houston's death sentence, is alleged to be held in Israel at this hour." The anchor claimed an unbiased sentiment, reassuring the viewers that his network only reports the news, but his body language told a different story. He seemed pleased with his critique and secretly hoped the US would fail to comply.

\* \* \*

## The City of Peace

Jerusalem, the city of peace, has endured wars and occupations for four thousand millennia, yet she presides in all her splendor over three opposing faiths. The fabled city with her conflicting diversity stands as a testament to human failure. From Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, it was forty minutes by car - plenty of time for Eitan to set the stage for what Army was about to experience.

Again he was upbeat. The ugly events of yesterday seemed to have little lasting effect. Both agents had crashed a good portion of the day after filing their reports, and then slept the entire night. Now they were on their way to meet the Greenberg's. The whole idea was a mystery to Army, she hardly knew Eitan. Why was she meeting his family? And, why was it so secretive? It obviously had something to do with the plan of action the two countries were collaborating on and more importantly the part they didn't know about. Army had relaxed a little since her introduction to progressive interrogation. She talked to Spencer by phone, giving him all the information Greenberg's team collected relevant to the vans. She then faxed a detailed report to Leonard's office. The sun was up, casting its new life across the ancient countryside of the Judean desert. It should have been a good start to a beautiful morning in the land of God but the smell of death possessed her and all she felt like doing was blow her nose.

"Cut it out," Eitan demanded. "You're acting childish...We had no choice...One man or six million Americans...Get a hold of yourself."

Screw you! She was about to yell when she realized it was that kind of grounding she needed. It's what Ralph would have said. It's what made Guerra and Armendorfer a great team. She wiped her nose for the last time. "What is it with you?" she asked. "How can you feel no remorse after something like that? How can you be so hard-hearted?"

"That's not fair, Army," he said, and she knew it. "It comes with the job." She had heard that before too. She felt better.

Ralph and Eitan were not the same people. They came from different worlds, separated by oceans and cultures. But principles exist within no boundaries. Ralph was the family man every woman wanted. Eitan was still untested. Ralph worked his way through little Havana to a position of honor. Eitan was privileged but equally worthy. Different men in most ways but their commitment to country and values were unrivaled. It was what Army loved about both of them.

"Let me tell you something of how I believe," Eitan persisted. "I believe every day is a new day, a new beginning." Army raised an eyebrow. She didn't want him to ruin the moment with some harebrained self-indulgent psycho blab. He was not deterred. "I mean this literally. It's how I cope, how I deal with unpleasant things. I believe life is a sequence of twenty-four hour cycles. Whatever you're given to endure today will pass and tomorrow will bring a new day full of hope. I can't change yesterday but I can help forge tomorrow." He seemed satisfied with his analogy.

"Yeah, right!" Army said, unconvinced. "Nothing's that easy."

But as they drove in a leisurely fashion along highway 1, she marveled at the citrus groves that sprang from nowhere on the thirsty landscape. She wondered how that was possible. How could you make something grow where nothing would? Then suddenly, as though directed by a divine hand, the morning sun crossed the windshield and shed its warmth on her cynical disposition. It was then that she began to better understand why Eitan could face the new day with a clean slate.

They ascended Mount Zion to the sound of "Jerusalem" by John Starnes. Eitan had slipped the CD in for inspirational effect but Army was unaffected. She came from a reserved secular upbringing where religion was considered corruptive and a waste of time. Education and public service was the creed of the Armendorfers and Army was well disciplined in the family's canon. She was historically acquainted with the Holy Land through her university studies and chosen profession but was void of any spiritual connection. Eitan, on the other hand, was born in Israel for the express purpose of spreading the good news of the Christian gospel. Although his life took a few turns his parents had not anticipated, he still held to their Christian tradition. What was not evident, and he shared with no one, was the daily spiritual conflict he battled within himself. The life he had chosen seemed incompatible with the Christian faith his parents embraced. He had hoped that Army might be able to somehow help fill in some of the blanks that haunted him about his faltering conviction. As far as he knew, she was raised a devoted Christian like all red-blooded American girls. The evangelical sound of John Starnes was designed to set the mood for a weighty

chat on religion. It seemed like a good idea before introducing her to his very zealous parents. Starnes' tenor voice reached for a crescendo as the City of David appeared on the horizon. Eitan had witnessed the sight hundreds of times but it never failed to inspire him. He stole a glance at Army. She looked to be in deep thought as she surveyed the idyllic scene. The time was right just as he had hoped to probe the chambers of her spiritual heart. He was about to ask her what she was thinking when she reached over and turned down the music just before the heavenly ending. She paused a moment longer as if to frame an important question. "How do you get those oranges to grow in the desert?"

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## **A Burdensome Stone**

Jerusalem is two cities. The new is a contemporary metropolis with its share of tall buildings and modern architecture. The old walled city looks much like it did two thousand years ago when the writers of Holy Writ penned the New Testament. Old Jerusalem is conveniently divided into four sections where the three great religions of the world manage to survive in uneven harmony; all asserting eternal rights to the city of God, tenaciously supporting their sacred claims with featured antiquity. Resting atop the Mount of Mariah, on the old Jewish Temple Mount, is the Mosque of Umar. This is the spot where God provided Abraham a scapegoat and the prophet Muhamma is said to have ascended into heaven. This real estate is the source of deadly contention. It is located in the Arab quarter. The Jews have Solomon's Wall, the ancient foundation of the first temple in their quarter. And the Christians the Via Dolorosa, the passage that led Jesus to the crucifixion located in their coveted sector. An uneasy truce is maintained in the city of peace for the sake of the tourist dollar.

Eitan slowly negotiated the rental car through the narrow winding streets to a sedate area of stylish apartment complexes located in the Christian quarter. They would need to park and walk a short distance to the senior Greenberg's residence. The stroll would allow Army a new perspective into the contemporary life of the modern Israeli. Surrounded by the influence of twentieth-century progress and yet fettered by archaic disparity. They passed a group of playful schoolchildren on a field trip that was being escorted by a group of men armed with automatic rifles draped from their shoulders. Eitan later explained the guards were likely fathers who had volunteered for the dubious duty. The apartment building was not particularly notable but was tastefully constructed in traditional frontage by order of city planners for the purpose of preserving old world character. Much of the material used to construct the new complex was recycled stone pocked with shrapnel marks as a reminder of wars past and the sacrifice for independence.

An attractive lady in her sixties with lots of curly salt-and-pepper hair greeted the pair as they approached the front door. In a rare sign of affection, Eitan lifted his mother off the ground, making a full turn before lovingly putting her back down. They entered into a lively exchange, trying to catch up on the past all at once. Army watched as they talked and laughed when they laughed, and wished she could have just a small part of that kind of relationship with her father. After a while, Mrs. Greenberg noticed Army and gently nudged Eitan aside, sizing up the petite lass as meddling mothers sometimes do.

"Mother, meet Cassandra Armendorfer, FBI, if you can believe it," said Eitan. He then turned toward Army and said proudly. "Army, this is my mother."

"Helen," she said, extending her hand in Army's direction. The two women shook hands and then entered the apartment. It was smartly furnished and roomy enough but nothing like the lavish accommodation most Americans enjoy.

"I have coffee or tea," offered Helen Greenberg. "Water would be fine," said Army.

"I'll have coffee, mother, and bring Army a Coke if you have it," said Eitan. They settled in a small but comfortable living area while Helen headed for the kitchen and the drinks.

"Your father should be back anytime now," she yelled from the other room.

While waiting on Eitan's father, Army learned that he had gone to pick up a friend of his who would join the conversation. It was evident to Helen early on that Army would have difficulty understanding the work they were engaged in but one encouraging factor Helen noticed was Army's interest in the many photographs that filled the setting room.

"Is your father an archeologist?" she asked Eitan while surveying the photos.

"Amateur," he said, sipping his coffee. "Israel has more digs than it has people to work them."

Army began to move around the room, spending time at each picture, occasionally asking a question regarding their contents. Just as she was about to make an awkward inquiry about a relic she had no appreciation for, two men arrived at the front door. One was tall and very good-looking, the other short and fat. Eitan threw his arms around the taller man. They hugged and spoke in Hebrew. After a few seconds of small talk, Eitan's father turned toward Army and extended his hand. "You must be Army."

She shook his callused hand. "And you are Mr. Greenberg."

Eitan introduced his father offering no first name. The elder remained Mr. Greenberg to Army. The second man was introduced as Hymen Cohen, a close colleague of the Greenberg's. Pleasantries were exchanged, the fedoras were left at the hat rack by the door, and drinks were served. Mr. Greenberg seemed anxious to take the conversation to the next level. His facial expression went from friendly to earnest as he spoke to Eitan in Hebrew. "Does she know what we are doing here?"

Eitan smiled, looked at Army, and then back to his father. "She speaks fluent Hebrew, father...Arabic as well."

"Good, then there are no secrets at this table," said the embarrassed elder Greenberg.

He pulled a copy of the e-mail Eitan had sent home from the briefcase at his side and set it down on the coffee table. It was an inquiry from Eitan when he became suspicious of the incomplete dossier the Americans had dispatched to Gavriel Zachariah after publicly coddling to the radical Arab alliance. It was particularly disparaging to the Jews because the Americans were telling the world that they would no longer support them and then secretly engaging their help to run down the perpetrators behind the Houston nightmare.

It wasn't going to be that easy. The Jews didn't have much faith in the American administration, and then to be trusted with only half of the course of action was a major bone of contention and it disturbed them. When they confronted the Americans with their concerns, they were treated like a second cousin and told to be patient. The United States national security was assured they would work to secure an autonomous Israel, feebly reassuring their Mediterranean friends that their best interest was of the highest priority and in the end both nations would be more secure than ever. The Institute wasn't buying it and neither was Hyman Cohen.

"Miss. Armendorfer, are you familiar with the Prophet Isaiah?" asked Greenberg as he laid some photographs across the table. She curiously inspected them as he placed them in a hurried order.

"I know he is somebody in the bible," she said, looking up at Eitan for help.

"That's right," said Greenberg.

"He was an Old Testament prophet inspired by God to write what some scholars believe to be the most complete manuscript of the Old Testament, even going so far as to refer to the book of Isaiah as the miniature bible. My friend Hyman is one of those scholars and is qualified to make such an observation." Greenberg looked proudly at his friend and then continued. "Miss Armendorfer, we believe your President is planning a preemptive nuclear strike against a handful of unsuspecting Arab cities across the Middle East."

It took a moment to sink in and then Army responded in typical Armendorfer style. "What?! What are you people talking about?" The room fell silent, and then finally she said softly. "I'm sorry, I don't understand."

Hyman Cohen had said little before now. His voice was a pitch higher than expected. "May I call you Army?" he asked.

"Yes, of course," she said, easing to the edge of her chair.

"Army, this is an ill-conceived idea that could escalate into a nuclear winter in which at least a good portion of the world population would perish." Army thought for a moment, looked at the photos on the table, and then back at Cohen.

"Mr. Cohen, are you some kind of nuclear scientist?" she asked.

Greenberg answered for him. "Hyman Cohen is a world renowned archeological eschatologist...more specifically, paleography."

"I'm sorry...what?"

"It's the study of the end of time aided by ancient inscription," offered Eitan. He looked to his father for confirmation. Army began to squirm. She wondered if she was surrounded by crackpots. Her face tightened. It was an expression of her skepticism. "Hyman is an expert on the book of Isaiah," Greenberg persevered.

"What's that got to do with nuclear winter? How could you possibly come to that conclusion based on a spoonful of conjecture?" She smiled, trying to control her growing frustration.

"Please, hear us out, Miss Armendorfer. I think you'll better understand after you have had a chance to examine our findings," Cohen pleaded.

Army relaxed. Helen brought a new round of drinks accompanied by a platter of Rugelach cookies. Hyman Cohen began his bizarre explanation on why he believed the United States was about to take the world to the brink of destruction.

"In 1947, some very important documents were discovered in a place called Qumran near the salt sea about fifteen miles southeast of here. These inscriptions are better known today as the Dead Sea Scrolls. What makes these texts so important is that they are the oldest manuscripts known to exist, written two hundred years prior to the birth of Christ."

Hyman began to fiddle with the photos, rearranging them. The pictures consisted of a series of caves in a sandy wilderness that looked uninhabitable. Some of the glossies were of the Dead Sea but none of it looked familiar or significant to Army. Cohen separated one picture from the others and placed a chubby index finger directly in the middle of it. The image on the sheet was a tattered scroll containing the Hebrew language.

"This is the focus of our inquisition," he said to Army. "This is the oldest copy of the book of Isaiah we have and we find it in absolute harmony with the twentieth-century Biblical interpretation." He looked at Army to get her reaction. "I have studied this early manuscript forty years and I must tell you, I see alarming similarity between Isaiah's apocalyptic forecast and statements the President made in his State of the Union speech. If this charge proves accurate, then it would go a long way in defining your mission's mysterious code name." Army's attention grew keener. "Please continue," she said, still obviously puzzled.

"Let me try to make things easier to understand if I can," said a delighted Cohen. "Isaiah was a prophet of extreme foresight, inspired by God of course. He was able to see through time to the birth of Christ and beyond...all the way to judgment day. These prophetic forecasts are what comprise the greater part his work. The President has taken the liberty to title the most important military enterprise of our time using verses of retribution from the book of Isaiah." He paused, leaning back in his chair and sighed. "Day of Vindication is an implied quotation from the book of Isaiah that suggests the final judgment God has reserved for His enemies are about to fall."

Army looked around the room with polite suspicion. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. Eitan seemed ok with the idea, while his parents searched her direction looking for a response. "Do you expect me to buy into this hocus pocus based on your word and a few glossy photographs?" she asked in a sassy manner.

Eitan's father leaned forward. "Army, there is more...much more, but here is the bottom line. If God Himself is orchestrating this final hour of time before all things are made new, then there is little we can do or want to do. But if He is not in it, then a lot of innocent people will die because of a zealous imposter who thinks he is doing God's work. Do you understand?" Army was dizzied by it all. She seldom considered spiritual things, at least spiritual things with titles. Oh, she had asked herself what life was all about, who hadn't? And anyway she never took her own answers seriously enough to dwell on it.

"Convince me," she said.

"Good!" said Cohen.

"First you should know that the original Hebrew text found on the Qumran scroll is slightly different than today's Hebrew. The intent changes little but the emphases may alter somewhat."

Army acknowledged.

"The word vindication is an English phrase meaning defensive justification associated with a successful endeavor and sometimes aligning itself with retribution. In the original Hebrew, the words used for vindication take on a significantly more divine relevance. The reference here is vengeance found in the sixty-third chapter of Isaiah's book and moves beyond retaliation into an eschatological expression of judgment before deliverance, the eternal salvation, if you will. The entire context of these verses refers to a future date in God's timetable. Most important to our investigation is that the text emphatically states that God looked and found that no man could help Him bring judgment or deliverance. In other words He doesn't need the President's help." Army was more confounded than ever. She understood little of what had been said and it showed on her anxious face. Hyman recognized the dilemma and set out to simplify the problem.

"In short, Miss Armendorfer, we believe your President thinks the end justifies the means based on his elementary interpretation of Isaiah's text. I support my allegations using excerpts from his January speech; he attempts to quote from Isaiah and of course the title of your mission file. It explains the top-secret status

given the folder and why only an elite few have access to the final chapters. Should this information be leaked, the operation would likely be scratched."

Army sensed the obvious. "Wait a minute! Are you expecting me to leak this cockamamie crap to the American press? Oh, I don't think so."

"I'm afraid it's the only way to stop the impending carnage," said Helen Greenberg. She was obviously shaken by the prospect of such a catastrophic event. "The American public would not stand for such a thing. I'm sure of it." Army studied Helen's face as she pleaded her case. There was something about a woman's perspective that kindled her sister's compassion. Army could sense Helen's desperation.

"What else ya' got?" she asked.

"Excuse me?" said Hyman, caught off guard.

"You said you had a lot more. What else ya' got?" persisted Army. Eitan picked up the ball.

"Israeli intelligence received an e-mail about three weeks ago from a fairly reliable source stating that the Americans were about to level seven cities including Tehran and Damascus. No specifics were given, but our people believe that such a pretentious scheme would contain some type of nuclear armament. The targets are perceived hotbeds of Islamic radicalism and harbor the potential for nuclear threat. Our source infers that as soon as the vans are found and disarmed the US military action will initiate."

Bomb initiatives, war, this was something Army understood. Causes...she left those to others. Eitan's disclosure created a myriad of questions, too many to assimilate at once. Her brain flooded. The information was overwhelming. She rubbed her temples trying to isolate a single query. "Who is this reliable source? How is this possible? How can you be sure you can trust him?"

Eitan placed his hand on Army's hand to slow her down. "This is a person very close to the President's inner circle, someone we have used in the past with good success. We think it could be somebody's wife."

The room grew silently uncomfortable. After a minute, Helen asked if she could refresh anyone's drink. Eitan placed a second hand on Army's.

"One more thing, our satellite resource has indicated that the original Diego Garcia build-up six months ago has in fact grown to a greater capacity and remains on ready-alert status."

Army shuffled through the photographs, thinking about what she had just heard. "Ok, for the sake of discussion let's say I buy into this...what's next?"

Mr. Greenberg took over. "We have less than a week to alert the world about US intentions and that's assuming the bombs are found. If the US is unsuccessful in locating the vans and the deadline to free Abdullah passes, then Qaidat al-Jihad will blow their remaining bombs either way another nuclear device will be detonated."

"What happens if we blow the whistle and the deadline on Abdul passes?" asked Army.

"My government is prepared to negotiate a prisoner exchange along with some other incentives for the life of Abdullah. I think it's a proposal they will not refuse," said Eitan.

"There's a risk at every turn," said Greenberg. "A risk is worth taking if it's the right thing to do."

"Amen!" said Helen.

Army grimaced as she mulled over the tight spot the Greenbergs had placed her in. The responsibility was far too weighty for her to resolve on her own. She needed to structure the information; she needed Guerra.

Eitan understood the predicament she faced. He gently took her hand again to get her attention. "This is difficult for all of us, Army, but the alternatives are unthinkable...We must do this...You must do this. On one side you have a man possessed with vengeance and the power at hand to destroy a continent, on the other a lunatic with less destructive capability. Both men believe God is the founder of their passion."

Army stopped Eitan this time. "Just whose side is God on?" she asked acidly. Eitan could see the clash in the back of her eyes push its way through the audacity. He looked to his father for help. The elder Greenberg was quick to respond.

"God is on the side of justice, Miss Armendorfer."

She threw her hands up in a gesture of surrender. "What is it you want me to do?"

"The American people will not accept an accusation from a foreign government with such far a reaching consequence. The leak must come from an American insider with credibility. That would be you," Hyman said, pointing his finger at Army. "Your involvement with the investigation of Houston made you the face of the FBI. Your credibility would not be questioned."

"I would lose my job in a minute...no, more than that, I would never work in law enforcement again. Not to mention that it's illegal, I would be marked for life." Second thoughts began to mount in Army's crowded brain.

"Don't worry about that. There are ways," said Eitan. "Deals like this are made every day. You trade the information for hidden identity. All you need is one network. The rest of the network will pick the story up. One news anchor is all that needs to know."

"It's still risky," said Army.

"Is it a risk worth taking, Miss Armendorfer?" Army paused a moment too long. "Good! We have only a few days before time runs out. I think we should map the plan."

\* \* \*

## **Redemption**

The President brought the meeting to order. All of the original conspirators were there, tightly wrapped around the eight-sided table. A folder rested before each member. The President was brief with his opening comments. The stress in his eyes shaped the mood of the meeting. He pushed through the preliminaries and then passed the baton to the FBI's bureau chief.

Dale Barker was recognized as a man of few words. "Good afternoon. As most of you know by now, we have been successful in the apprehension of Abdul Fayez Abdullah, the Qaidat al-Jihad mastermind of the Houston bombing. The Israelis made the arrest with a daring commando raid into Iran. He was then taken back to Israel where he was questioned and subsequently confessed the whereabouts of the two remaining nuclear bombs believed to be in the United States. Both countries were well represented during the interrogation process. It was an effective collaboration we are very, very proud of. I am happy to report that the last of the two vans containing the bombs were seized in a Chicago suburb three hours ago. The other was secured in Los Angeles early this morning... Gentlemen, it gives me great pleasure to inform you that the United States of America is no longer hostage to Qaidat alJihad or any other foreign or domestic murderers."

The distinguished statesmen seated at the octagonal table were momentarily speechless, but then a handclap followed by another, and then a shout, and then the realization of the enormity of the announcement, and there was uproar. Barker gave his associates a few minutes to settle down before he continued with the details of his report. He explained that the Israelis were not prepared to surrender Abdullah at this time but they believed they had some equally important prisoners in their custody that would satisfy an exchange and meet the demands of the latest Qaidat mandate. When asked about the third US bomb, Barker explained that there was no real evidence that it existed in the first place, and with the capture of Abdullah they have severed the serpent's head so it was no longer dangerous. Some members of the elite band were unconvinced and didn't hesitate to share their concerns before Barker regained control and finished his remarks to a second round of subdued applause. The President was more comfortable after Barker's report but there was a far greater decision to be resolved before the meeting could adjourn. He was not willing to clear the final phase of the operation without total unanimity of this commission.

"My friends, this is good news. We owe an enormous amount of gratitude and thanks to Dale Barker, the Bureau, and all of the cooperating agencies in and out of this country that help bring these criminals to justice. Unfortunately it is a short-lived victory. We are still faced with the long term problem of Middle Eastern radicalism that threatens international peace for decades to come, and of course what to do with Israel. As you know, all channels of negotiation with the Muslim militants have lead to dead ends. It seems to me that we have no choice but to complete our original intention before the Jews unleash their arsenal and indiscriminately blow the region straight to hell." The members of the council begin to nervously fidget with their folders. "Therefore, I have asked Secretary Kerr to diagram the objective one more time before we proceed."

The Secretary of Defense left the table and stepped over to an easel that held a large geographical model of the Middle East. There were seven circles on the giant satellite photograph. Each circle represented a target. The purpose of the prop was to demonstrate the general locale of the sortie and show the ease with which to implement the exercise. Four of the seven locations were within a six hundred mile radius. The armament would be low-yield nuclear weapons designed to eliminate specific targets, doing the least amount of damage possible under the circumstances. The foray would be fast and effective; designed to eradicate the militant centers of radical Islam and restore stability to the Middle East once and for all.

Questions began to fly from around the table. The two most unsettling were what would the Russians do, and what about the remaining Qaidat al-Jihad bombs still unaccounted for? According to Kerr, the Russians



would present no problem given the condition of their antiquated delivery systems and their general lack of desire to take on the United States. They would be notified just prior to take off and given strong notice to steer clear. Martin Kerr went on to explain to the table how the Russian interest in the region might be enhanced after the completed mission. As far as the additional Qaidat al-Jihad bomb threat was concerned, no evidence remained of their existence. Should they in fact exist, they would remain a threat whether the US retaliated or not. Kerr ended his account with a final call to arms. "This is the last justifiable opportunity to stop the world threat of radical Islamic imperialism before it happens all over again." The President searched the table with his eyes for dissenters before he spoke. "My dear patriots, our way of life rests on the decision we make today. We have three days remaining on the Qaidat al-Jihad demand and we cannot trust the Israelis to solve the problems related to Abdullah's capture. We must act immediately if this is the course we are to take. I will ask for a show of hands, if we do not all agree, our Day of Vindication is abolished. May I see your response?" Five hands went up at once, two hesitated but soon were convinced it was the right thing to do. The President thanked his colleagues and then asked Buzz Atchison to proceed with the attack before Thursday night.

\* \* \*

### **Final Coverage**

Stuart Jenkins appeared. "Good evening. Earlier this afternoon, about 4:30 East Coast time I received a communiqué from a government insider who offered a chilling allegation about an American military action scheduled to take place sometime before Friday, the final day of the Qaidat al-Jihad warning. We have learned that the two Satan Clean vans originating from Baton Rouge, Louisiana containing the remaining nuclear bombs that held this country in repression for the last six months have been found and disarmed. Welcome news to say the least, but with this long awaited report comes the gruesome prospect of retribution.

"According to our source, the United States is planning a strategic nuclear action against radical Islamic strongholds that could produce or provide future weapons of mass destructions to be used against America and her allies. We have asked Lewis Kemper, our White House correspondent to join us. Nice to have you with us, Lewis."

"Good evening, thank you."

"Lewis, does the President have the legal authority to wage this assault without the consent of Congress?"

"Well, Stuart, the President of the United States has no clear Constitutional authority to declare war without congressional approval...Conversely, as Commander in Chief the President has authority to recognize a 'State of War' initiated against the United States and unilaterally commit troops...Some believe that gives him power to act independently in defense of the nation. As you recall, after the 9/11 events, Congress gave the Executive Branch unanimous consent to wage war against those responsible for the attack on New York. The President would argue that Houston is a victim of that same war."

Jenkins looked irritated. He needed something affirmative to influence public opinion. He would stay on the air as long as it took. "Have you heard any talk on your beat about an impending military strike? Anything that would lend credit to the accusation?"

"I'm afraid not, Stuart. Your report is exclusive at this moment."

Jenkins continued his break-in special with guests as they could be found. The network would run the grisly results of the nuclear explosion in Texas and use old file film of Nagasaki and Hiroshima for effect. It was all designed to rouse public outcry against the unthinkable retaliation. As the evening progressed, each national network picked up the story, preempting programming with their take on the possibility of nuclear escalation. Before the night ended, there would remain the inevitable chasm between hawks and doves, but it was a victory for Jenkins as he has exposed the plan, reduced the surprise, and created public awareness.

His last guest of the evening was the highly regarded Russian physicist Alex Krymov. His assessment of a nuclear winter with limited explosions based on Carl Sagan's work was thought-provoking. The prospect that a few nuclear warheads exploded under the right atmospheric conditions could result in devastating consequences for the whole of terra firma was what Stuart Jenkins was looking for. The next morning the

nation's newspapers would headline the Jenkins special, calling for level heads and government investigations.

### Three Weeks Later

Army worked her way through the morning coffee crowd to a window booth where she could waste some time before her meeting with bureau chief Dale Barker. She settled on a hot cup of tea and a bagel for company. Washington was still reeling from the unusual winter weather. A new wave of snow fell the night before, adding six more inches to the already pallid landscape. The streets and sidewalks were full of people moving back and forth in concert with the traffic lights. She wondered as she watched them pass if they understood anything about the world they lived in. She wondered if they realized that a handful of bureaucrats, terrorists, and traffic lights controlled their destiny. It was scary to think just how unconscious most of them were, but then they had their own little worlds to conquer and maybe that was enough. God knows she had her problems. She thought about the events of the past year and wondered about the role she had played in all of it. She thought about Guerra and Elana, about Eitan and Helen, about heaven and hell. She wondered how long before the next nuclear crisis. Maybe she was as confused as all the rest. She turned away from the window and motioned to the waitress for more hot water. Then she noticed that Jason Spencer was sitting at the bar between her and the waitress. By the time she realized it was Spencer it was too late; she had involuntarily gained his attention. He thought she was motioning for him to join her.

"Hi Army, what's up? I thought you would be back in Miami hanging out in the sandy state." He sat down across from her in the booth.

"I've got a meeting with Barker this morning," said Army. "Wrap up, I guess. He didn't go into detail."

"Oh yeah, congrats on the Abdullah effort, should land you a promotion...or at least a commendation."

"I doubt it," she said as Spencer motioned the waitress to bring his breakfast to the booth. It was time to leave. Ten more minutes with this reject from Alice in Wonderland and she would be in a bad mood for the meeting.

"Well...Jason, it was nice seeing you, but I had better get going now. I don't want to keep Dale waiting."

"Yeah, he's been very upset about something ever since that bogus news report about a preempted nuclear strike against Islam. There's been some shaking going on in the whole organization."

"What kind of shaking?" she asked, settling back down.

"There's some movement throughout the administration... election year, I guess."

"You mean the Presidential administration?" She asked nervously.

"Yeah, he's been politically crushed by the alleged Vindication file leak. I don't think he's re-electable and he knows it. The problems in Asia, the problems here...no solutions. He's in a fix and on top of that Israel is about to blast the Muslims back to the Renaissance."

"The President," she said again.

"It's trickled all the way down to the Bureau. I think Barker is on the spot and he's as testy as a rabid weasel."

"Oh boy," she thought out loud.

"Nothing for you to worry about, Army. You're the Bureau's golden girl. There's been talk about replacing Hoover's picture with yours." He smiled and stuffed another piece of toast in his mouth.

She smiled back politely and breathed a sigh of relief. If they only knew who the snitch really was, she thought.

"Hey, if you're not doing anything later this evening maybe we could get together for dinner and a drink?" When hell freezes over, she thought. "I'm sorry Jason, I can't. I've got another engagement, but thanks for the invite."

"How about tomorrow night?" he pushed.

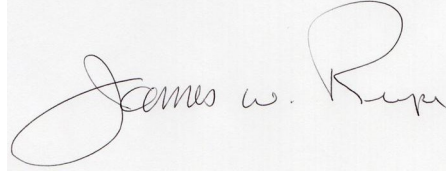
Suddenly Army's face lit up like the heart of a sunbeam. Her smile was genuine and longing. Standing next to the table was a knight without his armor. "Jason, you remember Eitan, don't you?" The men shook hands.

"What time shall I pick you up tonight?" Eitan asked.

"Seven!" she replied.

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James W. Rupe". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "J" and a distinct "W" and "R".